

“Our Family Story”
 Psalm 78:1-8
 I Corinthians 15:1-11
 October 22, 2006

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This is the story of Bill’s family: A young couple with three children had just bought a little house on the wages of a tool and die maker. Six months later, there was an accident; the punch press cut off his good hand to the wrist and almost all the fingers on his other hand. Bill’s father came home from the hospital without a job. They ate out of the generosity of neighbors and the Victory Garden. When he finally worked again they gave him a night watchman job for \$1 an hour; during the day he went to school. His wife supported his efforts, making clothes with Velcro fasteners, so he could stay independent. And they were happy, and proud to make it on what they had. Everybody pitched in; Bill, the oldest son, helped with repairs. Eventually his father picked up tools again; the Santa and sleigh he made is still used by his great-grandchildren. Sadly, Bill’s father died young, in his 50s. But even then Bill’s mother never let their family’s story die: how they pulled together, and became closer in duress, and how their mission was to take care of each other. And they tell that story still, to their children, and their children’s children, so they remember who they are (from a personal conversation in Lake Forest; used with permission).

Our family stories: they shape us. I remember my grandmother’s stories of the Armenian genocide, and how our family’s togetherness, stubbornness, wit, and deep faith pulled us through ... and my mother’s stories about the Great Depression, and the shame of leaving the city to go back to her father’s little town, and discovering multi-generations of our kin there, kin who fought on different sides of the Civil War, kin now buried side by side in the family cemetery. My guess is each of you has family stories too – of trials and triumphs, of failures and redemption, of tearing apart and coming together. These stories – they’re more than simply tales we tell. These stories shape us. They tell us who we are.

“In the beginning was the story,” someone has said, and if it’s true for our families it’s just as true for our family of faith. I saved an article from a decade ago about the power of our stories – especially those that Rabbi Michael Goldberg calls our “master stories”:

“By ‘master story,’ Rabbi Goldberg means a core foundational story that gives adherents of a religious faith their basic model for understanding the world, their elementary convictions about reality, all the deep-seated assumptions and expectations that guide

their actions. For Jews, that master story is the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and their metamorphosis into a new people around the covenant sealed with God at Sinai.”

For Christians, their additional master story is a second exodus, if you will:

“The passage through death and Resurrection of Jesus and the new ... life assured to ... his disciples. ... Virtually all doctrines, systems of ethics and general beliefs about the world – secular ones no less than religious – rest ... on a bedrock story. ... [Says Rabbi Goldberg:] ‘If a master story is true, it should have the power to take hold of our life and sustain it and even possibly transform it.’” (Peter Steinfeld, “Beliefs,” NYT, Saturday, April 15, 1995).

Isn't this the heart of what St. Paul once wrote: ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed ...’ (Romans 12:2)? It is the story we choose that changes who we are. Lutheran Pastor Rick Barger -- whose book your elders and deacons are reading as part of our spiritual development -- Rick Barger says it this way:

“[Christian] transformation ... has to do with the change in stories out of which we live, the giving up of certain presuppositions, loyalties, values, and worldviews through the adoption of a different story, or better yet, **that different story adopting us.**”

Barger goes on to illustrate his point with a personal story. He says:

“My family and I lived in Iran during the revolution that eventually led to the overthrow of [the Shah]. On Christmas Eve 1978, we were gathered around the Christmas tree in our home in Tehran. We were under a mandatory curfew; ...[so] on this night we would ‘do church’ in our home. As nighttime fell, we heard the sounds we had become accustomed to hearing each night: ... voices shouting in Farsi from the rooftops: ‘God is great!’ and ‘Death to the shah!’ and ‘Death to America!’ ... the deafening rumbled of armored military transports rolling down the street outside our door, taking soldiers to their positions in the city ... machine-gun fire and other eruptions of violence. Inside, my wife [and an American friend] and I were singing Christmas carols as loud as we could to keep our small children, whom we held in our arms, from hearing the mayhem outside.

“Two stories were being told that night. Only one will have the last word. The world organizes itself around the story of unresolved human conflict, power struggles, greed, and violence. The church organizes itself around the story of God, who comes to dwell with us, beginning as a defenseless baby, declaring peace and amnesty; being crucified, raised from the dead, and available and accessible to the church as the Living One. The distinction between the two stories is the question of whether sin and death hold the last word or whether God does” (*A New and Right Spirit* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), pp. 22-3).

The story we choose makes all the difference in the world. Barger’s family was under assault that dark season in Tehran. But the truth is that our families are always at risk – from the assaults of all the powers that, in Luther’s words, “threaten to undue us.” While we are loathe to dwell on them, we cannot avoid life’s threats and stress. The question is, what story do we tell ourselves to deal with our feelings of vulnerability and our questions of meaning and purpose? Barger spells out the difference between the world’s story and the church’s story:

“...the world’s story tells our teenagers that their value comes from looks, ... popularity, and accomplishments. The church’s story tells them are inherently valuable just as they are.

“The world’s story tells us to take control of our lives and eliminate uncertainty. The church’s story calls us to trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and to accept that living in ambiguity is ... unavoidable.

