

The Story of the Bible  
Acts 13:16-27, 29-33a  
August 24, 2008

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*Conclusion to Series: Part I*

We've embarked on a grand adventure: for the last 50 weeks we have explored some of the most important stories in the Bible. Many of them were familiar stories, stories we all know and remember: stories like Adam and Eve, Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, David slaying Goliath and then becoming King. Others were stories you may not recall as vividly: stories, perhaps, like Solomon building the Temple in Jerusalem, or the early church arguing over whether Gentiles could be included. I named this year-long adventure "Stories We Can't Live Without" because I believe these really are *life-giving* stories. Oh, yes, I dare say my judgment wasn't always on target; I'd bet the story of the decline of the kings is one you could easily live without. God forgive me, but do we really need to know the difference between the corrupt Jehoiakim and his son Jehoiachin? Yet all in all, over the course of this last year, most of the Bible stories are life-giving indeed.

So what have we learned? Even if this is your first Sunday here, there are two major points I hope we will hang on to. The first is this: that the Bible is less a monologue than a conversation – a conversation among numerous, sometimes conflicting voices across many centuries. Let me explain.

Now, I have to confess, the first time I heard that Scripture has competing voices – the first time I learned this as a freshman in college -- this approach to the Bible really rattled me. I was a typical 18 year old kid who went to Sunday School and youth group in a Presbyterian church in the 'burbs. I thought it was pretty cool that I could actually get humanities credits for taking a Bible class – sort of like getting gym credit for taking Ballroom Dancing. I thought it would augment the conservative Bible study I attended on Thursday evenings. Then I went to class: "Bible as Literature" taught at the very secular University of Illinois. By late September I hit a wall. The Thursday night group taught that Joshua literally fit the battle of Jericho, as it says in Joshua 6 ... and Professor Schoedel taught that the Israelites' entry into Canaan was probably much more gradual, as told later in the book of Joshua. Well, at that point, I had to make a choice. I could either protect my faith and force the Bible into one neatly wrapped package into which I stuffed any inconvenient discrepancies ... or I could dive in head-first and, with the inquisitive mind God gave me, explore the Bible as it *really* was: a multivalent, unfolding, and sometimes uncomfortably discordant conversation. I chose the latter, became a Religious Studies major, and, as they say, the rest is history.

I quickly discovered that the Bible didn't need me to protect it. Instead, it had an awful lot to tell me if I would listen to it on its own terms, *especially* in the places where the ancients retained competing stories and called them *both* holy – which happens from the very beginning. Genesis 1 majestically opens, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,” and culminates the sixth day with the creation of man and woman “in the image of God.” God calls creation “very good,” and on the seventh day “God rests from all the work he had done.” Then, immediately a second account of creation starts the story all over again! “In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was in the earth ... the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” In this second creation story, God starts with man, then makes the Garden of Eden, then takes a rib and makes the woman, Eve. You know the rest of the story – how they eat of the tree of knowledge, and they're expelled from the garden, and their firstborn son Cain slays his brother Abel ... a very different ending from the first creation story, no?

Yet taken *together* these two stories both tell crucial things about the nature of the world and our human condition. The first affirms what we know to be true: the glorious beauty of creation, the mysterious ordering of life, and the nobility of humanity: the highest aspirations of our better selves. And the second story confirms a starkly different reality that we also know to be true: our origins and ends in the dust of the earth, our propensity for lies and blame to shield ourselves, the power of jealousy, conflict and violence. Is humanity by nature moral or immoral, noble or ignoble, nearly divine or closer to dirt? The answer, the Scripture wisely says, is “yes.” We are both.

This is only the first of many juxtaposing stories. Sometimes the juxtaposition occurs to “clean up” older versions and make our ancestors look good. Says one scholar: “1 and 2 Chronicles are a ... reworking of much of the material from Genesis through 2 Kings, and it cleans up a lot of the embarrassing moments.” (Yale University Prof. Christine Hayes, “Introduction to the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible): Lecture 5 Transcript,” September 20, 2006, <http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/introduction-to-the-old-testament-hebrew-bible/content/transcripts/transcript05.html>) Other times juxtaposing stories emphasize particular points. Centuries after the book of Exodus is written, Deuteronomy retells the laws. Why? The Israelites' situation has changed. No longer refugees, the Israelites are fat and happy. Deuteronomy reminds the wealthy to help the weak; and it reminds worldly Israelites of their loyalty to the Lord God alone.

But most often, as with Genesis 1 and 2, the juxtaposition allows different points to yield a larger truth than either version could alone. For example, 2500 years ago, when the Israelites returned from Babylonian exile, many brought their foreign wives

with their foreign gods. Writings like Ezra-Nehemiah warn against letting foreigners in – for fear of corrupting “pure” Jewish identity. Others, like Ruth and parts of Isaiah, suggest that foreigners might be *more* faithful and patriotic than Jews-by-birth, and further, that Israel was founded on God’s law of welcome. I still hear echoes of both arguments in immigration debates in Europe and the USA. How open should we be? What is our core identity? There’s never been an easy answer.

