**When a Story is More than a Story**

**Text: Exodus 3:7-8**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Last weekend I attended a 50 year Chi Rho Camp reunion. There were about 80 people at that junior high church camp back in 1967, and 9 of us got together to reminisce, and sing, and talk about our journeys and how that week at camp shaped those journeys; and shaped us.

But here’s the thing: as we shared our memories about camp, the stories didn’t always agree. Two people would talk about the same event, but the stories were different. But you know what? That’s okay. You can have two very different narratives that claim to be about the same event, but the differences are okay because the stories themselves have meaning.

For example, my friend Jeannie and I were trying to remember when and where during that week we’d met. In my story, we met on the baseball diamond. In her story, we met at the swings. Now, Jeannie enjoyed playing on the swings as a kid, and you might have noticed that I have a certain fondness for baseball. So our stories reveal something about who we are as human beings. It almost doesn’t matter that the stories disagree because there’s truth in the narrative; there’s meaning in the narrative; there’s something revelatory in the narrative, regardless of the historical event to which the narrative points.

If that’s true of the stories that we tell about ourselves, it’s especially true of the narratives in the Bible. The Bible is a book of many stories, and of stories within stories. Those stories purport to tell of historical events. They claim to tell of the mighty acts of God, made flesh in history. And they do; to some degree. But they don’t always agree. There are two different creation stories: the 7 day creation story in Genesis 1, and the Adam and Eve story in Genesis 2 and 3, and they are very different. There are 2 stories of Norah’s Ark. In the more familiar story Norah brings in the animals 2 by 2, but in the other story there are 7 animals of every kind. Again, different stories. There are 4 gospels – 4 stories of Jesus’ life – with lots of differences between them. Have you ever compared Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth with Luke’s? They are two different narratives. We try to blend them in our Christmas pageants, but in doing so we change the stories. Matthew’s wise men were never at the stable, and Luke’s shepherds never saw a star.

But that’s okay, because there’s meaning in the stories themselves. The stories themselves are revelatory. We know longer have access to the actual historical events, but God can speak to us through the narratives.

We can see this in today’s story of Moses and the Burning Bush. We’re told that Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro. Hey, wait a minute: I thought his father-in-law was Reuel? That’s what it says just one chapter earlier. And Moses has taken the flock of Jethro or Reuel or whatever his name is to Mt. Horeb, which we’re told is the mountain of God. Later in the story Moses will return to Mt. Horeb, where God will give him the 10 Commandments. Now some of you must be thinking, “Wait a minute, preacher, that can’t be right; the 10 Commandments were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai.” Well, of course, you’re right; and I’m right. There are two different stories about Moses. In fact, there are *many* stories about Moses in the first 5 books of the Bible. Some of them talk about the law being given at Mt. Horeb, and others talk about Mt. Sinai. And somewhere in the mix there’s a 3rd name for the father-in-law.

But all of this is okay because the narrative itself has meaning. The story is about the presence of God and the power of God. The Mt. Horeb version of the story especially talks about a God who has seen the suffering of his people in Egypt. He has heard their cries for deliverance from Pharaoh’s oppression. God is with God’s people in their suffering, and God will break the chains that enslave them with the power of his mighty hand. Both then and now – both 3000 years ago and today – God’s presence and God’s power brings justice and freedom to the poor and the oppressed of the land. And the Law is one of the tools that God uses to bring ongoing protection to God’s people. In the Mt. Sinai story that Law puts a lot of emphasis on the finer points of administration and worship and dietary restrictions, but in the Mt. Horeb tradition the emphasis is on compassion and justice for the suffering and the vulnerable. The Mt. Sinai narrative seems to be about a people who are already established in Jerusalem, and they’ve set-up a lot of bureaucracy to protect the establishment. The Mt. Horeb narrative tells the story of a people who are on the move, in the wilderness, protecting the vulnerable from the dangers that lie on every side, and looking to God to protect them all.

We have different narratives – in the Bible and in our own lives – and there’s meaning in each narrative. The trick is to listen to the narratives – to listen to each other’s stories – with a degree of openness and grace.

I got to thinking about this in conjunction with the ongoing battle over the hundreds of Confederate monuments throughout the South, and the conflicting narratives regarding those monuments. Those narratives may or may not have a whole lot of connection with the actual events of history, but they sure are packed with meaning.

“Everyone knows,” says the Northern narrative, “that the Civil War was fought to end slavery.”

