

What's Your Story?

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Mark 1:14-20

Mark 1:14-20

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

This is the word of the Lord!

Have you heard of Storycorps? Storycorps is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to celebrate the lives of everyday Americans by inviting them to tell and record their stories.

It's a pretty simple concept. The Storycorps sound booth travels from city to city and sets up shop. People are invited to bring one person with them whose story they want told, and the two of them sit in a sound booth for 40 minutes and have a conversation—one person asking the other one questions about their life. When they're done, they get a CD with their story on it, and another copy is made

and sent on to be archived in the Library of Congress. Pretty cool, huh? You can hear their stories online if you're interested.

I listened to a few: the story of a young mother running through the hills from Mexico to the US—in socks, so as not to make any noise—in order to escape drug violence and find a better life for her children. The story of a husband caring for his elderly wife for over 10 years, refusing to let Alzheimer's get the best of her, and him. A Vietnam veteran, who can't sleep more than two hours at a time at night because of a nighttime attack in Vietnam that caused night terrors, is looking out his kitchen window one morning while washing dishes and looking down his tree-lined driveway, as he watches a squirrel doing what squirrels do he hears a voice that said, "Ok, you can't sleep; so now what?" And it caused him to laugh out loud. And it occurred to him in that serendipitous moment, "I have to stop wishing for a different life and struggling against it, and learn live the one that I have. It was a pure moment of acceptance." I love that story, including the part where God used a squirrel. I always wondered what their purpose is.

So far over 40,000 Americans have had their stories told and preserved. Together, they tell the American story, one life at a time. The founder of the movement is named Dave Isay. If you asked him why he does this he'd say it's

because he wants people to know that their stories matter and won't be forgotten.

Suppose the Storycorps trailer pulled into the parking lot today, and you had a chance to sit in the booth with someone and talk. What story would you tell? What dreams have you chased? What obstacles have you overcome? What tragedy or pain have you experienced, and grown through? What adventures have you had?

I don't know if he realizes it, but Dave Isay is simply confirming what the Bible tells us from the very first pages: that every person's story matters, because God's story of love is being told one life at a time. And so, a big and important question to answer about each of our stories is: How has God's story, the story of Jesus, intersected with your story? And what has been the result?

As we read Scripture, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, we discover that God's story intersects with our story, and it changes everything.

Everyone has a story to tell. The stories we tell are reflections of who we have been, who we are today, and who we want to be. Telling them matters. Listening to them matters. We have so much to learn from each other, and learn

from God through each other. I know of churches that have held, as a regular part of their programming, storytelling nights. Where people come prepared to share their story (or a significant aspect or part of their story from their journey of faith), and everyone comes prepared to listen and learn. There are actually churches whose name is “Story Church,” where their mission is to help people find their identity in Christ, and grow in love and service to others. That’s pretty cool. They equip people, not just to *tell* their stories, but to *listen* well to others as a form of outreach. Because, people need and want to be listened to.

As people of God, we are a storytelling people. From the very beginning, God’s story has been told. Our reading from Deuteronomy 6 reminds us of this rich heritage. From the very beginning, here is what they are to do: pass the story on. It’s that important. Tell it not just to your children, but to your children’s children. This is what will help you prosper and have life, Moses says to them.

For the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, this is a particularly important reminder. God has been shaping their identity in the wilderness, and they are about to enter the promised land, and they’ve been through a lot! In those challenging times, they turn to the stories of their faith and what God has taught them to remind them of who they are, *in God*. For a

displaced people, it is the stories that kept them going and kept them alive, connected them to their identity as God's people and kept them looking forward to the promise of a better tomorrow.

Storytelling is the basis of our written Scriptures—the Bible—which began as oral traditions that eventually made their way to parchment and then to paper and now pixels on tablets and smartphones and computers.

The Bible, the written Scriptures, is God's Story. Each time we open its pages, we dive into the incredible witness of God's story from beginning to end. We are captivated by the family stories of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel and the Joseph story. And as we read and hear these stories we are reminded—praise God—that there are no perfect families in the Bible. And no perfect people. Hallelujah!

We learn of the formation and careful guidance of Israel. We are startled and awakened by prophetic proclamations; and not just their *verbal* proclamations but how their *lives* were part of the proclamation as God asked the prophets to do some weird stuff sometimes, as an example and message to the people who God was lovingly calling back to faithfulness. We read of the life and teachings and actions of Jesus and the powerful good news of Christ's death and

resurrection. We see how the early church wrestled with how to be disciples in a changing world. It all comes to us in the form of narrative; of story.

Our exploration of the Bible, though, is not just a study of literature or a series of lessons in history. These stories were put down so that they would have an impact on us. They are stories to captivate our hearts, our souls, our minds, and to prompt us into action. To form and shape *our* stories.

