

Sharing Our Testimonies
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
May 21, 2017 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

Psalm 66:5-20

Come and see what God has done; he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river by foot. There we rejoiced in him, who rules by his might forever; whose eyes keep watch on the nations – let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our back; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows, those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will an offering of bulls and goats.

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

When I was in the Dominican Republic, we visited numerous churches and shared our vision for partnership with each other. This partnership comes with challenges of communication. We have to talk to each other to form and sustain a relationship. The obstacles are speaking Spanish and the other English; the internet is not always available; not all pastors have computers; the mail system does not exist.

When we met at the church in Jaquimeyes, a woman shared that even though building relationships between a great distance is difficult and may seem impossible. We have to remember the Israelites standing at the Red Sea as Pharaoh's army was coming after them. God opened up the waters and led them by foot to safety on the other side. God as the Psalmist says is awesome in his deeds among mortals. God rules with his amazing might with the Israelites and today with us. God's power and steadfast love is forever!

How many of you have had to face a challenge? How many of you have felt your feet slipping and you didn't know how you were going to remain upright because life kept slamming you down? Where do we find hope? How do we get through those tough times?

In the Psalm today, we not only hear the imagery of the exodus out of Egypt but we also hear the wilderness journey of the Israelites that took them 40 years to reach the promise land. They cried out with growling stomachs and parched lips. They prayed while searching the unknown. They cried out wondering where was their God in the silence. And one day, God brought them to a spacious place. A land flowing with milk and honey. God opened up the river Jordan, led them by foot and answered their prayers.

Their answered prayers were met with rejoicing and celebration. They offered up to God their sacrifices of bulls and goats and rams. They were thankful that God had not abandoned them but had listened and responded. It was not in their time but in God's time. It was not easy. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness was down-right difficult. But they had learned from their experience and they want to share their stories.

Come – Come and hear, those who fear the Lord, those who are in awe of God's wonder, and I will tell what God has done for me. It is so important to tell our stories. It is equally as good to praise

God and give thanks. But, we must heed the words of the Psalmist to testify to what God has done. Why is this so important?

When we speak it and share it, we claim our faith that God has heard us and answered us. It is true that God doesn't always answer in the way we want or in the time frame that we wanted. But in telling our story, we are connected to God and our faith is made stronger. But the connection does not stop there. One commentator says that, "Testimony reveals that "God has given heed to the words of my prayer for a larger purpose. What God has done "for me" is not for me alone. The grace and faithfulness of God to me reveals God's orientation of grace and faithfulness to all." (Feasting on the Word – Year A by Thomas L. Arr Jr.; Westminster John Knox Press; 2010; p. 480) God doesn't answer our prayer just for you or me. God answers our prayers to build up all of creation.

This weekend is the Kairos Retreat at Rockville Women's Prison. During this time, the women will hear talks about various things like God's Grace, Choices or The Church and each talk follows a script. We have to do this to stay within the guidelines of the prison and stay consistent with the program. But, what makes these talks so effective is the personal testimony or story that allows the person to go off script and share a piece of their life that relates to the topic. This is where the rubber hits the road so to speak.

We have all had struggles and go through difficult times. Many of us find ourselves on the same road that others have travelled. It is in sharing and giving testimony that we are able to connect with each other and with God. If God answered your prayer, I can live in hope that God will answer mine.

This is a process and something that takes work as we travel our faith journey. I am struck by the imagery of the Psalmist when the author speaks of testing and trying us like silver. When a silversmith refines a piece of silver, they place the piece of silver under fire. The hot flame burns off all the impurities so that the silver can reach its shiniest potential.

This testing and trying is not punishment. God does not treat us like guinea pigs or puppets with strings. One commentator says this trying and temptations are about obtaining knowledge and understanding. As the obstacles in life happen, God molds us and shapes us through the way our prayers are answered. This is God's will for our lives. Just like in school, some lessons can be easy and some lessons can be brutal. But, when we learn from them, we must share.

(In both services, the congregation got to see five church members share their personal testimonies of when they experienced their prayers being answered by God.) This is a short summary of what they shared:

Daisy Tawiah told us about her prayer to find a job in Indianapolis. She was working as a Pharmacist in Louisville and wanted to move up north to be with her family. It took 3 ½ years before her prayer was answered. She always wondered why it took so long. As she reflected on this, she recalls a woman who would come into her pharmacy complaining about being very sick. The doctors could not find out what was wrong with her. After talking with the woman, Daisy found that her house had a mold issue. She told her that she needed to check into it. Come to find out, that is what was making the woman ill. She could have eventually died from this. Daisy feels like God needed her to be there to help the woman. Then, the God's timing came for her to move up to Indianapolis and a job opened up to make that happen.

Diane Whitaker shared that God actually answered her prayer twice about the same matter. She had been unhappy with her job and asked God about finding a new job. Time went by and she really couldn't find another job. Soccer season approached and she wanted to attend her niece's games so she put off job hunting until the season was completed. During this time, she had a co-

worker quit. After the season finished, she found that she was really happy with things at work. Diane felt God giving her peace with her current job and decided to stay. It was a good decision and she thanks God for answered prayer.

Shawn Lamey found himself in a rut. He was working at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and during this time he met his wife, Paula. She needed help with some things in her life. They both connected and began to be supportive by helping for each other. As Shawn thought about this, Paula actually helped him a great deal. He feels she helped him more than he helped her. God sent her into his life at just the right time and this was definitely answered prayer from God.

Rachel Emery and her husband, James were down to one car. It was stressful to coordinate the driving for work and other commitments. The church was gifted a car and the car was offered to them. This has made life so much better. This has helped with not having to be on the same schedule for everything. It has given them more flexibility. They are thankful for this gift from God.

Tim Graves shared about the time that he and his wife, Susan, were to be parents for the second time. As the pregnancy progressed, Susan found out from the ultrasound that there were problems with the baby. Their names were added to prayer chains at church and family and friends were asked to pray. They got to talk to their baby in the womb and got to feel it move. Being a parent is a commitment just like being a Christian. We are called to follow Jesus Christ, who is our Savior. The baby was born 5 weeks early. Their baby boy lived an hour. Tim and Susan named him Matthew, which means "Gift from God." Even though they prayed for a miracle, their prayers were answered because they got to meet him and have him baptized. He could have died anytime during the pregnancy. They both know that Matthew is their guardian angel. One day, their family will be reunited in heaven.

Blessed be our God, who has not rejected our prayers and God's steadfast love will never leave us. Amen.