

What's Your Story?

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Good morning. Today, as Pastor Joy said, I'm not here to preach a sermon in the traditional sense. I'm here to share a story—the story of how God has worked in my life. Not a highlight reel, not a testimony wrapped in a bow, but a real story, with sharp edges and quiet miracles, with loss and laughter, and hymns that carried me when nothing else could. My hope is that in hearing it, you'll be reminded of your own story—and of the faithfulness of a God who shows up in every chapter, even the ones we wouldn't have written ourselves.

Before I was even born, my Mother Becky's life was a long line of miracles. She was in a car accident in her early 20s that left her with a broken back and a spinal cord injury that paralyzed her from the waist down. She was told she'd never walk again and that she couldn't have children. But she was a rebel. She threw herself out of bed at night in her body cast and taught herself to crawl. An orderly—who must have been an angel—secretly helped her back into bed each night. She taught herself to crawl, then to stand, then to walk with a walker, and then with a cane. She had a fiery determination. And a few years later, having resigned herself to not having children, just a month after marrying my father, she found herself pregnant. The woman who was told she'd never walk again, never have children—walked again, and bore two healthy children. God is gracious and merciful, indeed.

Music was always there in my life. My mother was a terrific singer and sang in church all the time. EVERYONE sang in my home church—and they sang LOUD. You could hear it down the

street on a quiet Sunday morning. One Sunday when I was about 5 or 6, I was sitting at the piano in the fellowship hall plunking out a melody when a well-meaning deacon told me to stop and leave the piano alone "until I knew how to play." Apparently some church ladies heard this, and 4 or 5 of them came out of the kitchen, aprons on, (I seem to remember a knife or two) and told him under no uncertain terms to "let that boy play!" A seed was planted in me that day about protecting young and developing musicians while they're learning.

I don't know where my parents found the money to support our family and my music the way they did. From the time I was 8, we lived on and worked a blueberry farm, and my dad worked as a sign painter. It wasn't easy, but when I came home asking for a flute so I could join the middle school band, my mother found that \$35-a-month rental fee (a lot for us), and I had a flute. Farming taught me about what it takes to serve things that grow in the hope that it will bear fruit. It wasn't just about the plants—it was about tending the soil.

In 2004, hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne came through, and our little single-wide trailer just couldn't hold up. In the middle of the night, the roof came down on us. That still sticks with me when storms roll in. For a while, we lived in tents. Mom and Dad made it the best they could. They bought some extension cords and ran them from the pump house to a kitchen tent with a coffee maker and a TV, and a firepit we cooked over. It was hot and sticky, but we made it. Later, we lived in the barn for over a year until FEMA helped us get a new home. Yes, I was raised in a barn. I wouldn't necessarily recommend it but it's a big part of how I think about home.

Life wasn't easy. It was rich, and fulfilling in ways I continue to gain understanding for. But it was never easy. Through it all, Mom sang in the choir and for special music in church. When she couldn't climb the steps to the choir loft, she sang from the floor at the steps. When she couldn't stand there anymore, she sang from her pew. But she never stopped singing. We knew how the day would go by what she sang in the morning—Great is Thy Faithfulness, Blessed Assurance, When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder. I think those songs gave her strength to literally stand up each day.

When I was 18, in the car after picking me up from college for Christmas break, my father had a heart attack. I was driving. He told me to get him home. I called ahead and told Mom something was wrong. My mother fell down the stairs trying to get to him as we pulled in. When he saw her, he said her name, his head fell back, and he was gone. We did everything we could, but when the Lord calls us home, we go. The next morning, Mom didn't sing. But later, after a day full of visitors and planning the funeral, she began to hum. She said later that the humming brought those glorious words back to her heart and helped her through. The seeds had been planted in her too. Those songs kept her standing. She couldn't support my sister anymore, and neither could I in the midst of the 2008 recession, so my sister lived at the Florida Baptist Children's Home, and Mom moved into assisted living. Thank God for Medicare and Medicaid.

I met Hannah in school at Florida Southern College. I thought she was aloof; she thought I was a jerk. We were both right, so we weren't friends at first. But over time, a friendship grew, and then true love. When I decided to ask her to marry me, I wrote her father—who is a missionary in Peru, and was in Peru at

the time—and asked for her hand. I told him I had already bought the ring, and I couldn't put it better than Harry in *When Harry Met Sally*: when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with someone, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible. In my life experience, one doesn't always have all that much time.

We got married, and I don't say this as a joke or to be romantic—I mean it: In the darkest times of my life, when I look at Hannah Jane Mazur's face and she looks back at me, I know—truly—that there is a living God who loves me.

In 2019, I got food poisoning that turned into sepsis. I'm not sure why I didn't die. I'm just so thankful I didn't. The choir knows and others have figured out that I have been blessed and cursed with super acute hearing. I can hear a whispered conversation above the din of a crowded room if I know to focus. Well I got an earful of very scary discussions between doctors and nurses outside my room who I think were trying not to alarm me while they waited to see if my kidneys would fail. By the grace of God they didn't, but I would rather endure a kidney stone per week for the rest of my life than ever feel what I felt in that hospital room. I felt like I was burning alive from the inside. When I did sleep it was a horrible, fearful sleep.

I've never fully recovered. Ever since, every hour of every day my body aches. Every day it doesn't play fair. Chronic pain has become part of my landscape, and it has changed how I move, how I rest, and how I lead. It has taught me that embodiment matters—that presence isn't just about showing up, but about how we show up. I don't have the strength I once did. But I also don't

waste strength on things that don't matter. I live now, truly, on borrowed time. And I try to use it well.

