



TELL ME THE STORY

February 25, 2018, Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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God of Abraham our father, God of Sarah our mother, we remember with gratitude your salvation story that undergirds our lives. As we hear your promises again, open our eyes and ears to your love, your truth and your guidance. On our Lenten journey, help us to see ourselves in the narrative of Scripture. Teach us again. Pour your wisdom upon us. And call us to faithfulness. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

Several weeks ago Brick Church was honored to host in Adult Education the renowned Old Testament scholar, Dr. Phyllis Tribble. She gave incredible lectures on Genesis one and two, diving deep into the Hebrew and offering cultural context to these stories. In her lectures, she used a word that might have sounded odd to some of our ears. Dr. Tribble called these stories in Genesis “myths”...myths that arose from the imagination of the people of Israel but that also arose alongside the other creation myths in the Ancient Near East. She reminded us that reading the Genesis myths within their wider context shows us just how differently the Hebrew people understood the creation and their God. As much as I learned from her lectures, it does still feel strange to call these narratives in Genesis “myths”.

Instead of myth to describe Holy Scripture, I prefer the word *story*. The word *myth* seems to convey something made up and false. But Dr. Tribble used the word myth to keep us from associating the stories of Genesis with science and history. Genesis one and two are stories. Scripture is not a history book nor is it meant to be a science book. Scripture is a different type of literature all together. Dr. Tribble used the word myth to remind us that these stories have a history, they come from a



community, they require imagination, and they are not always meant to be historically accurate or scientifically realistic.

This distinction is important because we are a storied people. As Christians, our faith has a narrative, one that God began in creation, that God writes while in covenant with Israel, and that God fully reveals in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Muslims call Jews and Christians “people of the book” because of how we hold to the stories of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Story is how we understand who God is and how God interacts with humanity. Through story we come to know the many saints who have followed God before us.

This morning, we gave Bibles to our 3rd grade children. We don’t give our 3rd graders these Bibles because we think they can read and understand these stories all by themselves. We give them these Bibles because we make promises at their baptisms to teach them about the love of God and the stories of God’s people. We make a promise to them that God’s story is for them too, not just for us the grown-ups, but for everyone.

Today’s story of Abraham and Sarah is one of the more pivotal narratives in the story of Scripture, because this is where God’s covenant with the family of Israel begins. God has made a promise to this aging couple, one that they both laugh at, but one that God keeps. God promises Abraham and Sarah a family, descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. This becomes the beginning of their journey with God, marked by their new names, and many blessings await them. There will be missteps, but in spite of it all, God’s promises keep their story moving forward.

Abraham and Sarah’s journey with God is a story we hear, but it’s a story that we are a part of as well. That’s the thing about the stories of Scripture—they aren’t just abstract narratives, fables that have no connection to us. They are stories we’ve inherited, stories that if we let them, can shape us and lead us in following God. We can find our own faithfulness and failures in the stories of God’s people; we can hear our own thoughts spoken through their words. When we’re lost and looking for direction, we can follow the journey of God’s people in the wilderness. When we feel joyful and praiseworthy, our praises echo those of King David.



When we grieve, we hear Rachel weeping for her children. When God calls to us, we can lean upon Samuel's willingness to follow. And when God's promises exceed our expectations we can laugh along with Abraham and Sarah. These stories, these people in Scripture become our teachers, because just as we strive to be faithful in following God, so did they. They are witnesses of an incredible story, one that we've inherited. Their story has become our story.

Many of you know my family and I have spent the better part of this week packing and unpacking our apartment. Unpacking, while exhausting, can often be a trip down memory lane. And while unpacking our books this week, I came across the many versions of the Bible that my husband and I have shelved in our 200-year-old barrister bookcase. One of these is more significant than the others, and it was given to me just this past year.

This past Christmas, I got an unexpected package in the mail from my Aunt Carolyn. When I opened it, I found a well-worn, well-used RSV Bible that belonged to my grandmother Margaret. The note from my Aunt said, "She would have wanted you to have it." The margins are filled with notes, there are plenty of sections highlighted and she even has specific parts labeled in red. As I flipped through the pages I was reminded of the many times my grandmother told me stories from this Bible, took me to church, and showed me her love for Jesus. As if the Bible itself wasn't full enough of stories, having her copy added deeper meaning because these stories are not just abstract tales told a long time ago. They meant something to her, she connected with them, and she saw herself in the narrative. The stories of Scripture were a deep part of her life, and by her example, she shared that depth with me.

