

Our Story Faith Study

Session 5: Unexpected, Untrue and Ever-changing Stories



Opening Questions *(select 1 or 2 questions)*

- Tell about a time when you encountered road construction or a travel delay and had to find an alternative plan.
- Have you ever been part of a surprise party? What happened?
- *God is with us, no matter what.* What is your first response to this statement? How does it make you feel? How do you think it impacts how you live, if at all?

Opening Prayer & Responsive Reading

Dear God, our stories are ever-changing and often unexpected. Our lives contain twists and turns—delight and contentment, as well as disappointments and setbacks. It's easy for us to take things for granted when life goes well, and to cry out to you in desperation when it doesn't. Please help us to feel your love and presence always, as our stories continue to unfold. We know that you are with us always, and that you give us strength to live our lives.

One: God's Spirit writes a new story on your life each day. Be awakened to God's love each day. Be a blessing to the world. Live in love with your neighbor.

All: Our story matters. Amen.

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible is a single story of how God has overcome all obstacles to bless all of creation, including us, human creatures. Psalm 139 and Romans 8 are strong statements of God's unconditional love for the world. There is no place too dark or too hard that God can't find us to love us and to bless us. These are comforting words in this time of uncertainty in so many areas of our private and public lives.

Psalm 139: 7-10

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Romans 8: 35, 38-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Think About...

(optional, depending on time)

- What word or phrase speaks to you today?
- What causes us to forget at times that God is with us always?
- Paul makes a list of things that cannot separate us from the love of God. What else would you add to the list?
- How does knowing God will love you completely and forever affect the way you look at life? Does it change how you live in any way?

What Do Others Say?

One of the gospel threads that weaves through all of scripture is that "God is with us," no matter what. Exodus and exile. Faithfulness and fragility. Our turning away and our turning back. When we recognize it, and even when we don't, God is with us.

How does that good news settle in your spirit? I hope it's a source of encouragement, of confidence, of hopefulness.

But let's be honest. The world we live in, the relationships we curate, and the bodies we inhabit give us ample cause to wonder how and if God is yet present in our stories. This lesson is a chance to wonder about and wonder in God's ability and desire to show up in our lives—even and perhaps especially—when they take unexpected and unwanted turns.

Unexpected Stories: Case in point—*A Global Pandemic*. An unseen and seemingly uncontrollable virus has upended our lives for a year and a half. It's certainly not the only unexpected story you have experienced in your lifetime, but it confronts us with some essential truths. We are not in control, for as much as we want to be. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. Stuff just happens. We are not immune to hardship. We are also gifted with times of surprising joy. So, where are you now? How are you sensing God's presence in your unexpected story? Remember, God is with you.

Fulfillment of Creation Illumination

(optional - use as a group or individually)

Explore the text from a different perspective by viewing an illumination (artwork) of the text from *The Saint John's Bible*.

In the "additional resources" you'll find a copy of the illumination, a guide with questions, and a YouTube link to a guided meditation.

Find the "additional resources" at:
www.incarnationmn.org/our-story/

Guided meditation:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyMbS9VfY3s&t=5s>

Untrue Stories: As a kid, I grew up between two brilliant siblings. In my mind, they were always smarter than I was, more creative, more likable. So I started telling myself the story of “never enough.” Since I couldn’t be as smart as they were, I majored in “underachieving” well into my college years. Since I wasn’t as creative, I never risked trying out for a musical or a choir until my senior year of college. I was sure I was “never enough.”

It wasn’t until well into my 20s that I had the good grace of multiple peers and mentors speaking a new truth into my life. You are smart. You can be creative. I’m sure my mom and dad had spoken those same words hundreds of times, but this time it stuck. I began to see myself as others experienced me, as God had made me. What are the stories that you have told yourself or others have told you that are simply not true? Where are you now as you live with those untrue stories? I hope you sense God’s presence in your story, speaking these words of love: “You are a beloved child of God. You are made in God’s image.” Remember, God is with you.