My mother, meanwhile, started having mini-strokes, and then in 2020 she had the big one. She couldn't swallow, couldn't speak. Her eyes still had some fire in them, but that faded too.

Let me make something perfectly clear: Becky Mazur was the most difficult, bossiest person I've ever met. One benefit of this is she always told us exactly what she wanted. If anything should happen to her, she said she didn't want to be in pain. She didn't want to be kept alive. She wanted to see my dad as soon as she could. When I was a kid, my mother had a conviction that no one should ever die alone. So we would visit people, and I'd sit in hospice rooms with her. So in December 2020, there I was with her in hospice.

I knew what to do. I sang. I prayed. I talked. I remembered with her. Those old hymns came easily: Blessed Assurance, Great Is Thy Faithfulness, When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder. Their words gave me the courage to love her to the very end. I only left to play Christmas Eve services in Gainesville—something I believe she would have wanted. On New Year's Eve, she died. No more pain. No more struggling to walk. No more fighting to live.

When I got into my car that morning to drive home, the last thing I had listened to in my car autplayed: it was the choir of Kings College singing O Come All Ye Faithful. "Sing, choirs of angels; sing in exultation; sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above!"

We made it through. We are making it through. As I look back on all of this I realize that all of those church services were rehearsals, for us to minister to each other in the hospital, and in the hospice home. A life of singing was just rehearsal for the big

choir in that heavenly choir loft, where she will be standing to sing with the Altos.

Music has ministered to me every day of my life. Not just pretty songs and comforting words. It wasn't about putting on a good show. It was certainly never about appeasing tastes or flattering egos. I've sat in too many sacred spaces—grief, silence, joy, surrender—to treat music like a performance.

Church music must be forged in the fire of real life. It must sound like hope with cracked edges, like joy that knows what sorrow is, like faith that's been to the tomb and still dares to sing "Alleluia." These hymns—these old, resilient, often-overlooked hymns—formed the scaffolding of my theology long before I had the words. "Great is Thy Faithfulness" wasn't just a comfort song—it became a declaration I had to stake my life on. These songs didn't just comfort us; they *carried* us.

If we do this right—if we build choirs and teams and congregations who sing with blood in their voices, who hold space for grief and testimony—then we're not just making music. We're building altars. Altars where the weary can rest. Altars where the proud are undone. Altars where the Holy Spirit doesn't need a mic or a monitor to be known.

And that's the music ministry I believe in. That's the music ministry I've bled for. And by the grace of God, that's the music ministry we are building here.

At Abiding Savior Lutheran in Gainesville, I did my best to live this out. The choir was strong and growing. The praise team was vibrant. We had a Christ-centered choral scholar program. My office was twenty-two steps from a stunning pipe organ. We

had built something beautiful together. Ministry is always challenging but there was no reason to think about leaving.

But just after Christmas, when it came time to plan for the spring and for Easter—I drew a blank. For the first time in my life, I couldn't see what came next. After hours of prayer and tears with Hannah, standing in the choir loft, looking at everything we'd built, I felt the Lord say, "Joshua, it's time to go. I need you elsewhere."

We're so quick to say, "Lead me, guide me, Lord." We better be careful praying it because the Lord will answer!

Before I looked for a job or sent a single email, I told my pastor: I believed the Lord was calling me elsewhere. It wasn't easy for him to hear. And to many, I must've sounded like a fool—leaving a full-time, secure job with no plan in place. I know many feel I was abandoning them. The gossip mill worked up a juicy story that I didn't believe people were good enough musicians, which was a horrific lie. But I knew: if I wanted to keep hearing God's voice, I had to trust it.

And now—here I stand. At Lakewood. Still learning. Still listening. Still being shaped by your stories, and offering mine.

This is my story. It's not neat. It's not triumphant in the way we sometimes expect testimonies to be. But it's true.

I believe the Lord called me here. And He has continued to provide for my family in glorious ways I never expect—yet again and again, He shows up. Every conversation I've had since arriving confirms the call. We have work to do—and we will do it.

But first: Jesus. First, the truth of His Law, His Gospel, and His Love. And on that foundation—with courage, with patience,

with principled decency and good order—we can do so much more than make pretty music.

We can become the hands and the voices of the Holy Spirit among one another. We can take the obligatory anthem and use it to amplify the word of God we hear read. We can ride the rhythms of the church calendar so that no matter what happens, people are reminded the Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We can truly lament together. We can truly give thanks, together. And hearts will be changed. Lives will be changed. By the grace of God, we will be changed. I believe in a music ministry in which Music is never allowed to become an idol, but remains a glorious, god-given means that is not mere decoration, but the proclamation of this Jesus, Crucified Died Buried and Risen again, for me, and for you.

I can't promise perfection. None of us can. But I have seen with my own eyes enough to believe—deep down—that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not hardship. Not heartbreak. Not conflict or confusion or even our own failures. Not death. Not life. Not what's happened. Not what's coming. (Romans 8:31–33, 35–39)

This is the love that calls us, that sustains us, that sings through us. What if this is someone's first time hearing this Word, this music? We'd better make it about Jesus. What if it's someone's last? We'd better make it about Jesus. Always.

So if you hear me singing in the hallways, or humming a hymn tune under my breath, now you know why. It's not just my memory or my love of these pretty songs. It's hope.

Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.