

“This Is My Story” Sunday
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
April 7, 2024

Clare:

How do I see God working in my life? What a question. In short, I’m here. And I say that on multiple levels. I’m here, alive today. I’m here in Salt Lake City. And I’m here at First Pres. Every single one of those things has been a result of God working in my life.

It’s hard to reach a certain age without having some sort of experience that brings you an appreciation for the simple act of living. For me, it’s a 30 year struggle with mental illness, with a chronic depression that simply will not go away. There are and have been good days, weeks, and months. And then there have been the other ones. A few years ago there were some hard days, weeks, and months that became harder, darker, and scarier than usual. But God intervened in the form of a friend who helped me stay safe long enough... And I say that cautiously, because that is my own story, though I wish it were the story of all of us who suffer in this way. Too many friends and loved ones are equally loved by God, and are no longer here with us. I don’t know why I had an intervention that worked and others did not any more than I know why my tumor was benign and my friends’ was not. I’m currently in the midst of mostly good days and weeks and months, and while I’d love to say that that too is God working in my life, I know that neither the presence or absence of symptoms, the presence or absence of health, are an indicator of God’s love or work in my life. On the good days I thank Jesus, on the others I just try to hold on to him.

And God has worked in my life to bring me, a Great Lakes girl who has spent most of her adulthood living overseas- first in Argentina and then in Thailand, here to Salt Lake this past June. Leaving a job and place and community that I deeply loved was never going to be easy, and for many years in Bangkok I had no idea what was going to be next or how I was going to know when it was time. Over the past few years, piece by piece, the idea of joining my brother and his wife here began to form. It was a joke at first, until I called them about 2 years ago and said no you guys, what if I actually did move to Salt Lake and live next door to you? I don’t live next door, but I did find a house around the corner and the 3 min walk is no problem. When it was time to decide to leave Bangkok as well as time to actually leave, I had complete peace- not peace that it would go smoothly or work out perfectly or anything like that, but peace that passes understanding that this was the right place at the right time. And it has been. The transition has gone better than anticipated and even on the homesick tear-filled days, I don’t regret it.

Perhaps most amazing to me is that I am here at First Pres. I’ve been in church my whole life, through a variety of backgrounds, denominations, and styles that are another story for another day. In the last decade or so I have really struggled with church. I’ve seen homophobia play out, experienced sexual harassment from a pastor, heard theology of condemnation, watched children be taught more about their sinfulness than their belovedness. At one church I was asked to be part of the church council, which sort of functioned like an elder and deacon board combo. They were thrilled when I said yes. They were less thrilled when I didn’t always vote yes, and downright hostile when I asked hard questions. Church broke my faith in Christianity and nearly broke my faith in Love himself. But I kept trying to hold on to Jesus even as I let go of church, and somewhat accidentally ended up at your Kirkin service last October. For the first time in a very very long time, I heard love and experienced a kindness in the presence of God in his people- and I had shortbread of course. I wasn’t very interested in finding a church in Salt Lake, but when basically every little thing in my life has been new these past 10 months,

being here on Sunday mornings has felt like coming home, like resting in a belovedness that I had forgotten I had.

Stephen:

I am immensely grateful to be here and how wonderful it is to share my story and at the end share my voice further through my poetry. I am honored to be included in this Sunday's story session time. The title of this story: See the Birds in My Mouth came to me in a light bulb moment when I was pretty close to the end of writing.

