

**Sermon preached by Rev. Chris Popadich at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 21, 2021**

**THE STORIES WE TELL
Deuteronomy 6:1-25**

Well, Friends, Church. On Thursday I had a pretty big milestone. I turned 40 years old. My wife, being truly amazing put in place for me all week special zoom calls with longtime friends that we would enjoy over dinner. It has been a wonderful week. At 40 years old and nearly 8 years of marriage I have many things to be thankful for. Particularly, I am so thankful to be with you, church, as I start a new decade of my life.

Within the 40 years of my life God has done miraculous things in me and for me. I am truly a new creation because of the work God has done to make me into the man I am as I stand before you today. And he is not finished, but God completes what He starts and He will one day bring me into His presence where I will see with my own eyes how He has washed me white as snow having cleansed me of all unrighteousness. Amen!

Birthdays are of course the perfect time to break out stories of the person who you are celebrating. This has, of course, been the case with me this week as I have heard from old friends. And what is family but the people who remind you of those most embarrassing moments when you were five and did something silly that you even now blush about.

No, sorry, I won't be sharing any of those with you this week. But there are some other stories, including the one I am going to share with you today, that Lisa and I have shared with many people every time they sit down with us for a meal. We share this story because it is one of those stories where God just showed up and blessed us beyond what we could have ever hoped or imagined. It takes place nearly 8 years ago in Pittsburgh.

"So what are you looking for?", asked grandma. We were gathered around the table eating dinner with Lisa's parents, sister Laura and grandma and PA. Buck and Shirley, Lisa's grandparent were a spunky pair who love Jesus. Lisa and I were newly married, and were living on love. We had Target gift cards, a queen bed and a host of wonderful presents from our wedding but our furniture was severely lacking. We did have a few things we had snagged out of the "Barn", a place where previous seminary students would toss...I mean place furniture they didn't need anymore. It was an old garage with no heating and was by any observer a cave of "mystery and wonder." We didn't care. Like I said, we were living on love and had found a few....umm... treasures...

Lisa was working as a paraprofessional and I was chugging though seminary. She has said again and again that she married me for my money...as you can guess we were raking it in. But our hearts longed to do exactly what both of our parents had modeled for us time and time again. They opened their table to friends, family, strangers...both of our moms cooked like they were feeding the Army so there was always plenty of food. But even if you have food you need something...you need a table to put people around and chairs. A card table just was not enough.

“We need a table.” we told Shirley and Buck that evening. “You see one that can expand and fit a couple of people let us know.” Of course there was multiple stores we could go to and even thrift stores that had old hand-me-downs, but like I said, we were not “raking in the dough”...all of those options, as nice, pretty and practical as some of those options were they were pretty much out of the question.

“Lord, you know we need a table.” we prayed before going to sleep that night. It was a past-time of Buck and Shirley to take drives around the area. Both in their 80s, they loved checking out neighborhoods. Who’s cutting their grass. whose house was up for sale. Who got a new car or took out their shrubs... “STOP BUCKY STOP! Will you look at that!” There, on the side of the road sat 6 chairs and a table. \$100 read the sign. After Lisa’s mom found where Buck and Shirley were looking at this table she called us and described this “table and chairs.”

It was an Ethan Allan table, with 4 regular chairs and 2 chairs with arms in excellent condition. Some smoke smells but beautifully taken care of. The sign next to them said \$100. After a good wash and replacing the seat cushion fabric they looked brand-new. The regular seats alone were marketed at \$600 apiece after finding them in a catalogue.

With two leaves to expand the table it fits 12 settings and we have sat 12 at our table. From Ambridge, PA to Fresno, CA to here in Alexandria we are so thankful to seat people at our table, provided by God, and answer to prayer. It was a simple prayer but it has allowed us to open our house to many people and feed them well and hear them tell their stories. And if you come over and ask about our table I am sure you will again hear us tell the story. (PAUSE)

Why, why retell that story? Why do we get excited about telling folks about our table? Because no matter who it is, no matter where they come from or what they believe, they are going to hear about the God who answered our prayer for a table. A table we were blessed with so that we could be a blessing to others.

But in the retelling it does something else. It reminds Lisa and me of the way God has blessed us and points us towards Him. Both the hearer and the listener are pointed towards faith in God.

This is the beauty of the instruction given in our scripture this morning. Starting in vs 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. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your house and on your gates.” Ignorance of God’s stories was not an option here.

The word “impress” in the Hebrew brings up connotations of repeating or sharpening. This is not a once and done sort of action. Any teacher here will tell you that for most children once is never enough to understand a concept.

Today one of my favorite books is the Chronicles of Narnia. I read though it every couple of years. And each time it helps us understand our faith to an even greater extent. I remember my dad reading them to us when we were kids. I loved to hear the stories and yet now, those same stories have taken on greater meaning.

The same with these Bible stories. Each retelling the listener, as they get older, grows in understanding and faith because each time they hear it they are different. Their lives are changed and so for the listener, the story becomes richer and strengthens their faith more because their lives are different.

The listener, the child in this passage who is the primary person to whom these stories are to be told is the first beneficiary of the retelling of these stories. But the blessings do not stop there. I already alluded to this earlier when I told the story of our table. Every time we retell the story our faith grows a little as well. Because we are never the same person when we retell the story.