Ever-changing Stories: I don’t know if we spend enough time processing the tectonic shifts that happen when we move into new phases of our lives. Childhood. Adolescence. Young adulthood. Single or married. Middle age. Empty nesting. Caring for aging parents. Retirement. Living into old age. The process of dying. Each transition has its own bane and blessing. There are things we gain and things we lose. We can experience the grace of new insights, new experiences, and new ways to relate. And perhaps we experience the grief of limitation, loss and loneliness. So, where are you now? How are you sensing God’s presence in your ever-changing story? Remember, God is with you.

Author Ariel Burger, a student of Elie Wiesel, gives us this encouragement: “It is not enough to repeat the stories of the past; we must also write new ones,” Professor Wiesel explained. “We must step off the page into our own situation, which is unmapped and unknown.”¹

Unexpected. Untrue. Ever-changing. That’s just life! Life with God. A God who is with us... no matter what.

-Pastor Kai Nilsen

Silence for Quiet Reflection (optional)

Spend a few minutes in quiet reflection on the questions in Pastor Kai’s reflection or the questions below or whatever is speaking to your heart in the silence. Write a few notes or sentences or a prayer.

- How are you sensing God’s presence in your *unexpected, ever-changing* story?
- What are the stories you’ve told yourself or heard that are simply not true? Where are you now as you live with those *untrue* stories?
- What do you want to remember and take with you from the *Our Story* series?

Think About (select one or more questions)

- What stands out for you from Pastor Kai's reflection or from the quiet reflection time (if your group spent time in silence)?
- We all have unexpected stories. What impact has the pandemic—an unexpected story—had on you so far?
- Tell about a time when you sensed God's presence – maybe during an unexpected or transition time.
- Has there been a time when you wondered if God was present in your story?
- The reflection mentions life stages and transitions. Which stage or transition stands out as an important time for you? What new insights did you gain?
- What life stage or transition are you in now? How might God be at work in your life in this time?
- What is something you'd like to tell your "younger self" now that you've been experienced more of life?
- Pastor Kai mentions regarding himself as "never enough," in comparison to his two siblings. He later comes to see himself as others experience him—the true story. What stories have you told yourself that are simply not true? If you are still living an untrue story, how might you to change how the story unfolds going forward?
- What has been helpful for you when you've felt that you're "never enough?" (And be sure to remember that you *are* enough. You and your story matter to God).
- What surprising things have you learned about yourself (or seen in others) during unexpected times of stress or change.

Wrapping Up the Our Story Series

- What have you discovered about your story as we've walked through the last five sessions together? Have you rewritten or rethought your story in any way?
- Have you seen someone else through a new story?
- How have you seen God at work in your story and the stories of others?

Connecting Faith with Daily Life

(for individual reflection & action)

- What is a story from your life that you'd like to share with a friend or family member? Find a good time to make that happen.
- Talk with a friend or family member about how this unexpected pandemic has affected you. Reflect together on how God might be present in this time.
- Look at the illumination of Romans 8 in *The Saint John's Bible*. See the instructions in the box earlier in this session.
- Reflect on the questions in this session or across the *Our Story* series. Journal, meditate, pray, go for a walk, write key phrases, or do something creative—or use a combination of methods—to contemplate. Are there any next steps?

- Think about how stories change as time passes or with different perspectives. Talk with your parents or children about a shared event and see what they remember from that time. Does this storytelling create a fuller picture?
- Ask someone to share one or more of their stories – you might use questions from this series as prompts for the storytelling. Perhaps you can be “story buddies” and share your stories with each other over a series of conversations.
- Is there a faith story or memoir in all of this? Perhaps you are inspired to record or write your faith story. Faith-based books to guide you include:
 - “Remembering Your Story: Creating Your Own Spiritual Autobiography” by Richard L. Morgan at www.upperroombooks.com.
 - “Writing to Wake the Soul: Opening the Sacred Conversation Within” by Karen Hering at www.karenhering.com/writing-to-wake-the-soul/.
 - “God was with Me All Along” by Mary Lou Redding at www.upperroombooks.com.

Prayer (*Read this blessing together. It is a blessing you offer to one another*)

As you finish this blessing, make the sign of the cross to one another.

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

-Numbers 6: 24-26 (NRSV)

¹Wiesel, Elie as quoted in “Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel’s Classroom” by Ariel Burger, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH), New York, 2019.

© 2021 Incarnation Lutheran Church. All rights reserved. Scripture texts are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States.