

Our theme this Advent is "I love to tell the story," as the old Gospel hymn goes. We are building up to the BIG Story – the story of a love so big it created universes, and then reclaimed that whole cosmos from destruction. Woven into that BIG story, making it possible, are so many smaller stories, of love and loss, of redemption and reclamation and restoration. Looking at those stories helps us to see how our stories weave into that Big Story. Because everybody's story matters. Every single person. Like a tapestry with threads missing, we don't get the whole picture without your story.

In the story we heard this morning from our gospel, we learned that the Story of Elders matter. Lord, do those stories matter. God did not choose to redeem the world without using elders – a LOT of them. Today we heard about Zechariah and Elizabeth, who would in their very old age become parents to a son who would grow up to be John the Baptist. When Jesus is eight days old he meets an old man and woman in the temple, Simeon and Anna – without their testimony his parents may not have had the confirmation they needed that this newborn of theirs was indeed unlike anyone else ever born. No one gets left out of God's plan, and no one is ever too old to be used by God.

This morning after church we're going to gather for a story-circle to tell the Story of Christ Church.

Woven into that story are so many stories we'll never hear – about the men and women who wanted an Anglican church in their new community of Port Tobacco; about the builders and decorators; the day a gift of a silver and baptismal font arrived from Queen Anne; about the fires that destroyed the early church buildings... and the altar guilds and organists and preachers...

We know a little about the story of how this church building was moved here to La Plata by oxcart, stone by stone – but during lockdown, when she had some time on her hands, Marie Webber began going through old files and she discovered that it was two women in the church who had the foresight to see that if the church didn't move to La Plata, it would soon dwindle and die. They insisted and convinced the vestrymen of the necessity of this move. There's a story!

In preparation for today's Story Circle, Barb Palko convened some of the elders of our church – elders in longevity in this parish, if not in years – to compile a timeline of the past 25 years. They ended up meeting twice, because there were so many stories to tell, some happy, some not so happy. We sit here today on that foundation of stories, and we can choose which ones we take into our future. But if we don't know them, we can't make that choice. And if we don't know our story, we can't tell it and invite others into it, to bring their colors and textures to this tapestry called Christ Church.

Our stories help tell us who we are. Today, as we listen to a little of that recent past, and hear from each other in our story-circle of how each of us came to be a part of the Story of Christ Church, we will also get a deeper sense of our identity. Our stories help us know who we are.

Now, we can know Jesus without knowing his story... but when we learn of his miraculous birth and the ways his life was protected, and the stories of his life of teaching and healing, and the stories he told to convey what this Kingdom of God was all about – boy, we have a deeper way of knowing him. And when we learn of the distant cousin who became John the Baptist, who dedicated his life to preparing people for the coming Messiah, we learn more about how important Jesus was.

And when we learn of the miraculous way this John was conceived, to a couple who'd never been able to have children and were way past the time of childbearing... we get a better sense of John's part in God's plan. And when we learn the story of Abram and Sarai, who also had never been able to have children, and they too – by God's promise – became parents very late in life, parents to Isaac who became father to Jacob, whom God renamed Israel... We see how rich this web of stories is. And we come to love God more, and know Jesus better.

And how about our own God stories? How many times has an elder told you a story that helped you with something you were dealing with now?

When someone close to me lost a baby born prematurely some years ago,  
It was one of my professors who was able to help me invite God into it.  
He didn't even tell me his story, but by the wise words he shared with me I knew  
he had a story of neo-natal loss himself – he shared it sparingly, but he shared it.

We live by each other's stories. We grow by each other's stories.  
This church will grow and thrive as we learn to share our stories.  
I had a God story happen this week – not a very important one, but a good one.  
I had to go to Lexington Park to pick up some Sunday School materials which  
Ascension Church is giving us. Along with the Godly Play materials,  
they piled other things into my boxes, among them a small stable for a crèche.  
When I left there I went to Asbury in Solomon's Island to visit two of our  
parishioners, Courtenay Wilson and Lucy Dettor. We share communion and then  
lunch in Courtenay's apartment, and she showed me her Christmas decorations.  
She had a little crèche set. "But I don't have a stable for it," she said.  
"Wait just a minute," I said, and went out to my car. And though the trunk and  
back seat and front seat were jam-packed with boxes, I was able to easily put  
my hands on that little stable and bring it in. It fit her set perfectly.  
That was not a very important thing – but it seemed like a God thing –  
and will be a reminder to both of us sometime when something bigger is up,  
that God is working in amazing ways. .

Just for a moment, will you bring to mind one of your favorite God stories –  
a time when God was real for you, when rescue or hope or healing came?  
Where were you? Who else was there? What was going on in your life at the time?  
What can you smell and hear and see?  
Just bring it up in your mind... and think about who you might share it with,  
who has never heard that story.

Advent is a season when we prepare to re-tell – and relive –  
the great story of how God so loved the world he sent his Son into it,  
the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth;  
the story of the maker of heaven and earth taking on human form and the  
complete dependency of a human infant, in order to lead us to freedom.  
That story is a great tapestry woven of billions of stories, some told, some untold.  
Your stories are threads that go into making that beautiful picture.  
Let's be sure our God stories are told, and shared, and proclaimed  
so that many hear this Good News and come back to life and hope. Amen.

## Luke 1:5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."