

Power and Purpose

Luke 4:14-21 Acts 1:6-8

Growing up, my good friend's dad always used to ask us, whenever we came over to their house, "What's your story today?" I'm pretty sure he thought we were up to no good, but it's a good question! I think about that from time to time; what's my story? What's my story *today*? It's a great question to ask ourselves from time to time, and to think through: how each of us tells our own story—the story of our life, or maybe our 'right now' story.

The same question is a good one for churches: what's your story, church? And I appreciate the two ways MPC's story is told for this celebration: Pat Hendrickson's visual display, and John Collier's (with Ann's help) written telling of MPC's story.

Thanks to them for helping us know, and tell, our story, as a church.

Speaking of telling our story...

I served 5 churches as an interim pastor, and one of the fun and interesting conversations that would take place during the transitional season is, "What *Biblical* story are we, as a church, living right now?" Is there a story from the Bible that we are living out, or that we can relate to in some way that helps us understand who we are *in God*, and tell our congregational story? This is actually

a great question for *all* congregations to ask these days, whether or not they have an interim pastor or a seven-and-a-half-year pastor or a very long-time pastor.

What Biblical story are we living right now? Or can relate to.

In my experience, many churches quickly go to the Exodus story: we're in between times, wandering in the wilderness for a while, headed toward the promised land of a new future. Which can be a useful way of looking at a transition time. How is the wilderness shaping us as God's people, the way it shaped the Israelites?

Other churches go to the exile story... these churches and their people feel like what they have known and loved has crumbled, and they are living in a foreign land. This can also be a good analogy, because in many ways, with all the culture change, it feels like the church is living in a foreign land. It isn't 1953 anymore! (or 1973 or 1993 or 2003) The challenge with the exile analogy, though, is that, for the Israelites, there was a promise of returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding it and restoring it, and their religion, to its former glory. And that just isn't going to happen with Christ's church. There is no going back to what used to be.

I've heard some say the Biblical story they relate to is feeling like the disciples in the boat with Jesus, with a storm brewing around them, and they're

afraid because the “boat” (church) is getting swamped and may go under. I’ve heard others use the Lazarus story, when they were at the brink of death, or considered dead as a church, and they feel like God resurrected them and gave them new life. That’s a wonderful story to relate to.

The Biblical story I think fits quite well right now for God’s people is the story we just heard about the early church, just after the resurrection, waiting for what’s next. Jesus’ followers had devoted their lives to following him, they had just experienced a series of disruptive events (witnessing Jesus’ arrest, trial, his death and resurrection), and as they gather together, they’re asking, “Now what?” Like most churches are wondering about today. All of the emotions are there, and the wondering, and the hoping (like most churches are wondering, and hoping).

I also like this story specifically for us at Maplewood, today, because that day was the founding of the Church! And it’s good to look back and ask, “What was in the DNA of that early church? What got planted there as their original purpose?” Just as we go back and look at our founding in 1953, and ask, “What was in the DNA of Maplewood when this church was planted? And what has *continued* in our story and our life together and ministry? What are the strands of DNA that still exist? I’ll come back to that in a moment, but let’s look at the early church’s story for a moment, and see how we (and any church) might relate to it.

Following Jesus' resurrection, we are told that Jesus' followers gathered together in Jerusalem. And in the first two chapters of the book of Acts it doesn't tell us what exactly they were doing; it simply says they were gathered together in one place, as Jesus had told them to do. We are told in Acts 1:3-4 (this is what happens just before the passage Stephen read): *"After his suffering, Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the Kingdom of God."* I love it that he spoke to them about *the Kingdom of God*. He didn't appear to them and give a series of seminars on how to organize the church, with flip charts and a PowerPoint presentation. He talked to them about the Kingdom of God. Which, by the way, is consistent with our Presbyterian heritage, because our constitution states that the great purpose of the church is to "Exhibit the Kingdom of heaven to the world." That's a cool statement, and a great purpose, or goal, for the Church.

"While staying with them, (it continues in Acts 1) he told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the father." And so, they did gather and wait for the promise. The promise being, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And we don't know much of what they did when they gathered, except we are told that they were praying, together. Acts 1:14 tells us: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus." This is Luke's way of saying: things were beginning to change, with women being included in the ministry of the early church—following Jesus' example.

So we know they were devoted to prayer.

And it struck me in reading the first two chapters of Acts that these disciples were not gathered together to have a strategic planning meeting, to plan the birth of the church and the early stages of the Christian movement. Jesus didn't give them a blueprint for committees and church organization, and the very first church cookbook of favorite recipes for their potluck gatherings. If anything, these men and women didn't know what the heck they were supposed to be doing next. And that's probably exactly why they were praying—they wanted guidance and insight and wisdom. They desperately *needed* guidance and wisdom.

So, they didn't hold strategic *planning* meetings as much as strategic *praying* meetings; strategic *waiting* meetings; strategic *listening* meetings. And I

think this is where the early church story and the Church's story today intersect. Because I believe that God's people, today, need strategic praying as much as strategic planning. We need to wait upon God for direction and wisdom. *Especially* now, since we are in new territory following the pandemic, and with society and the world in major transition.