Having encountered so many people in Sierra Leone, Europe and America, it is little wonder that answering the question: where is home has never been easy. It is hard to find roots and so, I remain unmoored in liminality, that I ascribe to my nomadic heritage. Taking a deep dive into history specifically the middle passage era essentially a time of liminal moments, my ancestors were taken from Africa (their home and center of identity) to step into an unfamiliar time and place and then much later they sojourned back to Africa specifically to a new location-Freetown (a free place for ex-slaves) in Sierra Leone surrounded with new stories and a culture different from what they had known. Even if they had an image of their destination, they could not predict what will occur in their new location. Nevertheless, whether liminality is forced or chosen, it can be a gift as it provides a space for change-positive change. Born in Freetown Sierra Leone to ancestors who found themselves in between times and places and now presently living in Utah USA, my random memories of hummingbirds in downtown Freetown's birdier skies yield words that show my mind moving seamlessly between senses as between worlds. Such mind move exercises like backyard birds taking spring and fall migration journeys, its nature to flow and fly on the axis of polarities has enriched my studies, teaching, research, art, poetry, creative writings, as well as my daily life activities where I am always hearing the ruby-throated birds in my mouth. This bird call opens the possibilities of meeting God anew because like birds I constantly live betwixt and between-living liminality. At the start of 2023 on and off, like migrating songbirds zipping in and out of view, I flitted in and out of Mathew's magnificent body of work, some twenty-eight chapters. Fragments stayed in my head throttling like an engine left on in absolute darkness. When the invitation came for story sharing from Pastor Jamie, I returned to Mathew 8 staying with and reading it slowly. From scanning to studying to sitting still, these motions can help the eyes turned to the skies see more than you expect. Foxes have holes, Jesus says in verse 20 birds have nests. Though Jesus's words here sound like poetry, it is not poetry when the verse concludes with Jesus saying the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. Here Jesus is living in a liminal situation, and this upends routine we humans are most familiar with. Jesus magnifies these struggles in Luke 2:41 to 52 where Jesus's parents looked for the 12-year-old Jesus among relatives and friends but could not find him because he had stayed behind in the temple in Jerusalem. After three days, the mother found Jesus and said "son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Jesus responded "why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?" Once I responded to this passage not with words but by whistling the sound of those migrating song birds I grew up watching. Then I imitated the sounds of chirping birds I long heard singing in my ears when I understood that we can abide in God's house.

Liminality is a given for all of us. Emily Dickenson once wrote "I dwell in possibilities, but my life experience leads me to think we dwell in liminality." Humans always undergo changes that are both predictable and unpredictable. Life is constantly in a state of flux and transition. Like agile bird flight, the world changes moment by moment and so, are our lives and those around us. This is not theoretical. We live it and we all live in it. This liminal in between state shows who we humans really are and what we

normally do. We tend to manage, control, hold on to and grasp on to what we know. Liminality can be a gift if we surrender to God who is in us, with us for us ahead of us and believe that he can make things news. For some of you who have lost either a precious something or precious someone or both- be it a spouse, a child, sibling, a dear friend, a job or being weighed down by despair, remember that Good Friday wasn't the final story. There is always a resurrection day. Meanwhile in these liminal moments of waiting, waiting between Good Friday and resurrection, let us remember Jesus's words to his parents "I am in my father's house." Do you not see how necessary Jesus's words are in a world of uncertainty? Rather than holding on, let us embrace surrendered receptivity and allow Jesus to come to us in our illness, loss, pain, grief, anxiety, confusion and then in him we can find a home, a place where casting out has been cast out, lost has been found, unhoused now housed, dereliction rendered derelict forsaken becomes unforsaken, abandonment now abandoned and like an avid bird watcher overtime the otherwise virtually invisible becomes visible. Amen

It is an honor to think through transitions, of all kinds and so now is precisely the time to read three poems about my life, a life of liminality and the newness it affords.

My Life:

When I came home from the library
I wanted to live in harmony
I backpacked some change of outfits
A notebook and a few books

I walked to the wood behind
My home. My mama said
That after my birth she left me
With the trees

I learned fast to parley with rain
And tune into story
Grounded in the globe
I am timid of the pool

The streams surge and the moon
Follows the seas fast pronouncing
Lilt of mixed languages
But swimming pools bubbling up
They waver, the soft dusk with its sounds

Steadily I am limina
Steering into a parallel universe
Of happiness standing before the waves
With steps like compass parting the world

Liminality:

The Sea at night
Somewhere between Freetown and here
Lies these unseen and never inhabited
Batch of lands
The rock pools fill with soapy suds stained from
smoke
And soot but is as clear as tears.
Bluffs are whitened by droppings of cormorants
And moluccan woodcock, the wonderful clear
Smell of this aged and renewed bird e'jecta that
Has the balm scent of salt

Surrendered Receptivity:

Wind in the orchard
Bears the storm surges of life
Palm tree silhouette

Noah:

