

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Once Upon a Time...

The Making and Meaning of Sacred Story

Deuteronomy 6.20-25; 1 Corinthians 15.1-8¹

Russ Dean, March 26, 2006



NOTE: As in introduction to the reading of scripture, I shared these words, and read the scripture as printed below.

In his book, *Honey from the Rock*, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, writes:

Every religious revival seems to be accompanied by a rebirth of the narrative as a vehicle for religious truth... The great stories did not happen to the masters of old alone. They happen to us. You and I. This moment. A tale unfolds... There can be no honest telling about holy encounters without sharing them in their context. All true theology must finally be personal. God meets one of us. And we in turn are compelled to tell a *story from which no objective theological truth can be distilled*. For this reason authentic God-talk must always begin with the introduction *ma'aseh sh'hayah*, "It once happened..."²

So listen now to two stories.

Once upon a time... *We were slaves... but the Lord brought us out of bondage with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against our oppressors. God brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the abundance that God promised our ancestors.*

Whose story is it?

¹The basis of this sermon is a chapter in *The Bible Makes Sense*, by Walter Brueggemann, in which he speaks of the importance of the two "primal narratives" of scripture. For the Jews, the narrative is of bondage and freedom, and can be found in Deuteronomy 26.5-9 and 6.20-24, Joshua 24.1-13, and Exodus 15.1-8. For Christians, the narrative is of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, summarized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.3-8. A "Meditation on Scripture," placed in our bulletin prior to the reading of these two texts, was taken from Brueggemann's writing: "...the place to begin in determining the shape of [religious] tradition is with the primal narrative, that most simple, elemental, and nonnegotiable story line that lies at the heart of biblical faith. Such a narrative is presented with the passion of fresh believers and with the simplicity of a community that had screened out all uncertainties and felt no reason to explain. It is an affirmation in story form that asserts, 'This is the most important story we know, and we have come to believe it is decisively about us'" (p.39).

Walter Brueggemann

² Lawrence Kushner, *Honey from the Rock*, quoted in "alive now!," Nov./Dec. '81, p.27, emphasis added.

Once upon a time... *Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures... he was buried... he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, Christ appeared also to me.*³

Whose story is it?

I struggled to get started with this sermon, because today's message is really so simple that it can be stated in one sentence. (I know; some of you wish I would!) But so often it's the really simple things that we seem to have the most trouble with. You know, sharing, playing fair, "*do[ing] unto others...*" (Matthew 5). So, I was struggling to figure out how to tell you that the importance of the Sacred Story is just that. That it is *sacred*, precisely because it is *story*. There is no greater truth. The story *is* the message. The story *is* the meaning. The story stands on its own. The story does not need to be analyzed, compartmentalized, spiritualized, theorized, baptized, categorized, dogmatized...

The story, to be sacred, needs only to be told. And told. And told, again, until I finally realize that this story is my story, too.

I was trying to figure out how to tell you this, and I realized that Sacred Story is just like symphonic music. Just like it. Bach, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Mozart do not need to be analyzed. They just need to be heard. Music, maybe especially music with no words to get in the way, cuts to the heart of a knowable, internal, universal truth. We need not break down music into a compartmentalized set of beliefs, i.e., "The Four

³ Several years ago we changed the congregational call-and-response following our scripture to "Leader: You have heard the ancient story. People: Let us listen now for the Word of the Lord." The emphasis on scripture as "story" that led to that change is repeated in today's sermon.

Musical Laws of Beethoven's Fifth symphony."⁴ Not at all – and, to do so might even keep us from hearing the message, itself.

But with that thought it occurred to me that surely someone had done just this. We have been blessed with the capacity to simply listen to a symphony that is its own message and to know in hearing that this glorious sound is its own truth. But, since it is the simple things we seem to have the most trouble with, it also makes perfect sense that we could not rest in simply letting our spirits tell us what is true.

With that demonic little thought in my mind I opened my web browser, and I grinned as I “Googled” the words: “mathematical analysis of Beethoven.” In about one-half of one second Google returned 171,000 possible links, including the home page for “The International Society for Mathematical and Computational Aesthetics.”⁵ Aesthetic is “...the appreciation of beauty,”⁶ but for the members of “The International Society for Mathematical and Computational Aesthetics,” beauty is hardly just “in the eye of the beholder.” No, for the Society, “beauty” is a formula, an equation, a mathematical probability!

Looking through this website, I was thinking of the unfortunately analytical way too many of us learned to hear our own sacred scripture when I read:

Remarkable advances have been made in the mathematical and computational analysis of major artistic masterpieces – from the chorales of Bach, the piano sonatas of Beethoven, to the paintings of Picasso and

⁴ I allude here specifically to the “Four Spiritual Laws,” a neatly-packaged tool for evangelism, made popular by the para-church organization, “Campus Crusade for Christ.”

