

June 4th: A Forever Story

Good morning again, friends! This morning we conclude our year-long sermon series—we've been reading through the whole Bible from the beginning to the end and seeing how these ancient texts can be relevant to our modern lives. It has been quite a journey, has it not? Well today we'll be trying to bring it all together, so before we dive in one last time, would you pray with me?

Everlasting God, Once again, we've heard your story—a story of love and faithfulness, of mercy and compassion. A story of hope and peace, a story of beloved children living as family. As your people, we are called to bring this divine story to the world, to tell and retell it by our words and our actions, so that others may hear and join the story, too. So we gather here with joy and courage, ready to be strengthened and sustained in your holy storytelling. Guide us into places and spaces where we can share the goodness and grace that we have experienced, help us tell a story that is so beautiful and compelling that it captures the attention of the whole world. In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit Among Us, we pray. Amen.

Are you familiar with the famous song from the musical Rent—the one that goes:

“Five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes
Five hundred, twenty five thousand moments so dear
Five hundred, twenty five thousand, six hundred minutes
How do you measure, measure a year?”

Most people know this song by these opening lyrics, but the actual name of the song is “Seasons of Love,” which I feel like is an appropriate framework for our reflections today as we find some common threads in our series about being God's family and telling God's story. When I was thinking about how to wrap up this year of sermons, I thought about this song—how DO we measure a year?

Our musical theater lyrics ask:

In daylights, in sunsets
In midnights, in cups of coffee
In inches, in miles
In laughter, in strife
In five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes
How do you measure a year in the life?

As I looked back on the past liturgical year in our congregations' life, I asked the same things, in a slightly different way.

Do we measure our year in the number of nights that I tossed and turned, worrying about my sermon that wasn't done yet? In the pages of paper that I printed and then flung into the recycling bin after noticing a dozen typos? In the stacks of books that I rifled through in search of the right words to say?

I'm mostly joking about all of those, but still—sometimes metrics help to fully describe our experiences.

When you add it all up, I've written and delivered 37 meditations—each with an average of 2200 words, each requiring more than 10 hours of study, writing, editing, and practice. We've gathered together like this almost as many times, and we've spent about 20-25 minutes each week digging deeper into these texts and searching for meaning.

In these 37 sermons, we've covered a lot of ground. We've gone through familiar narratives like Noah and the Ark, Moses and Red Sea, and King David and Bathsheba. We heard about the Ten Commandments, and the entrance into the promised land of Canaan, two major milestones for the development of Israelite theology and practice. We've also read some less familiar texts, like Solomon's court case with the women arguing over the living baby, or the story of Esther—who saved her people from annihilation, or the words of prophets like Isaiah and Micah. We listened to our Advent texts about John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the birth of Jesus. We celebrated Christmas,

and Epiphany, and then heard more about Jesus' life as captured in the Gospel of Matthew.

We've read passages from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome—his words giving encouragement and advice to this new congregation in the midst of a powerful empire. We read about Jesus' final week—and the meal he shared with his disciples before he was taken away by the authorities. We retold the stories of Good Friday, and Easter morning, remembering that it was women who first received the news of the resurrection and were sent out into the world to spread the miraculous news.

I've quoted Dante in Italian, and Desmond Tutu's words about the Swahili phrase Ubuntu. We've read texts that were originally written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Just last week, we observed Pentecost, the day when people of all nations, languages, cultures, and backgrounds became disciples of Jesus through the miraculous arrival of the Holy Spirit like tongues of fire. We traced the themes of belonging and family through every text, seeing how God's story has always been an invitation into love and relationship.

As I looked back on all these weeks, I was going to call this sermon a "series finale," but when I thought about it some more, it didn't quite feel right. Mostly because the story isn't really over, at least not in a permanent way.

I think many of us believe that because this story of scripture includes and relies on human participation, it is finite and limited in some way. And in some small ways, that is slightly true. Our holy texts include human history, human mistakes and the full range of human emotions. But on the whole, this idea that this story is boundaried or constrained couldn't be further from the truth. Because even though human beings are storytellers of this narrative, the story of scripture really belongs to God. And because God is infinite and unlimited, this story is too. This story of God's family is bigger than any of us or all of us, it's bigger than human beings, it's bigger than just one species or one culture, or one ethnic group. It goes beyond our human memories, our human

lifetimes, our human understandings—it is a divine mystery that transcends time.

This particular cycle in our liturgical calendar has been completed, but we are just getting started on plumbing the depths of the biblical story. This is the starting place, not the finish line. This is a chance to go back and begin anew, not a moment when we can close our holy book and never pick it up again. Today, I wanted you to know that this sermon series may have just been a season in the life of our church, but I hope that the lessons that we've learned and the love that we've shared have a more lasting effect on our lives.

My friends, it can be fun to learn more about the Bible and to study these ancient texts. We can find a lot of wisdom in these pages or in the time we've spent together on Sunday mornings. It can be interesting to study these ancient people and their cultures, but is that all we're here for? I don't think so, or at least I hope not. I hope that we being a part of a bigger story, a family story, gives us the opportunity to see the world and our experiences differently.

So what have we learned?

Have we learned to trust in God's promises, like Noah and his family as they built and set sail on the Ark?

Have we learned to be more in awe of God's power like Moses and the Israelites at the shores of the Red Sea?

Have we learned to repent, like King David did when he was confronted by his own sin and hurtful behavior?

Have we learned how to be more wise when faced with difficult circumstances, like King Solomon?

Have we learned to persevere in tough times, like the faithful remnant spoken about in the prophet Isaiah?

Have we learned to be courageous in our convictions, like Queen Esther?

Have we learned more about how to be salt and light in this world, as Jesus taught about during his Sermon on the Mount?

Have we learned to wrestle with deep truths and unconventional teachings, like the twelve disciples did through the parables?

Have we learned how to be servants to each other and to the world, like Jesus who knelt to wash his friends feet during their final moments together?

Have we learned to be radically inclusive, like Paul taught the early church when they struggled to accept Gentiles into God's family?

Have we learned more about what it means to live as reconciled people, like the church in Rome—a diverse body with a common purpose?

How has this time made us more in tune with the divine?

How has it made us kinder, or more compassionate, or more generous, or more loving, or more hospitable?

How has this time brought us greater clarity, or greater purpose, or greater convictions, or lead us into greater service?

Ultimately, the goal of my work and our time together isn't intended to just be a theological thought experiment, but a tangible step towards personal and communal transformation. We are individuals who have been transformed into a family through the love of Jesus, and so transformation has always been at the center of the divine story.

As you can imagine, transformation is a much more difficult metric to measure—but I think it's the real reason that we are all here.

But despite our misconceptions, transformation doesn't have to be a sudden or explosive change in our lives, it doesn't have to be radical or instantaneous or monumental. It doesn't have to involve hundreds of hours or sleepless nights. In fact, true and lasting transformation is more likely to be slower, and more consistent, with little changes adding up over time, bit by bit until we look back and see how much difference it has made. Just like our divine story, transformation doesn't have to have a firm beginning and ending—it is something that can ebb and flow, always in movement.

So my friends, the story continues. The work continues. The transformation continues. Forever.

Amen.