

Say So

Psalm 107:1-9

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¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever. ² Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble ³ and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

⁴ Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; ⁵ hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. ⁶ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; ⁷ he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. ⁸ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. ⁹ For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.

It was the summer of 1989 and I was between my eighth and ninth grade years at school. It was my first time to attend the Logos Program's National Conference in Estes Park, Colorado. While the week got off to a rocky start – I was accidently left behind when my church group left downtown Estes Park for the conference center. Yet it turned out to be a fabulous week. Tons of memories were made that week in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. And before the Conference was over, I knew that I wanted to come back again to this special place.

The last official event of the week-long conference was a closing communion service on Friday night. As the worship service unfolded, we soon reached a point in the service that was called the "Say So." I remember it clearly. Dave Throop, a minister from Southern California, addressed the 500 of us gathered for worship. He said, "This is your opportunity to share about how God has moved powerfully this

week. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” And then, Dave began to move through the chapel with a wireless microphone as a number of participants felt moved to share.

The responses of the high school students gathered there that night were quite varied in depth and emotion:

- I just want to say that this was one of the best weeks for me. I had the greatest small group I’ve ever had and Mr. John was a great leader. *Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.*
- I wanted to share that I’ve had a hard life already – I’ve gotten mixed up in drugs and my friends and I spend way too much time drinking. But, after this week, and all I’ve learned here, I’m going to turn away from all of that. I know I am stronger because of what I’ve learned about God this week and about how God is going to be with me, to help me when I get back home. *Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.*
- My mom and I haven’t gotten along very well. I’ve been sneaking out to get away from her and we are always yelling at each other. But, because of the friends I’ve made here this week and the conversations we’ve had, I know that I need to honor my mother – my mom. And I think I can because of the ways I’ve felt God talking to me this week. *Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.*

The “Say So” went on for at least another ten minutes with further stories of changed lives and proclamations of the power of God that week. But, as it went on, I began to wrestle with whether I should stand and say something. Fear and doubt began to creep in. What if I couldn’t string together a sentence with 500 people staring at me? If I did say something, what would people think? Would they be cynical – did that really happen? I began to think “nobody wants to hear from me - I’m just about to be a freshman.” And so I convinced myself that I didn’t really have anything to say.

Yet I should have said something. I had something to say. It was at that worship service that very night that God called me into ministry.

I confess that I was afraid to say so that Friday night in the summer of 1989. And I suspect that many of you can relate to the fears that arose within me. Perhaps you also have been too shy, too cynical, too worried about what others might think, too concerned about your reputation. Maybe even you have heard the stories of others and thought, my story is not that dramatic – nobody’s going to want to hear my small, plain story. I don’t – we don’t – need to say so.

In their gospels, both Matthew (12:34) and Luke (6:45) capture Jesus saying: *For out of the abundance/overflow of the heart the mouth speaks*. Indeed, our hearts are full of many blessings, some more apparent than others. But so often we don’t tell the story of our hearts’ abundant blessings. And there is a real danger in our reluctance and unwillingness to risk saying so – it’s a danger to our own sense of gratitude and to the health of our community.

I confess that I was afraid to share what was in my heart that night 29 years ago – to share what God had done. But if I had known Psalm 107 better – the psalm the “say so” was based on, I would have realized that I wasn’t supposed to be or to feel all alone in sharing my story. In that same verse in which the redeemed are called to say so, the “redeemed” is not singular – it is plural. The redeemed of the Lord referred to the entirety of God’s people. The psalmist is calling for corporate confession – for the testimony of the whole community. It’s not just my story – it is all of our stories.

That was certainly the case for the Israelites. God had redeemed – had saved - the Israelites time and time again. And while the Old Testament is full of countless stories of God’s deliverance, the psalmist uses four pictures in Psalm 107 to describe God’s faithful love. In the section of Psalm 107 we read this morning, we see the first picture – the first adversity the community faced - was a reference to the Israelites wandering

in the wilderness during the Exodus. When they were hungry and thirsty, physically and spiritually, they cried out to God, and he came to their aid – manna from heaven and water from a rock were just two of the ways God delivered them from their distress. Because of this, the Psalmist suggests that “they” (the redeemed) should give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds, *for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things*. God sustained...and sustains them.

If you were to read the rest of Psalm 107, you would see that this pattern repeats itself three more times with the adversities of imprisonment, illness to the point of death, and a tumultuous storm at sea. In each case, the people cry to the Lord, God delivers them, giving freedom, healing, and safety, and the redeemed are summoned to praise.

These four stories weren't just an “in case you forgot” retelling. There was a clear purpose in sharing these stories. Celebrating God's goodness and acts on behalf of the community was at the center of Hebrew worship. This pattern was at the heart of their thankful praise to God. “Saying so” was fundamental to their worship and devotion to God.

“Saying so” was also a way for the community to remember. In scripture, remembering falsely or forgetting entirely is often associated with an absence of gratitude. In fact, one of the saddest judgments passed on people in Scripture is that they didn't remember God's steadfast love. Therefore, witnessing to God's faithfulness and deliverance was a way for the community to ensure that the story was repeated and recalled. If you have ever participated in a Jewish Passover Seder, you know how this works. The Seder remembers and retells the story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In addition to stories, prayers, and questions, powerful symbols witness to the story: a vegetable dipped into salt water reminds them of the tears shed by their enslaved ancestors; a bitter herb calls to mind the bitterness

of slavery their ancestors endured; charoset spread upon matzo bread evokes the image of mortar spread upon bricks under Egyptian oppression. These are just a few examples of the symbols shared and stories told at the Seder as a reminder and retelling of God's steadfast love.

