

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on September 12, 2021.

CLAIMING OUR STORY

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. Psalm 77:11-12

I have shared with you a couple of times before a story that came out of a planning retreat held in March of 2017. At this retreat our Elders, Deacons and Trustees met in our Narthex to choose three or four areas for us to focus on over the next five years.

As part of this process the participants were asked to reflect on challenges that we faced as a congregation. One of our leaders said that recently in an informal discussion at work he revealed that he was a Christian and part of faith community. One fellow worker responded "I thought you were too smart to be a believer." Our trustee wondered what would have been an appropriate response?

This led to a long discussion about the changes in the cultural context in which we live out our faith. It was decided that one of our tasks for the next few years was learning how to share our faith in the radically new world in which we find ourselves.

For the next year we did some study and reading as we ruminated on ways to put this into practice. In thinking about this challenging question, Judith and I developed what has turned into a four-year plan for our worship. We called this plan "A New Apologetics." The term apologetic was first used by Christians in the first centuries following Jesus' resurrection. Christianity grew widely in the Roman Empire which was filled with many philosophies, religions and ideologies. Many pagan writers and teachers attacked the new Christian movement. Christians needed to defend their ideas and explain the faith. Apologists such as Origen, Justin and Augustine all sought to defend their understanding of Jesus.

We are attempting to propose new ways of presenting and living our faith in a way that fits our changed circumstances. The first chapters in this series explored what we called obstacles to faith or those Christian ideas that turn off people in our culture. These were ideas or experiences that serve as barriers to belief. In the second series we shared some of those things that draw people to Christ. During the following program year, we focused on Christian practices which help us grow in faith. The fourth series presented examples of Christian who incarnated various Christian values and virtues.

Today we begin a final series called "Claiming our Story."

As we have said before we are living in a new cultural reality. The world into which I was born no longer exists.

When I made my first appearance in 1955, we still lived in an intellectual world we called the modern world. This meant we still were feeding off the capital of the enlightenment. Reason was seen to be the most valued human characteristic. Men and women were confident that human reason could discover truth and solve the problems of the human race. Science, democracy and institutions like the United Nations would usher in a better world.

Today we live in what has come to be called the post-modern world. In this world reason is no longer as highly valued. There are many who no longer believe in the reality of truth. All meta-narratives are disparaged and individual experience is now held to be paramount. I have my truth and you have yours.

When I started kindergarten, America was still part of Christendom. This meant that all the institutions in society worked together to support a common understanding of the world and promote what was understood as Christian behavior. This meant that the schools, the government, the churches, Hollywood and families worked together to create a seamless whole. One experienced this truth in many ways including the stores being closed on Sundays and Christmas carols being taught in elementary school.

Today Christendom is mostly gone. Today we live in a pluralistic age. The various components of our culture compete for our attention and very often give contradictory messages. The Christian faith is increasingly understood to be merely a private concern.

In order to learn to live in a new reality, we can turn to the story of the people of God in the Old Testament. Following the Exodus, the Hebrews under the leadership of Moses wandered in the wilderness for forty years. During this time, they had received the Ten Commandments and learned to live as a people of the Covenant. They were nomads and herders of sheep. They moved frequently and primarily lived apart from others.

After forty years in the wilderness, Moses died, and Joshua took over leadership of the people. Joshua led them into the Promised Land. The first chapters of the Book of Joshua describe how the Hebrew people invaded Israel and made a place for themselves in that land.

The entrance to the land of Israel meant a very different life for the Hebrew people. They would no longer be nomads moving from one watering hole to another. They would now settle in one place. They would no longer be hunter-gathers, but now they would stay in one place to till the land. They would no longer be living isolated lives distinct from other people. They would be living side by side with other tribes who worshipped many gods.

It was very tempting for the Hebrew people to want to blend into the surroundings in which they found themselves. Many of the native peoples in Canaan worshiped gods that promised fertility. Maybe they should adopt the faith and practices of those who knew how to live in this land.