“The world’s story tells us that personal failure is greatly to be feared. The church’s story lifts up Jesus Christ crucified as one rejected by all.

“The world tells us that we have only limited resources. The church’s story, declaring that there is enough for all, calls us to reorder our lives so that others might live” (p. 24).

I’m convinced that we all know the emptiness of the world’s story. I’m far less certain that we all know the power of God’s story ... or even that we’re sure of what God’s story is. And getting the story – our master story – straight matters so very, very much.

My dear friend Bob Dunham, Pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, mourns the way most of us have lost our sense of the master story, our knowledge of our sacred narrative. Acknowledging the truth that everybody knows – that members of our mainline churches generally do not know the Bible, for reasons of busyness or sloth or even the sense that we’re not competent to understand it and ought to leave it to the professional pastors and priests to interpret for us, which by the way, would have the Reformers rolling in their graves ... for all these reasons, most of our Bibles sit idle collecting dust. “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light unto my path,” we sing with the Psalmist, “but we know, in reality, that its light is fairly dim in our lives, because we do not read it, not as often as we might” (“Ekklesia: Formed and Shaped by God’s Word,” 2-12-06, p. 2). I do not say these things to make you feel guilty – but to name what we already know: that when we do not read it – when we do not really know our family story – we surrender the authority to interpret what our story says. Dunham says it better than I can:

“When we do not read it, we abandon it to the tyrannies of those who do. So, when fundamentalist Christians use the Bible to make outrageous claims, we have no answer. When they cite the Bible to make scientific research into an enemy of faith ... we no good response. When they manipulate the Scriptures to create tensions in the Middle East that may hasten the end of human history ... we have no effective reply. When they use the Bible to justify hatred ... of whole groups of persons ... we don’t understand enough about Jesus’ teachings to argue persuasively another perspective. When they make of the Bible something it is not, when they make of Jesus Someone he is not, without an active and considered engagement with the Word, we have no rejoinder” (p. 3).

And, let me add, when, as *TIME* magazine recently covered, evangelists of the “Prosperity Gospel” use the Word to preach that God wants us all to be rich, that materialism is the end-point of our faith, we have no means to lay bare the tawdry worldliness of the story they’re hawking ... and when they say that having money is a sign of God’s blessing, we have no tools to question the sick implication that poverty is a sign of God’s curse (David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to be Rich?” *Time*, 9/18/06, p. 55).

When we don’t know our story, we surrender the story to those who claim they do. We are stewards of the story now, and getting it right matters so much: the story not of a God of vengeance but of forgiveness; the story not of a God of ignorance but of reason; the story not of

a God of coercion but of sacrificial love. The story of a God who uses ordinary people to change the world, who draws us together when the world would tear us apart, who defeats the power of death by being crucified, who defeats the power of evil by laying down his cosmic power, who defeats the power of hatred by embracing the world in love. And if we don't tell this story here ... who will?

Sometimes we take for granted the legacy we have received. I was so moved last Sunday when my Yale Divinity classmate Rick Spalding was visiting. He is also a member of my beloved Moveable Feast study group, and now serves as the chaplain at Williams. Rick was a child of this church; he grew up here, but he hadn't been back in years and years. After worship this is what he told me: the memories came flooding and flooding and flooding back again, and looking at this stained glass window above the chancel, this window of Jesus the Good Shepherd, he remembered: this picture is the first way he understood that Jesus loved him ... that he was a child of God (from a personal conversation).

How did you hear the story? Who was it that first got through to you about God's love for you? I credit my grandmother, and my parents, and Mrs. Elliott, my 7th grade Sunday School teacher, who first got through to me, that these stories of Jesus had something to do with the trials and woes of an adolescent girl. One of our new members who joined last week, in describing his faith, talked of two people at his home church who guided him through his very difficult teenage years ... and the debt of thanks he owes them to pass on that which he has received. He writes:

“In seeking membership to First Presbyterian Church now, I am also seeking a transformation – a peeling away of these burdensome layers of self-absorption and doubt. I am seeking a renewal – a deeper, richer and wider knowledge ... of God's presence and His love for this world Having been the recipient of His love before through the wisdom and guidance from members of Northminster Presbyterian Church in Evanston, I am, at least, acquainted with the power of His love as shown through Mr. and Mrs. Kellogg during the turmoil of my adolescence. Now it is time for me to pass on those gifts which they so generously gave to me” (Craig Earnest, October 2006, used with permission).

“I pass on to you that which I had received,” St. Paul writes to the Corinthians. Someone, somewhere, passed on to you the story of faith that they had received, or you would

not be here today. Who was it for you? I invite you to take a moment now to think back. Who was it? Where was it? Each one of you has a colored leaf, and a marker available to you. Please take a moment now and write down a person, a place, that first passed on to you the trust you have in the Lord. During the offering please place your leaf in the offering plate. Later we will hang these leaves on the bare tree in the Narthex, as a sign of our “family tree,” and the roots of our deep faith.

The story is always just one generation away from dying. And we are the stewards of that story now. Through our time. Through our dollars. Through the witness of our faith.

The Psalmist writes: ...