Long, long ago, in a state far, far away, I was ordained a priest. I had satisfied all of the requirements. I was well-trained. I knew how to do all the “holy hands” stuff. I knew the Anglican tradition’s theology of the Eucharist (as well as the Catholic and Reformed). I knew what to say when dispensing the bread and the wine. I knew how to give blessings to children and others who weren’t going to receive. I felt confident that I knew what I was doing. And I performed my role, as I understood it, quite adequately.

Several weeks into my priesthood, however, in placing the host in parishioners’ hands, giving them the “body of Christ”, and locking eyes, I realized I had no idea what each person was expecting, or what they thought they were receiving. Oh, sure, my theological training assured me that Christ was “really present’ in that piece of bread, but was that what they thought? Was it just a piece of bread? a reminder of Jesus’ death? the actual body of Christ? or food for the journey ahead? or some kind of mystical medicine that would help them heal? I had no idea! And, truth be told, it probably made little difference!

But that wonderment on my part translated into another, wide curiosity. You must realize that “church” has been my “job” for almost thirty years, and I’ve been “in the hunt” for over forty! For me, the “God thing” has been a vocational reality for a long time, and it has been lived out in churches. But I began to wonder, and still do . . . what draws others, what draws you, not only to the altar but to church? I think about this quite often, but, as you might suspect, with a bit more focus as I assume the role of “pastor” of this flock.

There’s no reason, of course, why we should expect everyone here this morning to be here for the same reason. You’ll certainly recall that people came to Jesus for multiple reasons. We heard of two reason in this morning’s reading from Mark. In the first case, a mother comes seeking relief for her daughter’s mental/psychological condition. We don’t know what “unclean sprit” or “demon” might have been, but many scholars suspect epilepsy or some other malady of the brain. The second case is much more straightforward - the man has physical defects for which he and his friends/family seek remedy.

But the gospels are full of other reasons that people sought to see Jesus. Later in Mark, and we’ll see these in a few weeks, parents brought their children to Jesus to have them blessed (Mk 10). A rich your ruler came to Jesus wondering how to find purpose in life - he asks how to go beyond simply following the las to inherit eternal life (Mk 10). Some came for food distribution, as in the feedings of the multitudes (Mk 6 & 8). Some questioned Jesus on matters of law or custom - think of the discussion of divorce, or whether to pay taxes. And, of course, recalling many instances, including the Triumphal
Entry, there were those who came to Jesus hoping that he’d be the political messiah who would get rid of their political overlords. The reasons people went to Jesus are many and varied . . . as I suspect the reasons you are here are equally varied. But, in many of the cases, people went away telling wonderful stories of their encounters with Jesus, stories that impelled others to see what was going on!

Coincidentally, in the days after my interviews with the vestry here, the results of a national Pew Research survey were published (https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/09/us/pew-church-10-reasons/index.html). The subject of the survey: Why people do . . . and don’t . . . attend church. The results were both “expected” and unusual. I’m not going to ask anyone to raise hands, but which of these apply to you? The top ten reasons people gave for attending church:

1. To become closer to God. (81%)
2. So their children will have a moral foundation. (69%)
3. To become a better person. (68%)
4. For comfort in times of trouble or sorrow. (66%)
5. They find the sermons valuable. (59%)
6. To be part of a faith community. (57%)
7. To continue their family’s religious traditions. (37%)
8. They feel obligated to go. (31%)
9. To meet new people or socialize. (19%)
10. To please their family, spouse or partner. (16%)

I find it instructive that many of the reasons the almost 5000 people surveyed in 2018 resemble some of the reasons people went to see Jesus!

But, equally instructive, while perhaps not surprising to those of us who pay attention to religion trends, are the reasons people gave for “skipping regular religious services”:

1. They practice their faith in "other ways." (37%)
2. They are not believers. (28%)
3. No reason is "very important." (26%)
4. They haven't found a house of worship they like. (23%)
5. They don't like the sermons. (18%)
6. They don't feel welcome. (14%)
7. They don't have the time. (12%)
8. Poor health or mobility. (9%)
9. No house of worship in their area. (7%)
You probably know folks who fit those categories! They may have been reasons you’ve cited at one point or another in your life. But the Pew researchers dug deeper into the data.

More than half the people who believe but don’t attend religious services regularly are women. Many say they haven’t found a house of worship they like and so practice their faith in other ways.

And why so many women failed to find a house of worship they like? More than 6 in 10 said it’s because they have poor health or difficulty getting around. More than half (54%) said it’s because they haven’t felt welcomed by congregations.

And the researchers conclude:

American pastors, imams and rabbis have spent endless amounts of time trying to cater to millennials’ tastes, or at least what they perceive to be millennials’ tastes: Coffee bars. Hip young clergy. Mission trips to exotic locales.

But this study suggests that there is an under-served group of believers who seem like they’d actually like to go to religious services -- if only someone could help get them there and welcome them when they arrive.

I must say, the Pew data (pardon the pun) tells a fairly bleak story, one we’ve been hearing from some time now. But I don’t think it’s a story we want to tell at Good Shepherd. Indeed, there are many different stories we can tell! And, in those stories are answer to those questions with which I began this sermon:

- I know - you know - of stories of healings in this congregation.
- I know - you know - of stories of sacrificial care for others in this congregation.
- I know - you know - of stories of radical welcome and hospitality, stories of becoming “no longer the other” in this congregation
- I know - you know - of stories of support and visitation in this congregation.

These are the stories that form this flock. These are the stories that we recall when we come to this place. These are the stories that, if we tell them, will let other folks know that their reasons for staying away from church might have little basis in reality . . . at least at Yosemite and Dry Creek.

Of course, telling the stories demands a bit of courage, especially for Episcopalians. But, I’ll tell you a story . . . about story-telling. Last week I made my first home visit as your pastor. A question I asked — and I’ll be asking you at different points
— was “How did you come to Good Shepherd?” The answer? “Some friends of mine had started attending. They knew we were looking for a place to land and told us about it. And we came . . . saw what they told us was true . . . and we stayed.” They heard a story — a story, to use a phrase from Proverbs — of the “good name” of Good Shepherd. That story was compelling!

We are a flock that has a great history — a great treasure trove of stories — and, therefore great potential! What stories from that treasure box might you tell? Will they be about music? Will they be about transformation while serving at St. Clare’s or Covenant Cupboard? Will they be stories of retreats or Quest? Will they be stories of joy at baptisms and weddings? Will they be stories of finding clarity at a time of confusion? Will they be stories of comfort at times of sorrow? Will they be stories of a sense of wonder when receiving brand and wine?

These stories, and the passion with which we tell them, will polish the good name of Good Shepherd. Those stories will tell others— off all stripes and persuasions —that this flock has room for more.

I want to close with two more brief stories, connected with my coming to stand in this pulpit this day.

Many of you know that the process of “sealing the deal’ on a new job is rarely straightforward. There are always little details that surprise us. In our case it was nothing bad . . . but it meant re-signing the signature page of the Letter of Agreement. Shane, Greg Bell and I finally got those all together . . . on my birthday a week-and-a-half ago. Brief story #1.

Brief story #2. When a rabbi friends of mine learned that today would be my first Sunday, he reminded me that this evening is the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Nice coincidence! But beyond that, Jews see Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world!

Old transformative stories. (Re-)birthdays. New transformative stories to be made and told!

With the grace of God, may the celebration begin . . . and continue!

Amen!