As he neared the end of his life, Joshua believed he had to do something to renew the covenants made with Abraham and Moses. So, he called the people together at Shechem. We usually remember this story from the Old Testament because of Joshua's great exhortation. He concludes his appeal with the famous words:

Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.

This is a stirring call that many preachers have used to encourage people to recommit their lives to God. But the part of the story that can help us today as we seek to live in a new world comes earlier in the chapter. Joshua spends the first thirteen verses in the chapter reminding the Hebrew people of the ways God has been at work in their lives in the past. He recalls the stories of Abraham and Moses. He reminds them of the Exodus and how they were saved at the Red Sea. He tells them God was with them in the wilderness and their entrance to the promised land.

Joshua knew the importance of memory and story. In many ways our identity is our stories. One of the signs of aging is losing sharpness in our short-term memory. We can wonder where we put our keys or why did I come into this room or we forget a detail or a name that used to be at the tip of tongues. This can be frustrating but not devastating.

What is devastating is the situation when disease robs people of their long-term memory. When they no longer can recognize their children, when they do not remember their work or interests, they slowly lose their identity. When we forget our story, we are no longer ourselves.

Stories make up our distinctiveness as individuals. Shared stories mark us as families, Americans and followers of Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus means knowing the stories of faith and passing them to the next generation.

In the new cultural situation in which we are living, it is only the family and Church that will teach the stories of the faith. In the past, merely growing up in the culture meant you would be exposed to the stories of the Bible. They were taught in schools. The stories were acted out in public theatres. Scenes from the Bible were found in great paintings, stained glass and statues. Great musical creations such as "Handel's Messiah" presented a narrative of Christ's life. Even the calendars of workdays and holidays told the story of Jesus's life.

It is very possible to grow up in our culture today with no awareness of the stories of the Bible and what they mean. This reality is reflected in the story of the woman who went into a jewelry store to buy a cross. She asked the person behind the counter if they sold gold or silver crosses. The clerk replied, "Do you want a plain one or one with a little man on it?" It is clear, for the clerk the cross had no symbolic meaning and Jesus was a nonentity. She did not know the story.

For people of faith to live into the future we must remember and claim our stories.

Some of you know, that our pattern for Sunday School for elementary age children is called the rotation model. Each month there is one story from the Bible that is learned in different ways. The word rotation means that each week the student groups go to a different room. One room is called “Tales from the Script” where the passage is taught by acting out the story. A second is “David’s Palace Theatre” where the children view a movie depicting the story. A third room is called “Creation Station” where art is used to re-enforce the story. In “PC Oasis” there are computer programs that unpack the meaning of the passage. “Our Acts Café” is the kitchen where the story is explored in a fun way.

Each of these rooms can reach children with different learning styles. It can make learning interesting. But when we started this program the challenge was which stories to teach. We knew that if the children were in this program for six years, it would mean there would be 48 different stories we could teach. The question then was what are the 48 most important stories in the Bible?

We had a committee and then the Session wrestle with this question. It was not always easy. There are stories that may be interesting to tell, but they do not tell us much about God. There are some that are difficult to tell, but of great meaning. The chosen stories are the core of God’s revelation to humankind.

It is not only important that children be taught the stories of the faith. As we adults, like Joshua and his people, face a new cultural and religious environment, it is important for us to recall the stories that make up our identity as God’s people.

Therefore, over the next 12 months, from today until Labor Day next year, we will be working our way through the core stories of the Bible. We will begin next Sunday with the first creation story and work our way forward. In Luke’s Gospel, just before Jesus’ baptism, Luke includes Jesus’ genealogy. Luke traces Jesus back to Adam. In doing this the writer of the Gospel tells us that the story of Jesus is part of the whole history of God’s encounter with human beings. The story of Jesus is for all humankind.

The great Danish writer Soren Kierkegaard wrote: **“When you read God’s Word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, “It is talking to me, and about me.”**

Kierkegaard is reminding us that the stories of the Bible are not merely stories from history, they are our stories. These stories are to shape our identity and our common life. They speak into our lives today. Over this next year may our worship be shaped by the words of the Psalmist who tells us to claim our story.

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.