But frankly, if we’re looking for easy answers, then the Bible may not be the place to look. The difference between a self-help manual and Scripture is akin to the difference between Boone’s Farm and a well-aged Bordeaux. It takes familiarity, and experience, and a willingness to learn. But if you want to find answers to the complex issues of real life -- its moral dilemmas, questions of competing loyalties, ever-changing challenges – well, I can’t think of a deeper, more refreshing, life-giving fountain of truth than the Bible.

So ... in our year with the Bible, the first thing I hope we will hang onto is this: that the Bible is a conversation – a rich conversation among numerous, sometimes conflicting voices across many centuries. But there is a second point I want us to hang onto as well: that in spite of everything I have just said, the Bible is one story. It is God’s story, from beginning to end. And the thread is never lost.

New Testament scholar and consummate southern story-teller Fred Craddock says it this way: “Because the Bible is often read and studied piecemeal, its narrative is seen only in fragments, or not at all, but the story is there” (Fred B. Craddock, “The Bible: The Book of Books,” *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, General Editor (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), pp. 14ff). It is the story of God’s providence. And the story goes something like this:

God creates the heavens and the earth, and it is very good. But it is not enough for us to be human; we want to be like God. And so begins the saga of sin. Yet from the beginning, God provides a way for us to move forward. When Adam and Eve sin, God gives them a place to live and work to do and children to nurture. When Cain slays his brother Abel, God protects him from retaliation. When all the earth grows evil, God spares Noah, and promises never to destroy the world again. God chooses Abraham and Sarah to be blessings to the world, and their descendents, Isaac and Jacob and Joseph to carry the covenant forward. None of these people are perfect. Abraham tries to pass Sarah off as his sister; Jacob steals his father’s blessing; Joseph, the favorite son, taunts his brothers, until they sell him into slavery. But God continues to provide for Abraham, and all of us, his children.

God does not protect us from sin, or shield us from hardship. God allows Egypt, once a place of refuge, to become a place of slavery. But God never forgets his promises, and through an unlikely leader, Moses, God provides for our deliverance again. After the plagues and the Passover, Moses leads the people across the Red Sea into the wilderness. In the desert of Sinai God provides manna to keep us alive, and the Ten Commandments to show us how to live. Then God leads us again across the waters, across the River Jordan into the Promised Land.

In the land, God provides leaders for the nation; first judges and then kings. King Saul, who establishes the nation; King David, who unites the empire; King Solomon, who builds the Temple to the Lord. But national glory is short-lived. Kings act as if they are gods, and brothers kill brothers, and people take what is not theirs. So just as God sent Abraham, God sends prophets to call us back to justice and faithfulness. And just as God allowed his people to be enslaved in Egypt, so God allows us to be exiled to Babylon. But just as God raised up Moses to lead his people to freedom, so God raises up Cyrus of Persia to bring us home again. And eventually – after centuries of Persian rule, then Greek rule, then Roman rule, God sends not a human intermediary, but his own Son to save his people. God sends Jesus: the Word made flesh, a light to the nations. And though sin and evil try to destroy him, God is in the business of life. In the resurrection of Christ, once and for all, God triumphs over evil; love triumphs over hatred; life triumphs over death. God, who had the first word in creation, will have the last word after all.

The Bible: it is many stories, and it is one story. “The Bible does what stories do,” Yale Dean Harry Attridge reminds us.

“[The Bible] does what stories do: shapes imagination, inspires hope, hones sensibilities, wrestles with ambiguity. The Bible tells a large story ... a story of God’s relationship with the world, which begins in the wonder of cosmic beneficence and ends in reconciled peace. Between beginning and end come frustration, betrayal, estrangement, reconciliation, bitter dispute, joyous restitution. Between alpha and omega lies, in other words, the human condition as we know it, fallenness and alienation, redeemed by an all-encompassing love” (Harold W. Attridge, “Can We Trust the Bible,” *Reflections*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 6-7).

The Bible does what stories do. More than that, the Bible does what only God’s story can do: give life in its very telling. At different times in our lives, it will tell us what we

need to hear, and we find ourselves in its epic drama of humanity. When I hear Adam saying, “here at last is bone of my bone and flesh of myself,” or when I hear Ruth choosing Boaz as her husband, I recognize and marvel at the gift of my own strong marriage. When I see Eve reach for the forbidden fruit, or the Israelites build their golden calf, I see with shame my own propensity to have religion according to my whims and desires. When I watch manna fall to the ground like dew, or see the loaves and fishes multiply to feed the hungry crowds, I remember the thousands of ways the Lord has fed me when I was starving, providing in the hungers of my deepest sorrows and emptiness and longing. When I read of God releasing Israel from bondage, or bringing the exiles home, or rolling the stone away from the tomb, I trust, I simply trust, that God is in the business of giving us new life, over and over and over again.

As we see the love of God at work in the pages of the Bible, in the stories of men and women just like you and me, we cannot help but see ourselves in it. And that’s why the Bible will never be just another dusty old book, a history of people and their God long ago and far away. For when we come to the end of the Bible, we do not come to the end of the story. The story lives on ... in us, and in our children’s children, for as long as human life will last. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And at the end, God keeps creating life again, will keep providing love again, will keep redeeming sin again, will keep bringing his children, all of his children, back into his fold again. Because, in the end, God is in the business of life. And that’s just how the story goes. Amen.