“What do you mean?” says the Southern narrative. “Everyone knows that it was the War of Northern Aggression.”

I once heard a tour guide at Fort Sumter in South Carolina say that the Civil War had nothing to do with ending slavery. He claimed that it was all about “glory and honor.”

We have different narratives. And those narratives collide with violent force each time that another monument comes down. I don’t know if we should be taking down the monuments or not. But I do know that we need to be listening to each other’s stories. *Both* sides need to listen; with a spirit of repentance and humility. Because, of course, part of the story of the monuments is the fact that most of them were put up between the years of 1895 and 1910; the very time that the Jim Crow laws were being enacted across the South. So the narrative is not only about wartime courage and honor, but it’s also, *and especially,* about segregation and oppression. But those who are calling for the monuments to come down need to be humble too because racial segregation was rampant across the North at the same time. And anyway, it occurs to me that calling for the monuments to come down is the perfect cause for White liberals because they can feel all self-righteous about it without actually having to make any sacrifices themselves, or make any changes to a social and economic system from which they are actually benefitting, thank you very much.

Some narratives drip with racism. Others ooze with self-righteousness. And we have to be willing to listen to the other’s narrative and repent of the sinful elements in our own. As Jesus said, “First take the log out of your own eye before you remove the speck from your neighbor’s eye” (Lk. 6:42). Maybe it’s more important right now for everyone in this nation to listen to each other’s stories and repent, rather than attack each other’s monuments or, indeed, each other!

The meaning is at least as much in the story as it is in the historical events themselves. There is something to be said for listening to each other’s narratives, rather than proclaiming mine to be right and everyone else’s to be out of bounds.

All stories are potentially revelatory, but there is, of course, one story that is *especially* revelatory. All narratives have meaning, but one narrative is normative. It’s the story about the One who was born in a stable, crucified on a Cross and raised in glory. It’s the narrative about the One who proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives and liberty to the oppressed. We tell our stories and listen to others in a spirit of repentance and humility, but we are bold to tell Jesus’ story in a way that *all* might listen, that *all* might repentant, that *all* – including we ourselves – might be transformed. His story helps us to discern what is ultimately true in other stories. On the one hand, the Mt. Horeb story speaks of a people on a journey, travelling through the wilderness, worshipping in their portable tabernacle, pulling up stakes and moving on. On the other hand, the Mt. Sinai story speaks of a settled people, with lots of rituals and procedures, and the Temple already in place; not a portable tabernacle but a well-constructed Temple. But the Jesus story talks about a Word that become flesh and *tabernacled* with us. Our English Bibles say “the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us,” but the meaning of the original Greek is more like he *tabernacled* with us; he *pitched his tent* with us. The justice-seeking, peace-loving, establishment-breaking, on the move and Kingdom-reaching God of the Mt. Horeb story is the One who became flesh in Jesus Christ. This is the narrative that provides us with a filter through which we hear all other narratives, including our own. This is the story that – we must remember – is Jesus’ story, not our own. No room for self-righteousness here. But we are called to try to make our story more and more like that of Jesus, as God gives us the grace, the humility and the wisdom to do so.

There is meaning in the narrative. We have stories to listen to, stories to tell, and stories that have yet to be written. Including a new story for our congregation. When our Church Board meets on Sept. 12, we will be in conversation with a representative from Hope Partnership, a Disciples of Christ unit that helps congregations envision the future into which God is calling them. Part of the Hope Partnership process is the writing of a Future Story for the congregation. If the Board decides to go with Hope Partnership, this will be a story to which we *all* will contribute; the *whole* congregation. I look forward to the possibility of hearing this future story and what it might reveal about us as a congregation. Because I’m here to tell you that there *is* a future into which God is calling this congregation. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, there is a past that we need to let go of and a future into which we are called. Israel was told to let go of their memories of Egypt and keep on moving toward the Promise Land. God got tired of hearing about “Maybe Egypt wasn’t so bad after all.” I mean, Egypt was where they’d been *enslaved*, for crying out loud! God got tired of hearing about Israel’s old story, and we need to get tired of hearing about our old story; about declining membership, and church splits, and embezzlement. There’s a *new* story that we need to hear; a story of hope and new opportunities and new life. We worship a God who pitches his tent in our midst; a God who calls us to pull up our stakes; a God who calls us to move forward.

I can’t wait to hear the new story that we will soon tell, as we journey in the light of the God of our fathers and mothers, the God of Mt. Horeb, the God of our Lord and Liberator, Jesus Christ. Amen.