

God's Story, Our Story and My Story

Psalm 78:1-7

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*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.*

*I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.*

*We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of God
and the Divine wonders done.*

*The Holy One established a decree in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which God commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep the commandments..*

When we don't know our stories, we don't know who we are.

Because we are story people.

We experience things in life and then assign meaning to those events by telling stories. The stories we hear and the stories we tell define and shape our world.

Some stories I was told growing up

- My dad was raised by two single aunts in Iowa because his mother died when he was 2.
Family takes care of each other and shows gratitude.
- My mother was raised in a small town in North Dakota. Her parents told her she would go to college and get a degree. The women and men in the family have equal access to education. You meet the man you will marry in college.
- My grandfather became a dentist and was the only dentist in a small town in North Dakota.
He loved his work with people in town and with indigenous peoples near town – the

Hidatsa, Mandan and Arikara. My two uncles and two cousins are dentists. It is the desired profession in our family.

These pieces of stories are true and were helpful. But there was more to each story.

My dad's father was so overwhelmed with grief and raising 3 boys that he did not stay in touch with my dad. That was hurtful and probably made my dad particularly loving, engaged and shall I say indulgent, lenient dad.

My mom loved to tell the story of how she met my dad in college. The truth was when she graduated she was engaged to someone else, a fellow from her hometown. She admitted years later she felt like she was making a mistake to marry the fellow from her hometown. My parents met in Iowa and reconnected years later in southern California. I did not meet my husband until after seminary and I was pastor in a church. A different story but a great one.

Dentistry was a desired profession, but not the only one. Our family – we have Pilots, teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, hair stylists, fly fishing tour guides, coaches and dentists. I am the only pastor.

The stories we tell about our life matter and they shape us. If we only tell what we think are the “good parts” of the story, where we are the heroes, and where we get it right the first time, our narrative is incomplete.

Similarly, if we only tell the stories of how we fail, how we do not belong, how we don't matter, our narrative is also incomplete. We have to tell the whole story.

Telling the story of our life is also a communal act. If we live by ourselves in a cave, there wouldn't be anything exciting to tell about our story, for one thing. But without people to hear the story we have to tell, what is the story worth? Language requires community.

Also, stories are communal because they are mediated and negotiated between people. Whenever our family is together, there is a fair amount of “remember that time when....”

Sometimes, we all laugh and remember the story. Sometimes, we have no idea at all of what family or friends are talking about. Whatever the story was about was something that held more meaning for them than it did for us.

We each have a particular story to tell and it matters that we give each other space to share stories and give each other time to listen to stories, even as we allow their stories to be different than ours would be.

Think about what it means to be people of the story. We spent time at the Officers retreat yesterday telling stories about our church – personal stories, collective stories. And we talked about ways we will write the next chapter.

Psalm

The author of Psalm 78 understands the power of story, and the absolute necessity of it. He understands that we cannot know God without stories; that we cannot know ourselves without them. The psalmist knows that we cannot be the people of God without telling the story of God, passing the story on to each generation. Things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us, the psalmist writes.

Where does the power of a story lie? What is it about a story that so compels us?

Once upon a time.

Long ago and far away.

In the beginning.

Summons and enchantment, invitation and initiation.

We speak of getting lost in a story, but part of what draws us to a story is the promise of finding: finding a different world, finding another time, finding ourselves. There is something in us that hungers for a story, an empty space that is shaped precisely to its contours. We reach for the threads that a story offers, we enter the rooms it opens to us, we inhabit the skin of another and somehow, in the hands of a good story, we are returned to ourselves. And we are perhaps holding the threads of our own stories a bit differently, or entering a new space within ourselves, or finding ourselves able to inhabit our own skin more completely.

Elie Wiesel says that God created us because God loves stories.

When Christ came (in the fullness of time, the story goes), he came as the Word made flesh. A story in motion. And he went into the world with stories on his lips, weaving them everywhere he went.

A sower went out to sow.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers.

There was a man who had two sons.

There was a Samaritan woman who came to the well at noon.

Jesus understood that in a world where it can be so difficult to know God, to know others, to know even ourselves, a story can offer a language, a doorway, a point of entry. He knew how a story can take us a little deeper into knowing, a little farther down the road in our journey of return.

We will not hide them from their children, the psalmist writes in Psalm 78. And perhaps that's where the true power of a good story lies: that it *unhides* something, reveals something—and someone—we need to know. A good story usually shows the characters in their fullness – strengths, flaws, and all.

As we continue to share our stories and we as a church write our story of who we are in 2022, let's look for connections between the biblical story and your own. Listen for the stories other people aren't sure they can tell. Be brave to seek out safe places to tell your own.

If you doubt there is beauty in the broken places of your own life, if you doubt anyone else needs to hear your story, when you are tempted to hide it all behind fig leaves of one sort or another, I invite you to remember Michelangelo's statue of David in the moments before he battled Goliath.

I was reading the story about it that I did not know. It came from a block of marble that was so flawed that two artists stopped carving on it before 26 year old Michelangelo convinced the authorities to let him give it a try. There were flaws in the marble that made them doubt anything of beauty could be made from it, that made them doubt there would be strength in the finished project.

If Michelangelo can make a masterpiece out of a flawed and abandoned piece of marble, imagine what story is waiting to be told from your flawed and beautiful life. Imagine all the ways God is shaping our story as a church – we are amazing, we are imperfect, we are seeking, we are learning, we are praying, we are eating, we enter times of silence, we are laughing and we are serving.

What stories are you listening to? What stories are you telling? How do you attend to your own story? How might God be inviting you to look at your story with new eyes?

We are story people. Tell your story. Remember it is beautiful. Don't let the flaws get in the way.

Amen