Good morning, everyone. Today I will be sharing about a time in which I experienced God in my life. We often hear people talk about and refer to a defining moment in their life in which God presented himself and helped to strengthen his relationship with said person rather openly. Today I would like to present a different kind of perspective, my perspective. In my life I have yet to experience a single defining moment of experiencing the Lord that overshadows other events. And maybe for some of you, you've had your moment that helped to solidify your faith and devotion to the Lord. And for those of you who haven't maybe what I refer to will feel relatable and very like your own beliefs. In my life I have been very fortunate. I've had amazing grades my first year of high school, I've made the varsity sports as a freshman at my high school, and I am so fortunate to have an extremely loving family and an awesome group of friends. And on Sundays when I come to church, I'm happy and grateful to be here. And through the lessons were taught through our time here in the sanctuary one thing always troubled me and that truthfully was that of how have I experienced the Lord in my life outside of church. Always hearing about people's experiences with the Lord questioned my beliefs and I found myself asking, Why have I not had a moment I can look on and say wholeheartedly, That is when the Lord made it clear he was at work in my life. This question made me wonder and got me thinking a lot about my life. And after some time, I didn't know why, I found myself lost about this topic but rather than lose faith I kept searching and while thinking of writing this very story I realized something. My life has so much good, so much to be thankful and grateful for. My academic success, my athletic success, my social success. Where did that all stem from. My mom refers to a time when I was in 3rd grade in elementary school I talked to my parents and told them blatantly "I am not learning at school." What do you mean you're not learning my mom told me? Everything we learn at school I already know or is too easy for me. At such a young age God was watching over me and helped to present this issue to my parents. And sure enough when my mom looked into it, I wasn't learning. I was top of my class setting records for things like multiplication and division. And this sparked a change I changed schools and was accepted into a gifted learner's program that I was a part of until 7th grade. The Lord was watching over me throughout it all and not just one moment helped to define that. I have been so lucky for having success for putting hard work into the things I do and after time I have realized that this is the Lord at work, guiding and helping me through my very actions. So, I found myself still with no defining moment in which I experienced the Lord but with the knowledge in which of the Lord's actions and work in my life. And what did I take away from this whole situation, the fact that I don't need one singular moment in my life to fulfill my faith in the Lord. So, I ask you to look at your view of how the Lord is presenting himself in your life.

Halen:

I've always been a Jesus-person. My parents experienced the transformational power and love of God in their early parenting, so I grew up with the reality that God's love is real, God's power is real, God's Presence is with us and that there's nothing we can do to ever be away from God's Love.

I'm a person who is pretty optimistic and happy as a default, and I'd like to say I'm hardwired for hope. I find that hope in the Lord, in Emmanuel, God-With-Us Presence. I grew up active in our church, youth group, worship team, the Christian school I went to. I had an idyllic life. But I had this lurking question in the back of my mind if my faith was real since I hadn't experienced suffering. If I was joyful because my life was easy. Or was I actually doing a really great job at being Christian?

I grew up in Sandy, just 20 minutes that way, with my parents and my younger brother, who was 3 years younger than me. Matt was full of life, laughter, jokes, the biggest friend group, life of the party, deep

thoughts, deep love, the best singing voice, he loved leading worship and singing. He struggled with depression and addiction and finding his place in the world. And he took his life when he was 27 – 9.5 years ago.

There's nothing that can prepare you for sudden death, for tragedy. For the questions that will never be answered – Questions for him. Questions for me. Questions for God.

For those of you that have experienced this type of loss, you feel it so deep, and in my experience, it doesn't really "get better". I'm one song, one memory, one unintended 'how many siblings do you have' question away from crying on any given day, almost 10 years later, and that still surprises me. You learn to make friends with grief, to learn how to live with a hole in your heart. But the ache is always there.

Here's what I know.

My joy is now tinged with sorrow, and is somehow sweeter.

My simple easy life feels forever complicated and messy.

I know less about how's and whys and when's of how God intervenes, of when my desperate prayers are answered, of when healing comes. But I still pray and ask and declare.

That I still am hardwired for hope. And my hope is in the Lord.

That community is the balm. That we aren't supposed to do hard things alone. Community carries us through and mine did, and does.

That the Presence of God is transformative and God's Presence is real. It is for me, it was for Matt in his last moments, and will be for us in eternity.

That my roots were deeper than I knew. And like Barbara Brown Taylor says in *Learning to Walk in the Dark* "new **life** starts in the **dark**. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark".

This is my prayer for those of us living in the dark, in the mysteries, in the questions... In the Holy Saturday between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday.

That we will flee to God for refuge.

That we can have confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us, regardless of what is going on in our present.

That we will experience that this hope is strong and a trustworthy anchor for our souls.

That it will lead us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary, into God's presence.