We have a similar story of God's steadfast love to remember each week when we gather at the Lord's Table. We remember the adversity of our sin and our inability to overcome it. And we also recall how Jesus' death on the cross – his body broken and blood shed, symbolized by bread and cup – and his resurrection to new life, redeemed us – saved us - from that sin. And we give thanks. That's why the act of the Lord's Supper is sometimes called the Eucharist – a Greek word that means “giving thanks.” That's why the Eucharist is fundamental to our worship. As a community, we give thanks, telling this vital story week-after-week so that we do not forget.

So what does this pattern of the redeemed look like for us today? Individually, we could probably recall a dark moment in our life (death, divorce, job loss, illness, a school or business failure) and how we cried, “God just get me through this!” And then we remember how, sometimes miraculously, sometimes imperceptibly, God moved in our lives. Having received from God, we give thanks for God's steadfast love, and we use this pattern to reframe the stories of our lives with a different understanding of how the pieces fit together – of how God has been and remains present in all of the moments of our lives.

Corporately – for the whole community - the pattern of the redeemed has two expressions. The first is to give thanks together for God's movement in an individual's life. Christine Pohl, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, once wrote about how a colleague's childhood memories of Sunday evening gospel services were shaped by individual testimonies of gratitude. This colleague explained that through the personal testimonies, the community experienced the joys of each member, and the

practice made the community alive to God's activity in the world and able to articulate the events of their lives within the larger narrative of Scripture.

The second expression of community gratitude comes with giving thanks for God's movement in the community itself, as a whole. This is when the church gratefully recognizes how the church has been blessed by God. It's a practice of community life. Just as gratitude has been recognized as important to the well-being of individuals, it is also vital to sustaining communities that are holy and good.

When we faithfully remember and recite God's acts of love and care, we corporately re-live the experiences that have shaped our histories and identities. Here at First Christian we remember how God saw this congregation through the highs and lows of its 128-year history. We remember stories of God's care in the lives of particular individuals – friends who faced tragic adversities and, with God's help and grace, found their way through them. But we don't just remember. We give thanks! A grateful community says so! There is no doubt that gratitude is often a backward-looking practice – but it also shapes the future in that it allows us to build on that past with hope and confidence. And when gratitude fills our lives and community, it spills over into celebration and proclamation...and that celebration and proclamation is a sign of the resurrection which then gives us strength to carry the cross of each day.

As I mentioned earlier, there are dangers in not sharing the gratitude we have for God's steadfast love. There is the danger that we will forget how God has been good to us or that we will take it for granted. There is a danger in thinking that we have the all of the answers and that we have made it this far by our own hard work and determination instead of with God. There is a danger that our relationship with God and with others will languish if don't see the connections between them and the story of God's faithfulness. And there is a long term danger in failing to pass along the stories of our faith to others.

So how do we share our gratitude for God’s blessings with others? How do we say so? Individually it might look something like the simple practice of offering thanks at meals. It might be the establishment of a permanent “thanksgiving spot” in your house where notes of appreciation are left and family accomplishments are celebrated and remembered. It might be your willingness to share your story of God’s movement in your life with someone else – to pass it on.

Corporately, it might take place in the conversations of God’s blessings to us here at First Christian around the restaurant table you go to following worship today. It might be at the start of your next group meeting. But let me pose another possibility for how gratitude might be shared corporately.

About a month from now, the papers and the television news will be filled with stories recalling the major events of 2018 that shaped our lives locally, nationally, and internationally. This recap helps us look back at the circumstances and experiences which shaped the news throughout the last twelve months.

Well, we are almost at the end of the year. Today is the second-to-last Sunday of the church year. Two weeks from today is Advent –the beginning of a new liturgical year. So as this year draws to a close, it’s time for our recap. It’s time to give thanks for the ways God has been with us through the past, including this year. It’s time to tell the story of God’s goodness to us. A grateful community says so.

So I thought I would catch up on some thank you notes on behalf of this church:

- Thank you, God, for the more than 65 church members who gave up part of their day yesterday to deliver 110 turkeys and thanksgiving meals to members of our community. God, you are so good to us. The redeemed of the Lord say so!

- Thank you, Lord, for the resources and labor you have given to First Christian to provide hundreds of students in Wichita Falls with warm winter coats this season. God, you are so good to us. The redeemed of the Lord say so!
- Thank you, Gracious God, for the renewed interest in First Christian's ministries to children and youth. A stable, sustainable foundation has been formed and participation was up both with students and volunteers. God, you are so good to us. The redeemed of the Lord say so!
- Thank you, God, for our ministry of music. The capable leadership of Jeanette and Debbie, the musical gifts of our choir and instrumentalists, the sounds of our children leading us in worship through singing. And, you have blessed us with the addition of four college singers – Brianna, Natalie, Stephen, and Kenidee. We are grateful that they have enhanced our worship just as we have been enhanced by the relationships we have been able to form with them. God, you are so good to us. The redeemed of the Lord say so!
- Thank you, Sustaining God, for the leaders of this church – Elders, Diaconate, Ministry team leaders, Board Officers, and Staff, who helped guide this congregation through a time of transition this year. This church was better, and is better, for their leadership and steadfast commitment. God, you are so good to us. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!

These are just small samples of how God is so good. When we were lost God heard our cry. God delivered us and saved us. And so we give thanks and offer our praise to God. Let us not forget. Let us – a grateful community – say so!

Sources:

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