We are a storied people and how we connect to these stories of Scripture matters. We see in Abraham and Sarah's story that God calls to them, makes and keeps promises to them, and journeys with them, even when they forget God and this call. This naming and claiming from God is significant because Abraham and Sarah struggle with the other stories that seek to claim their lives and give them an identity. And here, too, we can see ourselves in the story of God's people.



Friends, identifying with God’s story matters because there are plenty of other stories out there in our world that want to lay claim to us. For example, the narrative of success teaches us that all of our earnings and achievements are due to our individual talents and intellect. This story goes along with the story of self-sufficiency—that we can move ahead in this world by only relying on ourselves. Life begins to be defined by power and wealth, rather than humble service. These stories can tempt us to adopt an attitude of entitlement and autonomy rather than gratitude and community. But in God’s story our life is a gift from God, and we live in response to that gift as thankful recipients of grace.

Another battle rages in our country over the narrative of nationalism, over who’s in and who’s out. People talk of walls, speak racist stereotypes and slurs to refer to different ethnic groups, and then use fear to establish a story of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ In God’s story, however, the relationship that God forms with Israel starts with sojourning immigrants, Abraham and Sarah, who are repeatedly commanded, along with their descendants, to welcome the stranger since they were once strangers in Egypt¹. Moreover, Jesus’ own family became refugees, fleeing their homeland—like so many refugees today—because of political violence. These immigrant stories at the heart of God’s story of salvation remind us that in God’s story walls and borders are not welcome.

But there are still other narratives out there. Currently, we’re watching a fierce argument in our country over violence and safety because our neighbors—and particularly our children—are being murdered at work, school and play. For some, righteous anger has peaked, and patience seems to have run out. At the same time, many others insist that the only path to safety leads to a world not with fewer weapons but with more. This is where knowing our faith story is clarifying. For example, as Dr. Tribble pointed out, in Genesis our God creates by bringing forth life out of chaos, beauty out of desolation. Other Ancient Near Eastern people understood creation to have been a violent act, involving warfare and slaughter, but not Israel. For Israel, creation was grounded in life, not death. Thus, the prophets of Israel call over and over again for swords to be beaten into plowshares and

¹ Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:34



spears into pruning hooks. Thus Jesus, our Prince of Peace, tells his followers to put away their swords, warning that if you seek to live by the sword then you will inevitably die by the sword.

Finally, if you think I'm being overtly political this morning, there's a reason for that. Our nation right now is filled with competing stories, all of which are trying to sell their narrative to us...which means that they're trying to sell an identity to us as well. The problem is that too many of us have invested in those stories rather than in the story of our faith. The result is incredibly negative polarization. Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, all have narratives that have led us to this moment that's defined by divisive speech and contentious relationships.

Friends, the truth is that God's story is not easily co-opted or rewritten to fit into any political category, any worldly party or agenda. In fact, in I Samuel when Israel says they want a king so that they can look and act like every other nation around them, God doesn't want to give them a king. God knows what will happen. God knows we will try to rewrite God's story to fit our own agendas. In God's story, God's people are called to be holy, to be obedient, and to be a light to others. God sends prophets to remind us of this, and eventually Jesus. This Jesus is the salvific reminder that God authors our story, not any other leader, ideology, hope, or dream.

On Ash Wednesday we were invited in the liturgy to read and meditate on the Word of God, and during this 40-day journey of Lent one of the things we're called to do is enter back into the Biblical narrative and hear again God's promises for us and our world. Lent is a time to seek direction, to find grounding, and to listen again to the story. In order to know more about the God who created you, redeemed you and continues to help you grow, I invite you this Lent to return to the story. Too many narratives out there are competing for our attention. Too many stories are telling us that they have all the answers. Too many people are telling us who we are and who we are supposed to be.



But God is calling us back to God's story, to God's plan for us found in the Scriptures, to God's love found in Jesus. This Lent, return to the story.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.