

Preachers: Tim and Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Psalm 107:1-91

Tim: Soon after our arrival in 2014, we gathered with many of you in small groups, called “cottage meetings” in order to hear your stories; stories about your faith as well as memories of the church’s past and hopes for the church’s future. It was at one particular cottage meeting that someone named a significant phrase from the church’s history, a tagline for this church from years ago—“A Church in the Heart of the City with the City at Heart.” This phrase was meaningful in the church’s history and now has renewed importance in the life of the Hagerstown Church of the Brethren. By telling the old story of this phrase it was reborn into an image, a logo that many of you wear on your church t-shirts. It is present on banners, newsletters, and directories. Stories like this are meant to be shared in order to inspire and shape ongoing ministry.

Audrey: Psalm 107 is a thanksgiving Psalm, calling those who participate in the liturgy to give thanks to God for his redemptive work in their lives. This psalm gives four examples of the people God redeems—those struggling with homelessness, bondage, affliction, and the storms of life all bear witness to the steadfast love of God. Some scholars believe these four examples are metaphors for what the people of God experienced in exile. They were without home, they were enslaved, they were ill because of their sin, and they had a storm to weather. The people who would have been reciting this psalm are those who had returned from exile, so they are invited to praise God for returning them to their home, for freeing them, for healing them of their sinfulness, for giving them peace. It is a story too great to lose sight of. It’s a story that must be told and retold. The only appropriate response to God’s redemption is to narrate the works of God—to tell the story. “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.”

The Old Testament contains regular tellings and retellings of the story of God’s faithfulness, but it is not only for the purpose of remembering what God has done. It is also for the purpose of being able to see what God is doing in the here and now. During the exile of God’s people, the narrative of the exodus from Egypt was an important one. However, it wasn’t told out of depression—“Remember when God brought us out of slavery and we were given our own land, those were the good old days.” Instead, it provided a lens through which they could view God’s current activity—“If God was faithful then, God will certainly be faithful now.” Stories of Israel’s past were meant to remind them of who God is and how God is in relationship with them, not to simply remind them of their former glory days.

Tim: So, what is the story of these days. We’ve been attempting to tell the stories of what God is up to at HCOB from our perspective over the last several months, but let’s review a few. Some of you have heard Audrey and I tell the story of our first Sunday at HCOB back in 2014. You all were nice enough but in no time at all after the 11am service was let out; you all shook our hands and were out that door. There was little to no mingling; there was limited sharing of life together and we could tell. Audrey and I looked at each other and we wondered, “Yikes, do these people even like being together.” Now today things are different; we can’t get some of you out the door. And you know what, that is a good thing. It says to me that these are people who love to be together—and they are family, sharing life together—and that’s the way of the Kingdom of God.

Audrey: One of the places that has been the most life-giving for me in my ministry here is the newly reinvigorated woman's ministry. Let me tell you, HCOB, there is a spiritual revival coming in this church, and it's going to be your women who lead the way. The women's retreat is a place where deep spiritual work is happening. God is doing amazing things through these women who are digging their roots into scripture and preparing themselves to be open to the movement of the spirit. This church is being blessed by their faithfulness.

Tim: The story of the Bible Read-Through is a wonderful tale of a people who already love scripture and decided to devote an entire year to study the Bible, cover to cover. Truly, this congregation is blessed by Sunday School Classes which are wonderful places for community building but also for solid Biblically grounded study and conversation. You add to this a year of focused study of the whole Bible and it yielded incredible fruit. People were asking Pastor Audrey and me questions consistently about things they read in scripture. People joined Sunday School classes just so they could have conversation partners over the text. Some people even bought Study Bibles for the first time. We were all blessed by the reading of God's word and I'll speak for my class, The Contemporary Christian Conversation Class, which has never been more engaged or curious about matters of faith.

Audrey: God is also working through the young people in this church who are deepening their faith. Walking alongside them has been an absolute joy. A highlight of mine will always be listening to some of the youth preach over the years — most recently Jared Kees and Katie Hardy. Katie and I also shared special time together at National Youth Conference last summer as we were paired together during anointing. Being able to witness the baptism of Noah Gingrich is also a moment that was clearly special for this congregation, as it was special for us too. Then there are the kids and youth at youth club who have grown deeper in faith and understanding of scripture. You have made space for these young people to thrive and to grow, giving them opportunity to both learn and lead.

Tim: The story of these last couple years has included incredibly challenging moments as well— moments that divided us and threatened our sense of community and trust. I am grateful, however, that God has held us gently as we struggled and reached resolution. While not all are satisfied, we've maintained the Biblical bonds of peace Ephesians 4 speaks of and we continue to bear with one another in love. God can be there in the worst of times, too.

Audrey: These are stories of God moving right here in this place. These are stories from our perspective of a people responding to God's call and doing it together as the church. Now it's your turn to tell the stories. If you want to really brighten this Sunday, tell us a story about how God has moved around this place and be specific. Don't just say, "Our church has been growing" or "we've had great leadership." Those are institutional, boring stories. Instead, tell the story about how God has moved in your life, in and around this faith community. Those are compelling stories. When we go downstairs to the fellowship hall after worship, tell Tim and me this kind of story. You can practice on us. But also, tell these stories to Pastor Twyla when she arrives in a few weeks. This will give her a glimpse into the spiritual vitality and maturity present at HCOB. But then also tell these stories at your family dinner table, tell them to your closest colleagues at work or your good friends you've had for years but with whom you have never talked about faith. It's your turn to tell new stories.

Tim: Notice she said “new” story. This simple word is significant. When Pastor Audrey and I met with the Leadership Team for the final time, we gave them a brief analysis of some big picture assets, the things you are doing well, and growing edges, the things that need more work. One of the growing edges we identified when we arrived and that continues to be a difficult one for you all is to live in the present and not the past because you have a lofty impression of your history. You need to stop comparing present day HCOB to the HCOB of the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s. Those were different ages. These comparisons have made it difficult for you to see what God is doing now and for five years we’ve been trying to get you all to tell a new story about yourselves. Some of you have been able to do this, but there is still work to do.

The fact of the matter is that people have joined this church, many people, who do not know the historic church but only the present. They have seen God here and wanted to join in. You do not need your history to be worthy of the Gospel message today. So do not let your history hold you back. Do not let your historic story dictate the ministries you can do today and do not let it dampen the significant moments that happen. For instance, because I think some of us need to have this spelled out, after a service of baptism one Sunday, I remember a member’s first words to me post-service were ones of longing for days gone by when in the church many young people were all baptized one after another, so many youth. That’s a good memory, but this memory was shared as a way of mourning that things have changed, and it diminished the significance of the moment for those who had just been baptized, people committing their lives to Jesus Christ through the ministry of this church. This beautiful moment is clouded by the past. This cannot keep happening because you will stay stuck in the past, unable to be moved into the future by the power of the Spirit.

Audrey: You must learn to own the now and the new of your story. You must learn to tell the beautiful things God is doing today. The world needs to hear about the now. Otherwise, the demise of the western church will only hasten because the church will stay in the past, irrelevant to the here and now.

So, what is God doing today, doing now? You’ve heard several examples of things we’ve seen happening here, but it is your turn to name these and your turn to tell these and keep telling them and to keep living stories worth telling. For Tim and me, the call of God remains clear and it is taking us onward to the Oakton Church of the Brethren to continue ministry in a missional model, much as we have done here. God has a calling for you, too. Tell the story of what God is doing anew, tell the story of God happening now, here in the life of your church. Let’s celebrate today by sharing the stories of God and let’s allow these new stories to take us onward toward the Kingdom of God. As Psalm 107 says, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.”