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Listen and Repeat - Psalm 78:1-8

Introduction to the lesson: This is the last in our series on living in – and as – a community of faith, from Jesus’ words about how to deal with conflict with others in the church, to Paul’s advice to the church at Rome on keeping faith, both our own and others, in a community of diverse belief. Today, we’re focusing on a critical part of growing in our relationships in the community of faith, the church – our relationships with God and with each other: sharing.

Those of you who took language classes should remember hearing the title of this sermon before - some of you may even remember high-tech classes like I had in High School: audio tapes! We all sat with headphones and microphones in little cubicles, and listened as the voice said (in my case, in French) “Ecoutez, et repetez.” Listen, and repeat. Learning by rote.

That was the way languages were taught, by and large, back then; it’s really still the way we learn a lot of things. See, and do. Listen, and repeat. That’s what the Psalmist is doing in Psalm 78, and it’s what God wants us to do to learn his ways: listen, repeat, and pass the message

down through the ages. Not just in print or on screens; orally, spoken, heard.

Psalm 78 goes on to tell the story of the Exodus, picking out particular events that marked that forty-year journey. He doesn't tell the whole of the story, he tells pieces – because everyone he addressed already knew the larger narrative.

The psalm picks out stories of the “wondrous works” of God as they were led to their promised land – but, more importantly, he tells how quickly the people who experienced them forgot that these wondrous works had happened. The psalm tells us that we should talk early and often about these things, to ensure they're embedded in the hearts and minds of each coming generation. As one preacher repeated often in his sermons, I quoted, and even now, over thirty years later one of the members of my first congregation always reminds me when we see each other, “Christianity is never more than one generation away from extinction.” It isn't just the faith of the Hebrews, but our own Christian faith that has to be passed on, not just in sterile books or even as a part of worship that the people who need to know about God may never attend, but from *our own* lips.

What's also important for us today is not just the wondrous works of God in the distant past: after all, these people forgot them within minutes after they occurred, or so it seems. Important as they are to our history, our faith, how we understand God's relationship with human beings over the years, what's at least as important is understanding - even just *seeing* - how God is acting among us right here and now.

You are miracles. Each one of us, a miracle. We are surrounded by miracles. And by “miracle,” I mean God’s work, in, around, and through us.

But a part of being a miracle is knowing how we came to be who we are, and knowing that we are miracles. That is, in essence what Psalm 78 is trying to do – help those who hear it know how miraculous they are.

We are the followers of a curious fellow named Jesus, who just happened to be the Son of God, the long-awaited Savior of the world. Jesus did many things that inspired his disciples, his followers, those who could see who he was, to be miracles themselves.

Let’s look at our own ancestors in faith, the early Christians. Even though they were pushed to the fringes of society, persecuted, reviled, made fun of, humiliated, they saw their following in Jesus’ footsteps and teaching as not just taking in knowledge and developing their personal faith, but as serving others - even those same people who persecuted them; to witness to Christ with their lives and deeds. Jesus himself said, “Do good to those who hate you” - and so they actually practiced it. That itself is a miracle, if you’ve ever tried it: I highly recommend it as a spiritual exercise that really involves heavy lifting! And maybe for us

“hate” is too strong – try “those who don’t like you or whom you don’t like.”

But back to those first Christians: one of the amazing facts that we have from outside sources, non-Christian historians and writers, about the deeds of these crazy people who *tried to do* things like love their enemies, is that when periodic plagues and diseases hit a town or a city - as they inevitably did - Christians, instead of running away like everyone else, ran toward the stricken people, and cared for them. This so impressed those who saw it that it became one of the greatest tools they had of attracting new believers.

Not that they had some sort of magical immunity to disease; they died, too - but they knew that to follow in their master’s footsteps meant walking into life-threatening danger in service to others. Even others they didn’t know. Miracles, even angels of mercy to those for whom they cared.

And Christians still do this today. The three westerners who contracted Ebola while serving those in desperate need, those shunned by their families and communities? All of them from Christian organizations, doing what Christians did from the very beginning, right now: putting their own lives at risk for the sake of others, *because they knew, they know, that their eternal lives are safely in the hands of the same Jesus Christ who inspires their work.*

That's the stuff of which heroes are made, as you well know - like those who ran *into* the Twin Towers on 9/11; those who run *toward* the sound of shots fired or people screaming or a crash.

But there are lots of miraculous things happening that aren't so grand, or at least not so headline-grabbing: I look out at this room this morning and see person after person who has a story to tell, but may not have realized that it should be put in words, spoken, and repeated.

Just in the past few weeks, I've learned of people who've recovered from seemingly impossible circumstances; one miracle in particular that involved not just a physical improvement that had been prayed for over a period of years, but a healing of relationships broken for decades.

And each of you has a story to tell, to share; some piece, maybe not even your own, that tells a wondrous work of God among us - a story we all need to hear.

We don't even recognize them when they happen to us, sometimes: have you ever had someone say after you'd related some event, "That was a God-thing," or "God was in that," or "Sounds like God's been good to you?" Simple things, like someone saying just the right words at the right time; getting an answer to prayer; a mended relationship; someone you know and love finally realizing how destructive or hurtful their

behavior is; even finding something you thought you'd lost forever – maybe even your faith?

Or just the fact that something keeps drawing you to acknowledge that there is a God? That draws you to worship? That you have people who know you and still love and care about you (that's a big one for me!)?

The lesson of Psalm 78 here, today, for our congregation, our community of faith, is, don't keep these things to yourself. Even if they happened to you, share them. Even if they didn't happen to you, repeat them. And listen for them - for the tiny glimpses of God that flash out of these little miracles that we take for granted - because that's what God wants us to do, what Christ did for us, and a critical part of living together in Christian Community. Listen, and repeat.