

Do you know why you are here this morning?  
Do you understand what this assembly is all about?  
Do you let yourself breathe in new life each time you cross our sanctuary threshold on Sunday?  
Do you realize this is no ordinary gathering of friends?  
The psalmist gets it! Do you?

Hear his words again: **“I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips...I have not hidden your saving help within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness....”**

The testimony of the psalmist this morning is transformation: Life has changed! God’s saving help has been recorded in the psalmist’s heart. Its lodging, its en-fleshment, its incarnation calls forth praise. Listen again:

“I waited patiently for God; the Holy One inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. [S]he put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and be in awe and put their trust in God”

**Saving help is not an afterlife happening. It is a here and now experience.** It moves from desolation to proclamation. Something extraordinary reaches into the ordinary mundane moments of life and shakes the foundation of life itself. Ironically enough, God’s “aftershock” finds us on higher ground. No longer cut off from others, we become immersed in the human story of gladness. **We go from dead man walking to “Good News walking”!**

That’s why we are here... to tell and retell our story—to taste it anew and live it over and over again with thanksgiving. Christianity as we know it today did not spring forth fully developed as whole cloth. Christianity is a word of mouth affair...**it requires testimony**...it grew from a small band of 12 into a world religion because those who were healed by Jesus couldn’t stop talking.

The Gospel of John, records Jesus encountering a Samaritan woman at the well who gives him water. Their conversation breaks the social gender codes of the day...she is transformed: and leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ They came out of the town and made their way toward him ...and many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony.

Likewise the Gospel of Mark tells us that a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed; and He said to him, “ See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

But the leper who was healed went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in

unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere. When healing happens it must be shared, testified to, and expressed openly, lest its power be lost.

Most of us have come to associate the word testimony within a legal context. We speak of it as a form of evidence that is obtained from a witness who makes a solemn statement or declaration of fact. We are placed in a position of swearing an oath usually on a Bible. Or we associate it within an evangelical religious context where someone has been “born again” and speaks of Jesus as their Lord and savior. One website I visited to find out more about testimony [[www.about.com](http://www.about.com)] offered several “Easy Steps for Putting Together Your Christian Testimony.”

Here are some excerpts: First and foremost - remember - there is power in your testimony! Revelation 12:11 says we overcome our enemy by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony. Skeptics may debate the validity of Scripture or argue the existence of God, but no one can deny your personal experiences with him. When you tell your story of how God has worked a miracle in your life, or how he has blessed you, transformed you, lifted and encouraged you, perhaps even broken and healed you, no one can argue or debate it. You go beyond the realm of *knowledge* into the realm of *relationship* with God.

A three-point approach is very effective in communicating your personal testimony. The outline focuses on before you trusted Christ, how you surrendered to him, and the difference since you've been walking with him.

6 - Things are to be avoided.

Stay away from "Christianese" phrases. These "foreign" or "churchy" words can alienate listeners and readers and keep them from identifying with your life. Here are some examples:

Avoid using "born again."

Instead use:

- spiritual birth
- spiritual renewal
- to come alive spiritually
- given a new life

Avoid using "saved"

Instead use:

- rescued
- delivered from despair
- found hope for life

Avoid using "lost"

Instead use:

- heading in the wrong direction
- separated from God
- had no hope

The author goes on to say: Avoid using "Gospel"; Avoid using "sin"; and Avoid using "repent" These dos and don'ts may be helpful to some Christians, but they don't speak to me...For a large part of my life this notion of testimony kept me from claiming God's power in my life. I was a skeptic... not about God, but how God was being used.

Lord and Savior language left me cold, it still does, particularly when it ushers in words of judgment and condemnation, against Jews, Gays, believers in pro-choice, and women who refused to submit to a patriarchal world view with all its incumbent social constraints. When testimony translates as a test of one's faith as it did with our Puritan forbears it takes on a life of its own. That life "based on submission to God's will from a position of human inadequacy" has often, not always, taken on the prejudices of the believer rather than the generous acceptance of God and Jesus' extravagant welcome of societies marginalized and outcast.

When I allowed myself to really take in the good news of God's unconditional love, when I felt God's acceptance in my own heart, my bones were strengthened and my tongue was loosened from the bonds of fear that had long kept me silent. **I realized that Jesus and God's saving help were two sides of the same coin and that no matter which way you flip it, the result is always the same: love abounds and grace multiplies.**

There are plenty of folk who faithfully respond to Lord and Savior language. As Jesus said of the poor, they will always be with us; but thankfully Christianity is no longer beholden to the notion of testimony only as test. Thanks to the ever-expanding testimony of progressive Christians like us, Christians who follow Jesus with an open hand not a closed fist, there is room to understand testimony as a more fluid process.

Progressive Christianity as espoused by UCC Simi testifies to acceptance, acceptance, acceptance. "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey".....finish the sentence with me..."you are welcome here!" As Diana Butler Bass notes in her book, *Christianity for the Rest of us...* "Testimony is about who we are and who we are becoming... our stories of transformation no longer tell tales of spiritual acquiescence and conformity. Instead they tell of finding meaning, finding unique selves, finding God in a confusing and chaotic world. Testimony along with healing and justice actions has become a spiritual practice that signifies life as story in progressive churches.

Butler Bass concludes that unlike the stories of Puritans and revivalists, mainline testimony is not "a spirituality of arrival, of the certainty of securing eternal life." Testimony from the progressive spectrum of Christianity is about "the journey...the act of getting there. Testimony is not a formula of salvation; it is a way of being—a map to an undiscovered country." In telling the stories of our lives, "we find we are not alone on the journey" that others are there walking beside us and holding out an open hand to steady us as we go. That has been my experience and that is why, after much resistance, I overcame my silences and trusted God's love enough to journey as a Progressive Christian pastor.

Tomorrow, Martin Luther King Jr's life will be recalled and celebrated in many circles. Each time his words of hope and acceptance and justice are recalled a new generation is blessed; for blessing is the nature of God's acceptance lived faithfully and spoken boldly. In the context of the Psalmist's testimony hear King's words: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Each and every one of us here today is called to bear the light of God's love into the world, to take our transformational stories from the shadows of fear into the sunlight of faith. Our stories matter! Telling them is important"

When we tell our story we don't need to put our hand on a Bible because we journey with a loving God. **Each time we step out in faith, beyond the fears instilled in us in the past we become the Bible—Good news walking! Amen.**