So, the Bible is *God's* story. And, the Bible is also *our* story. When we study it, we learn about people of faith throughout the centuries and we may even discover people like us. We are supposed to discover people like us! The stories of Scripture include an assortment of characters – poor and rich, younger and older, women and men, hopeful and cynical, full of faith and struggling with doubt, rascals and rabblers– and God works through them all! Just like God works through all of us!

Like the people in Scripture, we too have our stories of faith. They are filled with moments where we have come to know who God is in profound ways, times when we have wrestled with angels or demons, or both, and struggled to understand; times when we have contentedly rested in God's presence, or in the comfort of God's embrace as we wept and sought healing, and times when we

have danced for joy in the presence of the Lord out of a sense of abundance and gratitude. They are our stories of faith.

When we read the Scriptures, we can interpret our stories in light of the story of Jesus and God's unconditional love for us. We can better make sense of our own stories and of the stories of the world, and we can rest and trust in the Author of our stories, giving praise to a God who is the alpha and omega, the beginning and end of all stories, and the world's story, as we talked about last week.

When our story and God's story intersects, discipleship is the result. When Jesus recruits his first band of followers, like we read about today, he is obviously inviting them into discipleship—but another way of looking at this is, he is inviting them to have their story changed, and connected to God's story.

Living a life of faith means living into God's stories and making them our own. For example, in the gospels there are stories of healings. How can you and I make those our stories? There are stories of welcome and embrace of the outsider. How can we make those our story (whether you are the outsider or the one welcoming the outsider, as Jesus did)? There are stories of overcoming sin and living a new life. How can we live into that part of the story?

And it was this idea of living into the Story that led St. Ignatius of Loyola to develop a beneficial way of reading Scripture. Ignatius was the founder of the Jesuit order (16th century in Spain; Seattle U. and Gonzaga are Jesuit universities). This could be something to try at home if it interests you. Ignatius taught people to read a Scripture and insert themselves into the story. For example: the account of the disciples in the boat with Jesus when the storm came up; the boat is becoming swamped, Jesus is asleep, they wake him up, he stills the storm, and then asks them “Why are you afraid? Where is your faith?” Now, put yourself in there: can you feel the seat and see the others in the boat? As the storm builds, can you feel the boat rocking and rolling? Can you feel the strong wind and the cold rain pelting your face? Can you smell the salty sea? As the boat is being buffeted by the storm and water is coming in threatening to swamp the boat, do you feel the fear? If not, what do you feel? How do you respond to those who are freaking out? How would they respond to you? And as Jesus calms the storm, what now do you feel? And how would you respond, personally, to Jesus’ questions: why are you afraid? Where is your faith?

Also, with this or any of the accounts you read, is there a character that you relate to in the story? Who would it be? Is there a situation you relate to? And on it goes. That’s the idea. This obviously takes more time to slow down and

reflect. Ignatius developed this as a way of practicing living into God's stories. And then looking for signs of God's activity and presence in our story, now. To see where and how they intersect.

The more we do this, or even simply read the Bible and take it to heart, we, then, become storytellers. And, to use a word that, in my experience over the years, scares the heck out of us: we become evangelists. As a nice church member told me once, "Evangelism is a 4-letter word to me!" For many people it has become a ruined word because it conjures up failed attempts at sharing the gospel, or obnoxious Christians trying to get people to believe in Jesus... or else. But this is one of those words I'd like to revive and learn to love again. Because it simply means witnessing to the good news; the good news of Jesus and his love.

And witnessing can be done in any number of creative ways. As St. Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." We witness, mostly, by our actions. But in today's world and in our culture, when we *do* use words, I believe that witnessing is best done by telling our story, when appropriate, as the Spirit leads. Or, even better: by *listening to someone else's story*. We might call this evangelism with our ears. Because... people need and want to be listened to.

This is what Dave Isay says got him started: as a shy and awkward kid, he found that he liked listening to older adults share their stories; and that they liked telling their stories! What a beautiful arrangement. He had an old tape recorder and simply started recording their stories. That's his story! Or part of it.

So, how would you tell your story? And how does God's story, or the story of the Bible, intersect with yours, and impact it? It can be as simple as reflecting on your favorite verses in Scripture and why those matter to you. It can be a time when you have felt particularly close or particularly far from God. It can be a story of your past experiences of God's grace and peace, your present experiences of God meeting you, perhaps in a new way, or even a story you hope for in your future, based on the ways that God has walked with you up to this point.

Whatever your story is, don't be afraid to share it with someone else—when appropriate. Perhaps it's a practice we can engage in more regularly as a community of God's people. As we explore God's Story, let's share it, and our own stories with each other. Because when we do, we will be a witness to a living and active God, who continues to write all of our stories – even today, even now.

I Love to Tell the Story