GOOD MORNING!
I’ve decided to entitle this talk, The STORYTELLERS.

We started out the month of July in Mark, Chapter 5, with the story of the revival of Jairus’ daughter and of the healing of a hemorrhaging woman. These stories are usually characterized as symbolic of new life and a new Israel.

That started a sequence of stories from Mark about compassion and a call to action, what to do when you are overwhelmed by circumstances beyond your control. Fr. Paul gave us a rousing plea for compassion and a call to action on behalf of our brothers and sisters and their children, entangled in the razor wire of bureaucracy at our borders.

Early in Mark 6, when Jesus spoke at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, the locals were astonished and offended, as if to say, “Who does he think he is? He’s just a carpenter, the son of Mary.” The missionaries in their own hometown were not afforded their due respect.

After that incident, Jesus commissioned his twelve disciples, appointed as symbolic leaders of Israel’s twelve tribes. Their job was to foment a renewed Israel. They were instructed by Jesus to turn away from unwelcoming villages. We had Rev. Sarah’s wisdom story for modern day missionaries who carry the burdens of Earthly life as, “SHAKE OFF THE DUST AND MOVE ON!” I add to that, “Look out world! Here we come!”

According to New Testament scholar, Mark Powell, from Trinity Lutheran Seminary, while the disciples were away, Mark gave an account of how Herod killed John the Baptist. Last week’s story of Herod beheading John, as related by Deacon Tom Bates, hints at the now centuries-old conflict between Israel and leaders appointed by Rome. Some stories seem to be repeated over and over again.

Today we are in the 4th segment this month of readings from the Gospel of Mark. Let’s back up a bit and get a general understanding of the book of Mark, the first written but the briefest of the four gospels.
Although the original story is anonymous, by the beginning of the 2nd century, Christians were writing “according to Mark” on copies of the book. It should be noted, that in those times and places, Mark was a very common name. So, Mark’s identity is sketchy, he could have been John Mark, whose mother was a member of the early Christian church in Jerusalem and knew all the disciples.

He was also a relative of Barnabas and had traveled with Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey. John Mark is mentioned as being with Paul in prison. Paul’s letters were written before any of the Gospels, so Mark, having traveled with Barnabas and the missionary Paul, was familiar with the format of letter correspondence, but not necessarily narrative writing. Because the book of Mark is the first Gospel written, he did not have a template to follow.

Mark my words. It is not clear whether John Mark from Jerusalem is the same “Mark” mentioned as being with another disciple, Peter, in Rome. Peter frequently adapted his teaching topically, to fit the occasion rather than recalling stories in order of occurrence.

If you’ve studied cross cultural linguistics, it makes perfect sense. Eastern Mediterranean, southern European, “Latin”, Arabic and indigenous culture narratives throughout the world, communicate by talking around an issue with many adjectives and descriptive dalliances that connote layered relationships, telling one story within another in a referential fashion, and finally circling toward the main idea in the middle, with what some English instructors would characterize as flowery, unnecessary language.

Again, the modern New Testament theologian at Trinity, Mark Powell, says that Jesus stories, as told by Peter, were recorded by Mark in Rome, using a colloquial, unrefined Greek. Mark had not heard or known Jesus personally, but Mark was an interpreter and follower of Peter. He wrote down the stories of Jesus as Peter recalled them, thematically rather than sequentially. They are lacking in their presentation of Jesus’ teachings, but rich in emphasizing human frailty, suffering, failure, and ambiguity.
The weak and weary could identify with these stories more so than could the studied religious elitists or the powerful hierarchy of the time, or today, for that matter.

Today we welcome home our missionaries who have traveled to different remote Honduran villages each day and served with compassion to heal a total of about 1500 people who have little or no access to regular medical or dental care. These Americans are bursting with stories to tell. The ancient plight of poor people in remote villages has not much changed in history. Honduras Good Works missioners, along with locals gathered from the Episcopal Diocese of Honduras and students from the University in Tegucigalpa, are exposed to situations much like those in ancient Biblical times, when human frailty, suffering, failure, and little education was the norm rather than the exception.

After long work days, our modern team got food, recapped the day, got spiritual renewal then rest, and, along with our own Fr. Paul, each retired to a small convent cell, possibly with a roommate, maybe not. While most of the team slept, some of the team restocked footlockers with meds and supplies to start the next day.

Likewise, in our readings from Mark, the weary apostles needed a break. Having gathered around Jesus to tell Him all they had done and taught that day, Jesus suggested a retreat in a deserted place, but before they got to rest, the crowds saw and followed them.