From Hebrews 6:16

Scott:

Good morning. I live in Syracuse UT with my wife, Robyn and cat, Lucie. We have two adult daughters who live in Salt Lake. In the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that I am not actually a member of First Presbyterian, although I find this to be my spiritual home. I was raised in what is euphemistically referred to as the 'state's dominant religion' but was not raised in Utah. I was very devout for many decades. I served an LDS mission in Germany and Austria 45 years ago, married in the Salt Lake temple,

was the adult Sunday School teacher for four years, served in many leadership positions, checked all the boxes.

Over the past decade or so, as I have studied and tried to make my religion 'work' for me, to make it make sense, I found I just could not do it. At that point after trying to make sense of every little thing, answer every question, I determined that it was not feasible to do so. Sadly, I determined that the only logical conclusion was atheism, but I really did not want to go there.

I ended up here at First Pres a few years ago as my older daughter would occasionally sing here. My father and I liked to attend to hear her sing and I found I was comfortable here. Dad and I especially loved Reformation Sunday as my mom's family was originally from the Highlands of Scotland. I loved the sermons, never a hint of manipulation through guilt, fear or shame. Oh, and obviously the music. Dad loved the music and especially to visit with Larry after the service. In fact, Larry graciously played at my dad's funeral service a few months ago. And as a side note, the postlude today is the organ solo Larry played that day.

Due to a number of comments that Pastor Steve made in various sermons I determined that I would *choose* to have faith in God, while at the same time, having no idea as to the nature, structure, or organization that deity may take. I appreciate the kind, welcoming friends here, and I appreciate your patience with me as I try to figure out what I believe.

Now instead of trying to make it all make sense and focusing so much on the next life, assuming there is one, I prefer my daily challenge to be trying really hard not to be a jerk. I find that to be challenge enough! I typically do really well, right up until I get out of bed in the morning.

I would like to share with you an experience my wife, Robyn, and I had 20 plus years ago in Zurich, Switzerland. We had gone to Switzerland for Robyn's birthday, as her family was originally from there. As we were walking around Zurich, between chocolate and cheese, we decided to go into the Fraumuenster, a local reformed church, with a history going back a thousand years. We went in and we took a moment to look at the stained-glass windows.

Now I am a huge fan of stained-glass windows, but these were kind of strange, kind of weird, kind of hard to understand. OK, *really* hard to understand. The windows were done by Marc Chagall and are considered some his greatest works. If you are not familiar with Chagall, he was a Russian Jew who painted a lot of 'interesting' paintings. If you have seen the movie *Notting Hill* there is a Chagall painting of a goat playing a violin that figures into the plot. That is Chagall.

We looked at the windows briefly, and then turned around and started to leave. As we got to the front door a woman stopped us and told us in no uncertain terms that we needed to go back in and really look at the windows. I told her we would do that (Ja, wir machen das), which was just my way of trying to disengage from the conversation. What I didn't ask myself until later was how did she know we had not already really looked at the windows. So, we went back in, sat down, and started really looking, trying to make sense of them. After a few minutes, we were able to start determining just a bit what was being represented. At that point someone started to play the organ. Bach, as I recall. As we sat looking at the windows the most powerful spirit that I've ever felt in my life came into that room and just filled it. And it wasn't just the two of us that felt it. Everyone walking in felt it, as it was obvious on their faces. The spirit was just palpable. *Now* as we looked at the windows, we started to recognize the scenes, such as Elijah on his horse being taken into heaven, Moses holding the commandments, Jacob climbing the ladder, etc. Shortly thereafter the music stopped, and as the spirit began to ebb, Robyn turned to me and said, 'we were meant to be here today.'

As we were preparing to leave, I wondered what lesson, if any, God was trying to teach me through this experience. Or was it just his way of saying, 'Hi, still here, love to hear from you when you get a sec!'

We walked out the doors to continue our wander through Zurich, but only got as far as the back of the church, but now from the outside. From the outside, when one looks at the windows, all one can see is dirty plexiglass covered with rusty chicken wire, put there as protection.

Now God typically does not often speak to me. He doesn't even mumble. And on the rare occasion that he does, it's typically with a tone of exasperation. But in this case, I thought to myself OK God, I get it now, loud and clear. It was at that moment I realized what God was trying to say to me. It was this: WE are God's greatest work. WE are hard to understand and require time and effort. When we look at each other from the outside we see only dirty plexiglass and rusted chicken wire, all the guards we build around ourselves to protect ourselves from the pains and dangers of the world. It is not until we look at each other from the inside, as God sees us, through the eyes of perfect love, can we really understand and love each other.

In high school choir, there was a song we loved to sing, which was based on the Priestly Blessing, from Numbers chapter 6:

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

Amen