

A Good Story?

Rev. Brian Merritt

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Exodus 17:1-7

What makes a good story? I can hear my poetry professor, Ted Kooser, whispering in my ear, "If the story is too difficult to understand then you have failed as a storyteller." So, right off the bat I can tell you that if you do not understand what is going on in a story then it is failing to communicate to you fully. Yet, we do know the technical components of a good story. We have a setting telling us where our story takes place. Does it take place in Paris, New Mexico or the plains of Mars? There is a Protagonist. He or she is whom we follow through the bulk of the story. We typically care about their outcome and whatever happens to them is either the fate of tragedy or the celebration of their happy ending. Then there is the antagonist. He or she is the enemy or the obstacle of our hero/heroine. We watch causal action propelling the tension of the story so that there might be a movement toward resolve. The story hits a climax when the tension hits its peak and then the remainder of the story is fitted with resolution.

Of course in post-modern times we have seen different forms of narration, mixed sequence of events, or turning heroes into anti-heroes, but I believe that good stories still have necessary boundaries to be able to communicate their messages coherently with an audience. From Willa Cather, to Arthur Miller, to Jimmy Santiago Baca and to Margaret Atwood a good story teller knows their craft and communicates in a masterful way to their audience. Good storytelling is definitely an art. Not only is good storytelling an art, but it is also a gift given to us by the master storyteller, our creator. You can see the use of this storytelling by Jesus in our Matthew text today. Jesus teaches a difficult spiritual lesson about whose authority he does his ministry. Jesus is being questioned by an uptight group of religious leaders. So, he tells a story with a question.

This is the promise of the Psalm we retold this morning. We are reminded by Asaph in this beautiful song that if our ears are opened we can hear the parable story, dark sayings from old, things we have heard told, the things our ancestors past down to us, the things we are not afraid to pass on to our children and every generation that comes after us. The song that we sing at Immanuel today is a continuation of a Presbyterian story carried back in history to Philadelphia, over to Scotland, maybe the Netherlands or Geneva, it travels to Rome, Istanbul, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Egypt, Babylon, Nineveh, and Bethlehem. We come here to Immanuel Presbyterian Church to retell an old story that is being lived anew in and amongst us every week.

The Story's Most Important Moment is now.

Being inside a story makes us an essential part of history. It also makes it difficult to see the swirling whirlwind, nevertheless, attempt to interpret this coherently into the story's broader plot. We come here broken at worst and hopeful at best. Still, the most important part of the unfolding story of the Good News of Jesus Christ is in this present moment. It is the only moment where we meet the divine and the only moment in which we are given the opportunity to do the right things in faith. As difficult as the present moment is to interpret it is also the most essential moment for our life and faith together.

The amazing storyteller, Leo Tolstoy, reminds us this through a mystical hermit in his very short story, "Three Questions" by answering three questions posed to him by a king. He reminds that king, "there is

only one time that is important—Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power.”

I believe with all my heart the Spirit of God is with us right now, in this moment, and encouraging us to continue the story through the witness of Immanuel Presbyterian Church. Remember it is part of the promise in the name of our church, Immanuel, God is with us! God is with us now. We are all given an amazing gift of being both recipients and protagonists in the story that this community has to bring to its neighborhood, city, state, country and the world. These are the opportunities we have to bring good news into our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of our world.

The Story Moves Forward Into the Future

We are a people called to hope. So, even though our good news story exists in this present moment we are certain that it will not end here. We are heirs of the promise that there will be clouds of witnesses that come after us, just as there have been clouds of witnesses who have preceded us. We also know that the secret to the story is that it is good news, salvation, redemption, change and reconciliation. It will be life and life in more abundance.

The most important part of the story is “Good News” especially on this Sunday when we celebrate World Communion Sunday with people of every tongue, ethnicity, socio-economic background and geography we are reminded that the good news of the Spirit is the freedom for all of us to come together in unity of our worship around the table of Jesus Christ.

We are part of a story greater than any of us could ever imagine. It is a story whose plot has twisted and turned for decades, centuries and millennia. It is a story we can hear through a parable, dark sayings from old, things we have heard told, the things our ancestors past down to us, the things we are not afraid to pass on to our children and every generation that comes after us.

The Spirit is with us, the Spirit is amongst us, the Spirit will lead us and the Spirit will never leave us. The story will go on! Thanks be to God!