Planning and strategy are important and need to be done. And, at the same time, what we need right now is an abundance of praying and waiting on God, and listening to the Spirit, together. Because I think many people are desperate for God to show up and do something that only God can get credit for. I sure am. So, in a way, it's good to be in a place of not-knowing, because that's when God can show up and "do for us what we cannot do for ourselves," as it says in the wonderful recovery material.

We want God to show up, don't we?? And I think the pre-Pentecost and Pentecost story provides a nice parable of where Christ's church is *today*, in some ways, and what God can do if we wait and pray. Because, even before covid 19 hit, we have been in a transition time of worldwide culture shift. This kind of culture shift and transition only happens every 500 years or so. And the covid 19 crisis has in many ways just put us squarely in the middle of it and made it

obvious to us—and it accelerated the shift and changes. If we were in denial about it before, it's impossible to be in denial about it now. Change has come; culture shift is here. As one of my pastor colleagues said he tells his congregation: "Shift happens." Even made a t-shirt for them to wear that says "Shift Happens" so people will be curious and ask about it.

Therefore, like the first disciples, we need the Holy Spirit to come and empower us, and lead us in new and fresh ways. And as we know, the Spirit did come—in power! And I believe that same Spirit wants to come and empower God's people today. But in new and fresh ways, for our modern context.

Speaking of power... Before the Spirit descended upon them, when Jesus appears to the disciples and talks with them, an interesting question came up. As we heard in Acts 1:6: "*So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'*" This is such an interesting question that they ask Jesus. After spending three years with Jesus, learning from him and participating in his ministry, having witnessed his death and resurrection, and hearing about the Kingdom of God, they ask him a *political* question. Because the question "*Now are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'*" is the same as asking "*Now are you going to take us back to the glory days of king David!'*" In

other words, “Since you didn’t do that during your ministry years, and now that you’ve gotten that dying and rising thing out of your system, *now* will you take us back to the glory days?” That’s what they’re asking. You can picture them wearing their “Make Israel Great Again” hats. When David was king.

When David was king it was a time when Israel’s political boundaries were expanded, their enemies were subdued, their military was large and dominating, the first temple was being built in Jerusalem, and there was great material prosperity. Israel was the regional superpower. So their question to Jesus was: now are you going to restore us to that Camelot era when David was in charge? *When we had power.*

We see from Jesus’ response, it was the wrong question to ask (because it’s about the wrong kind of power, *and* it’s backward-looking). Jesus ignores their question altogether; doesn’t even respond to it. He simply points them in a forward-looking direction, and speaks of a different kind of Kingdom, and a different kind of power.

He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority (i.o.w., it’s not for you to know what God is up to, specifically). But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and

you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’”

I love it that instead of engaging their desire to go back to a glorified past (and many churches struggle with this desire, to a certain degree), Jesus makes a hopeful promise about an empowered future. A way of going forward that is *consistent* with the past, but not *the same as* the past.

Because this promise of the Holy Spirit, of empowerment and witness, is consistent with Jesus’ inaugural address in his hometown, where he states what he—and therefore by association his followers, his Church—would be about.

By reading that text from Isaiah 61 about the Spirit and empowerment, Jesus is saying, “What I am going to be about, and what I want my followers to be about, is good news!” And that good news, specifically, meant justice for the poor. Here is the original strand of DNA that Jesus weaves into his community of followers, and which the Holy Spirit will bring as part of the empowerment of Pentecost: we are good news people! People who care about justice, who care about the poor, who are about bringing freedom and release for people, and proclaiming God’s favor in word and deed.

And we can be proud that this is a strand that has been woven into this congregation’s life and ministry.

MPC has always done justice. For example, this church was ahead of its time in promoting women's issues and ordinations here. Feeding the working poor and homeless. Supporting Bosnian refugees. Giving time and money and food to local food banks and other hunger efforts, participating in One Parish One Prisoner, and so many more wonderful justice efforts. Good news for the poor, release to the captives.

Going forward, we won't always do the exact same things, but we can continue to do the same *kinds* of things. We can continue to support the same *kinds* of issues today, which have surfaced—or more accurately, have *re*-surfaced in profound and urgent ways—in recent years: racial justice, ecological and environmental justice, new forms of gender equality, to name a few.

As these issues and needs are presented to us, we will respond, because that is who we are, and have been. Yet we must recognize that we need the Spirit's empowerment to be a witness in the midst of these issues, so we must pray and listen and converse with each other, and with the wider church, to learn what faithfulness to the Kingdom means for us, in this time and place, so we may act wisely.

After the Protestant reformation there was a phrase that the protestant church adopted: "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.*" "The church reformed

and always reforming.” Or, “the church being reformed, and always reforming.”

Think of that, of being re-formed, throughout the years. The church changed and

always changing. Not for change’s sake, or because we get bored after a while.

But because of God’s leading; because of the Spirit’s initiative and activity and empowerment for *today’s* world.

But the catch is, as Jesus says, “It is not for you to know exactly what God is up to or what God’s timing is” (my paraphrase). Therefore, be patient, be prayerful, and simply go and be God’s good news people. Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God as the prophet Micah brilliantly said it. And leave the results to God. Because God is faithful.

Great Is Thy Faithfulness