

THE STORY GOES ON

Every country has oral traditions. It is part of the expression of identity of the people. War victories are celebrated in story and song. Dark moments in the history of the nation are remembered with sorrow and great drama. The Israelites are commanded in the book of Deuteronomy to keep the faith and stories alive, passing them on from generation to generation.

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess,² so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.³ Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.^[a]⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.
Deuteronomy 6:1-9 NIV

Even today countries keep their identity alive through oral tradition. Stories and events are perpetuated through song and story telling. This is pretty much what happened on the day of Pentecost when Peter, full of the Spirit, and having experienced forgiveness for his shortcomings, gets to his feet to tell the story. This is oral tradition in full display when he tells the crowds that are gathering, waiting for a word of explanation for their crazy, uncalled for behavior. Some had tried to explain it away as a shameful sign of public intoxication. Others gathered around this fisherman-turned-story-teller to see what this phenomenon that had interrupted the tranquility of a day of feast and celebration was all about.

Words are a powerful thing. Words convey meaning and hope; words can build kingdoms, and bring kingdoms down.

There is a song from a Bill Gaither musical. It speaks about the “story made song.” The song says; “you ask me why my heart keeps singing, why I can sing when things go wrong; for since I found the source of music, I just can’t help it God gave the song.” Then it goes on to talk about how over the ages many have tried to silence the song. Armies marched against it, nations tried to silence it, but in the end all that was left was the song.

I can only imagine how the followers of Jesus must have felt as they stood watching the song made flesh slowly become silenced on that cross. There was nothing but silence in the days that followed; silence and darkness. Hopelessness and despair...

Illustration: German and Allied soldiers on Christmas Eve. The story tells of a cold Christmas Eve night during World War II when in a dark field in France, German and Allied soldiers were dug in fox holes, eyes trying to pierce the darkness hoping to avoid an ambush from the enemy side. Even the glow of cigarettes was carefully shielded to avoid giving away positions and avoiding fatal shots. Suddenly in the dark of the night, a sound broke the tense silence; a solitary voice began singing Silent Night in French. After a moment, a second voice joined in the singing. Surprisingly another voice joined the tremulous choir, this time singing the song in German. Little by little, others joined in, and soon the night was filled with the voices of men in German and French singing about that night that was like no other. Forgotten for a moment were the crude realities of war. Laid aside momentarily were the fears of death and the song made hope pierce the dark night.

When all seems lost, there is still the song. In the midst of our darkest nights, we will find hope in the story that goes on.

The disciples felt it had all come to an end. This marked, for them, the end of an era. It is difficult when you have been used to being the center of attention to all of a sudden finding yourself on the margins. Peter and the disciples had for years basked in the security of being part of the Jesus entourage. They were on the top of the world. The idea that this maybe would not last had not crossed their minds. In a way they had never considered the possibility of failure. A sense of security, a sense of being sheltered from defeat had rendered them helpless and unprepared for dealing with the issues of facing hard moments.

Nobody is prepared for a death, even when it is an announced, expected death. You see the death warrant for Jesus had been signed a while back. There were those who felt he was too much of a radical, a danger to the status quo. This rocking the boat through his sermons and actions had many convinced that he had to go.

The truth is that when somebody comes around and proposes something new that pushes many out of their comfort zone, there are at least three ways to respond; embrace, tolerate or reject.

No doubt many of the crowds had accepted what Jesus had to offer. Some might say it was for the wrong reasons. But whatever the reason, the song sounded right. Others were tolerant of this new thing, even if it was not for them. But others violently rose against it. This song attempted against the status quo. The voices that claimed, we have always done it this way before, why should this Jesus person come now to tell us that we are possibly in need of a new thing?

We feel like a Peter today as I come to share the great news of the Disciples Pentecost experience.

You see over 15 years ago an in-depth Time magazine article revealed to the world that The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was dying. No doubt that news may have caused many people to experience that same sense of anxiety the disciples felt at the foot of the cross. Our death warrant had been signed by a culture that deemed the church, not only the Christian Church but all mainline churches, irrelevant. Like the disciples, we saw our numbers

decrease, our regions merge, our congregations close, our institutions disappear, and it seemed as if every event drove another nail into the coffin.

But just remember; when all seems to have come to an end, there is always the song.

Today we stand before you with the hope of the Spirit of the living God to report to you that we are part of a growing, vibrant church.

- We celebrate the creation of at least 687 new Disciples congregations. This number puts us over the half way mark of our 20 year plan almost 10 years ahead of schedule.
- We lift up that it is not about the number of congregations stated, but rather it's about the lives that have been changed through the witness of a Disciples congregation. More than 41,000 people live their faith in new ways, many of them coming into relationship with Christ for the first time through the efforts of these new churches.
- In four of the past five years, thanks to the new church movement, Disciples are opening more churches than are closing.
- New churches are contributing to the overall missions and programs of the Disciples. Disciples presence has been established in places where it had not been before.
- We have reached out to the growing Haitian community across the U.S. in ways that honor the partnership we have with our ministry partner in Haiti through the Division of Overseas Ministries.
- Today Disciples worship all across the U.S. and Canada in English, Spanish, Korean, French, Creole, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Chin dialects, Samoan, and several African dialects. Now if that is not a Pentecost experience, what is??

This is certainly the work of the Spirit of God, but there is a human element involved in this miraculous story. See, the disciples were scared, depressed, worried, but they were obedient to the command of "go to Jerusalem." The word says they were there in one accord. They were not all clear, they maybe were not seeing it from the same angle, but they were in one accord.

You see the story was being told again, and this group had three options: embrace it, tolerate it or reject it. But they choose to be open to the spirit and look at the consequence.

We have seen people in our churches reject the movement for many reasons; others have decided to tolerate what is going on; and yet others have embraced wholeheartedly what God is doing in our midst.

This is our story today. We preach that God is doing a new thing in the life of our church. We are not being taken back to where we were many years ago; we are being led to a new place. Many are being pushed out of their comfort zones. Others are having to let go of what is dear and comfortable, but it is a good thing!!!

One of the ways we can embrace this good story is through the support of the Pentecost offering. The Pentecost Offering, half of which comes back to our region for direct support of new church projects, allows New Church Ministry to provide training, support and networking for planters all over the United States and Canada. This offering is helping us to continue the mission of expanding the table. Since 2001, Disciples have started more than 692 new congregations, reaching more than 42,000 new Disciples. Our challenge is to continue to raise the roof on our giving to the Pentecost Offering. Give more, sacrificially, generously and joyfully!!

More than 2000 years have passed since that story was first told; ages have transpired since the first stanzas of that song was sung. It has gone through many variations. Time has gone by, but the story is still the same. The same spirit that inspired the song, that caused the rush of those first winds, is still among us today. Can you feel it? Can you hear it?

Let us lift up our voices and tell the story. Let us enjoy our Pentecost as we sing the songs of victory that remind us that God is not finished with this church yet.