⁵ From that site (<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~mleyton/ISMA.htm>) I read: “The computational analysis of design is now a enormous discipline involving the interaction of high-level mathematics with advanced programming technologies. All design attempts to satisfy two constraints: functionality and aesthetics. Even a discipline as functionally oriented as structural engineering, in fact, involves aesthetic control over systems of non-linear equations. Aesthetics allows for (1) productive unification of perception, reasoning, and action, (2) understandability despite complexity, (3) generalization and re-usability, (4) axiomatic economy and principled prediction. Aesthetics is a major force...”

⁶ Oxford American Dictionary.

Raphael, etc. Again, these analyses mainly involve Lie groups, Lie algebras, algebraic and differential geometry...⁷

Differential geometry? Why is just listening to “Moonlight Sonata” not enough?

Do you understand? Oh, I’m poking a little fun at the Society, in part because I’m not smart enough to know what differential geometry is(!), but more so because I’m saddened by the fact that Samuel Barber’s soul-stirring “Adagio for Strings,” is, for some poor mathematical genius, just another interesting algorithm! And, to the point, I am saddened that our Bible, filled as it is with some of the greatest Sacred Stories of all, is for too many poor biblical wiz kids, just a book of rules, a set of beliefs, a collection of stories to be analyzed for the purpose of learning the meaning of each, and, therefore, just a guide to doctrinal purity.

The ancients said, “...*your children [will] ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees... of God?’*” And did you hear their answer? “*You shall say to you children..., ‘ma’aseh sh’hayah.’*”

“What does all of this mean, daddy?”

“Once upon a time... *We were... slaves... but the Lord brought us out of bondage...*”

The story is the meaning.

This past week, in a correspondence with a fellow pastor, I asked about their celebration of communion, in light of our recent experiences. Guilty of not practicing what I’m preaching today, I asked about theories of atonement. What does it mean? Even unaware of my topic for today, Stan nailed me, nonetheless. “I don’t know that we need a

⁷ <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~mleyton/ISMA.htm>

theory of atonement,” he said. “I think maybe we just need to teach what Jesus taught, do what Jesus did, and tell the story of the crucifixion as part of his story, and ours.”

The story is the meaning.

This past week, Keely Smith came to me, and we talked about the meaning of Baptism. She would not have passed a graduate-level course in Systematic Theology with her answers. But, Keely, this is not Systematic Theology! This is your church, isn't it!? This is Keely's life, with us, together.⁸ When I asked Keely why she wanted to be baptized, she said, “Well, om... well, my brother got baptized... and, om, some of my friends have been getting baptized... and, om, well, I've been going to this church all my life... and, om, well my aunt says that after you get baptized you are living for God and not just for yourself.”⁹

The story is the meaning.

Every text of scripture has a reason. Something happened. No writer has ever sat down to make up something for no reason. Every scripture comes out of some personal encounter with God, but “what is lived can never be adequately described; it can only be communicated in stories that are told and stories... acted out in... celebrations.”¹⁰

A people experienced the life-giving presence of God in their life as a nation. And their story says, “*We were in bondage... but God gave us freedom.*”

For many of us, that is our story, too.

⁸ I baptized Keely at the beginning of our worship service, and directed these lines of the sermon to her, as she sat with her family near the front of the sanctuary.

⁹ For some pastors, Keely's “answers” might have led them to believe she did not know enough (didn't have the right doctrinal precision) to undergo baptism. I believe that Keely understands as much as she can, as a ten-year-old, about the “meaning of baptism,” and her “story,” was a meaningful way to express the importance of baptism to her at this time.

¹⁰ Ralph Milton, “alive now!,” Nov./Dec. '81, p.55.

A people experienced the presence of God so powerfully in the life of one man who walked among them, that after Jesus was gone, he hardly seemed to have been human at all. His stories came alive. His touch continued to heal. His forgiveness was thirst-quenching. His death seemed not so much an end, as the beginning of a whole new kind of life – for him and for them and for the whole world. And their story says, “He lived for us. He died for us. He rose for us.”

For many of us, that is our story, too.

A ten-year-old child experiences what she believes to be God in her life. God, in the life of her church. And a world away, in a farming village in Cuba, a 40-year-old woman named Ida, beaming with joy, shares the very same experience.¹¹ And they say, in their own worlds and in their own words, “I want more of this. God is here. This is real. I want baptism to help tell my story!”

For many of us, that is our story, too.

The story, from which “no objective theological truth can be distilled,”¹² is all we have of God. It is made sacred when we recognize its truth in our own lives.

So let us tell the story. And let us listen, that it may be so, even today!¹³

¹¹ On this morning, a delegation from our church was visiting our sister church, Resurrection Baptist Church, in Carlos Rojas, and Amy Jacks Dean was to baptize Ida following the service. At the time of this writing our delegation has not returned with a report on the baptism, but Amy indicated in a phone call that Ida was “beaming with joy” at the prospect of being baptized.

¹² Kushner.

¹³ Northrop Frye has said, “The Poet’s job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens; not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place.”