We all know what a rough day feels like. We all know what it feels like to doubt God's goodness, God's faithfulness, God's hand upon our lives. There are seasons when we are in the desert of our lives. Everything we see around us seems dry and empty and desolate. Then we have a new person come visit our house. "WOW, wat a beautiful table, is this an heirloom?"

There are days when I pause. I don't want to tell the story. I don't want to remember because I don't feel like having faith in that moment. Sure, that entire story could easily be told, "Yea, Lisa's grandparents found it on the side of the road for cheap." And that could be the story. Done.

BUT WHERE IS THE FAITH IN THAT! Where is the story? It sounds more like happenstance than anything else if you tell it that way. You see, when we tell the story, we have to tell it faithfully so that God, not us, is glorified. Remembering our sermon from Pastor Brunson from last week, we must FIGHT for our faith even if our thoughts and emotions are thinking quite the opposite. I have to testify to you, every time I tell a story of God's faithfulness my faith is renewed.

But there is a third audience that is blessed in the retelling of these stories – the community. Let me give you an example of what that look likes. As you know, I am new and occasionally I will make a comment like "WOW, when did Faith Church pave their parking lot? It looks new." And here is where it gets fun.

As I begin to hear the story, Drew with his arm tattoos talks about how much of a mess the church parking lot looked like and the mud everywhere, Emily might chime in and tell me how it wasn't a lot of fun because everyone had to be inside and then you get Tee in there and he is showing me pictures and telling me why and what pressures needed to be regulated and then Stan might be telling me how it was to talk only a couple of months and it lasted 2 years, then Bill might tell me how they had to wrestled with the gas company to grade the hillside...it goes on and on.

The conversation began with just one person but as the community began to hear the story told they chime in and bring correction and details to the story. What could have been a five-minute story about the parking lot now ends with a story about our giant window being replaced because the church finally had the money to fix it. And all throughout the telling of this story, listening carefully you can hear God's hand of providence and provision for our church building and property.

Although the story may have started with one person, as I walk out into the parking lot we are joined by others. So by the end of the story not only is the listener encouraged, not only has the faith of the teller been encouraged, but the community too now is remembering God's goodness and faithfulness.

As the scriptures say, "When you are at home, when you walk along the road, when you go to sleep and when you wake up." The reminders of God's story are to be everywhere so that they influence how you lived and moved and had your being. They are "tied on your head and wrapped around your wrist." Most commentators agree that the Israelites took this metaphorically not literally as there is little archaeological evidence, they followed these commands with actual scripture at this time period.

These stories that are being passed down to the children are so that everything you think, everything you do...your entire livelihood, "even on the door frame of your house" is shaped by these stories.

And our last audience, who hears but is not directly mentioned is of course God Himself. Throughout scripture we know that God is present. That is one of His divine attributes. God is Omnipresent. Is not God blessed when we tell the stories of the scriptures and testimonies of our lives that bring God glory?

The last audience that is blessed by the retelling of these stories is GOD himself! When God is the primary mover in our stories. When we get to the difficult points in our stories and say, "And then GOD," not chance, not good luck, not circumstance but God showed up and saved the day.

Church, our world is filled to the brim with stories that make you or someone else or happenstance the HERO of your story when it should have been God. Just the other day, as we were finishing our guest bathroom remodel we at one point were getting pretty discouraged. But the most challenging part was the small backsplash that went along the left side. We were feeling quite defeated after calling the company and looking at other Home Depots for options online. Nothing matched and there was no side piece available. After looking at other "Creative options" in the store, and finding nothing, we began walking to the registers. Suddenly I said, "Wait, Look at that," and there, on the shelf, were door thresholds. Friends, there are what, 20+ aisles down Home Depot? And there, a door threshold, caught my eye. Sure enough, we laid it next to the original when we got home and presto IT MATCHED! "GOD IS SO GOOD" we exclaimed. He is so gracious to us we spoke of it at dinner that evening.

Who is the hero of that story? Trust me, it is not me, it is not my ability to match colors and patterns. The hero of that story is God.

Parents, church, all who are listening, our students need to hear your stories of GOD'S faithfulness in your life. Not just the miracles but in the everyday moments like back splashes for sinks, and tables, when you walk along the side of the road. When you sit down to eat, when you are driving in the car, anytime you are with our kids, tell them the stories that point to God and his faithfulness. Long past are the days when the reasoning of "Because I said so" or "Because that is just what we do" would convince someone that they should read their Bible, pray, go to church, be involved in a Bible study. Long ago it was lost that we culturally would attend church on Sunday Morning.

Facts are one thing, obedience to parents is another, but a story, a story does something deeper for our faith.

We need to have an answer of a story when our children ask "What is the meaning of doing these things, what is the purpose of doing these things, why do we go to church, why do we worship God?" You should have an answer for them that comes in the form of a story about the incredibleness of our God.

And what is the blessing God promises to these children in learning these stories? "That they may prosper" as our text says. That they may be children of God and become all the attributes of being God's people.

A blessing to the nations, a people who deal justly in their work, a people full of the fruit of the Spirit, a people who love everyone and speak kindly to all who they meet. A people of hope in a world that finds so often everything is hopeless.

Let us be a church that passes on God's story. A people who tell of God's goodness so that for generations they may "Love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul, and with all their strength."