Now, this was not a small group of needy people. The story reports 5,000. Because they were wandering around like lost sheep without a shepherd, Jesus had compassion for them and decided to teach them, to feed them with wisdom and compassion, and heal their hungry souls. Details of bread & fishes are not included in today’s reading, except that 5,000 were fed.

The main point here is that miraculously, as Jairus’ daughter, and the hemorrhaging woman, the believers, the faithful people of Israel, were once again sustained by God, as on many occasions in ancient times, when they received the message of salvation.
That was interpreted as .... YES! They were still God’s special people, as in the lyrics of our processional hymn today, “souls, whose days, reclaimed from error’s ways, inspired with hope and praise.”

Mark’s Gospel verses for today are two different excerpts. The second story jumps to the end of the chapter when the mission party from the deserted place had already crossed the Sea of Galilee, to Gennesaret, and were followed again by crowds begging to touch the fringe of Jesus’ cloak to be healed, a reference to the traditional tassel Jewish males of Israel were required to wear. All who touched Jesus’ cloak were healed, and renewed, as expressed in our Gospel processional, “a lantern to our footsteps, shines on from age to age.”

We already know the details of these stories. So why review? It is an age-old tale. If you’ve been a church goer for many years, you’ve probably heard these lessons at least 20 times, but if you identify with or recognize this story, where do you fit in the scenario, what is your role today as a Christian? Each of us, just as each verse is part a larger story, you are part of the body, this team of Christians here, this moment. If I know one answer to these queries, not one, nor ten or twelve can solve or heal all the Earthly woes we are exposed to in our multilayer cacophony of what we call society in this 21st century after Christ.

You don’t have to do it alone. We have been put here in this flock, this family to do God’s will. We have been planted here at this moment in history as the body of the Good Shepherd, to bloom and grow in this local haven. Our reading from Ephesians tells us that Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone upon which we can rest our Earthly burdens. Tell your story and why you are here. Tell the story of Jesus and his love.

In the schools, shops, homes, in the forest and desert of our literal and figurative lives we can pass the bread and cup of grace, carry the flame of salvation within us, so we might be a light to others, to lighten someone’s Earthly burden, wherever we are, not just locally but to other nations of peoples. We are not entitled or privileged, but gifted. We are not the light itself, we are the vessels, made to be poured out to all humans.
Why? I believe that a new or renewed life is too precious, the most precious imaginable, not mine to hold onto. It’s too large to encompass in one vessel, too ethereal to conceive or grasp. It must be shared, like a big hot potato, it must be passed on.

Jesus did not do it alone. He discipled others to disciple others. They were nudged, provided the best example of all of humanity, created in the image of God, as is each and every one of us, given examples of how to live in Grace, Gracias, or thanks. Not to feel smug about our gifts, but by sharing the same cup of blood and the bread of renewed life in our own house of prayer, we should feel equipped to go forth and love as we have been loved. But how many of us feel worthy? You don’t have to be. Neither Jesus nor his disciples were perfect.

Over twenty years ago, a dear teacher friend shared her story saying, “This is my mission field, where God has planted me.” That shocked me. Could I be a missionary too? I had never imagined that I didn’t have to go to foreign lands to be a missionary. She planted the seed. Then Tom and Jane Bates, thinking aloud one Thanksgiving weekend, watered it. One said to another, “Dora could do that.”- just as I was walking into the office to pick up mail.

Numerous times before, during, and after my short-term mission trips I’ve been called upon to speak publicly about my experiences. It didn’t start there. More than 50 years ago I was asked for the first time to speak publicly in an auditorium of hundreds of people. I was too naïve to know if I couldn’t, or shouldn’t, but someone nudged me forward. Fr. Paul is good about encouraging us to tell our stories. You are the best experts at sharing personal struggles and successes and the most able to share your story. We are all one team cheering each other onward, each with different talents.

It’s all about growing and serving where we are planted. Look up. The curvature of our ceiling, with its support beams, looks like the inside of the hull of a ship, a vessel, our fellow - ship of grace, led by the Good Shepherd. Our “nave”, an Old English word for sailor, is pointed heavenward. Any coincidence you think? From this we can navigate the stormy seas and doldrums God puts before us, only if we keep in mind the direction
provided by God, who continually renews and sustains us, from and to time immemorial with stories of renewal and new life.

WHAT’S YOUR Good Shepherd story?

Where have you come from and where are you going?

If we share our stories, we probably will discover that we are all pretty much in the same boat.

Fredrica Thomsett, in her book, We are Theologians, refers to a voyage of discovery, that sends us homeward through our theological history and raises questions about our inheritance, identity and purpose. That, as Christian pilgrims, we are not so much inventors, but explorers, discoverers of what has been there all along.

Signed, Dora, AKA an explorer. THANKS BE TO GOD!