

“Storytelling in Hard Times”

Luke 13:31-35; Deuteronomy 26:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 16, 2025

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our stories might remind us that you will be with us always, as you have always been. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

As we move through these weeks of Lent, our scripture readings are going to provide us with opportunities to think about what church is and why it matters. I wouldn’t call it a sermon series exactly, but rather the lens of Lent inviting us into a particular kind of reflection. Last week we talked about following Jesus together, so that we are better equipped to resist evil and proclaim God’s welcome to all people. That is one way to describe what church is: a community of people following Jesus together in order to spread God’s love.

Today’s scripture passages offer us another way to describe church: we are a community that is held together by the stories we tell. There are some religious traditions that aim to help people “be here now,” but I would argue that Christianity is a tradition that holds close the past and the future, for the sake of the present. We are a community that cherishes both memory and hope, to promote flourishing in the current moment. Let’s take a look at our reading from Deuteronomy to see what I mean. It takes a bit of work to think through all the nuances of the timeline of this passage. It’s important to know that these verses are part of Moses handing down the Law to the Israelites. They were nearing the end of their forty years in the wilderness,

but they had not yet reached the promised land. Moses would, in fact, never reach the promised land himself. But he wanted to make sure they would be prepared when they got there. So what we have here is Moses telling them a story about their future. The story assumes that they will, indeed, enter into the land God had promised them and that things would go well and the land would produce bountifully. So Moses is telling them what they should do once all that has happened. Do you suppose the Israelites accepted the premise of this story Moses was telling them? Did they believe they would ever actually arrive?

As an aside, it's important to remember that this story of the Israelites' future is actually being told even further into the future, such that it is really a story about the past. That is, a story of Moses telling a story about the future, in the past. Here is where we need to realize how much power there is in telling stories about our future. Describing the way we believe things will unfold helps us to ensure the future unfolds that way. It is a way of manifesting hope. The fact that the Israelites were still telling this story about Moses telling a story shows how powerful they understood that story to be. It was part of what got them where they were.

But there is yet another timeline twist here, isn't there? Because in this story that Moses is telling the Israelites about their future, he describes the way they will honor their future present moment by telling stories about their past. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor" is actually a phrase found all over the Hebrew scriptures, because it was a defining quality of the Israelite people, part of their story that told

them who they were. And this story from their past would be reflected in their future, according to the future story Moses was telling them. You can see it coming through in the mention of “the aliens who reside among you” – the neighbors who were actually the indigenous people of the land – those “aliens” were to be part of the celebrations of the fruitfulness of the land.

In this passage, time is indeed rather “wibbly wobbly,” as Dr. Who would say. It’s a story of the past, about someone telling a story about the future, in which people will recount stories of the even further past. This is how our tradition became one that cherishes memory and hope, for the sake of the present moment. We have hope for the future, right now, because of our memories of God’s faithfulness in the past. We will commit to welcoming strangers and supporting those in need because we remember when we were strangers and in need. We will heed the cries of the oppressed and lift their plight to God because we remember when God heard our cries when we were oppressed.

The story we heard about Jesus dabbles in timeline nuances as well. Jesus speaks of “today, tomorrow, and the next day.” He even references the time when you will say “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” It seems likely that Jesus is drawing on the past to gird his identity and to cast a vision of hope for the future. But even more so, Jesus is naming the passage of time in order to strengthen his intentions for what he is doing right now. Sometimes, others will try to pull us from the path of faithfulness by predicting futures that seem threatening. Herod

wants to kill you; don't you think you'd better do something about that, right now? It does seem like a friendly warning for them to share. But what does Jesus say? Nope. That's not what I'm doing right now. I came to bring healing, and I'm going to stay right here, right now, bringing healing, because that's what I'm here for.

Our stories tell us who we are and they tell us what we're about, what we're here for, what we are called to do. Whether that is to offer us hope for the future or to increase our resolve in the present moment, the power of the story is the same. The old story of Moses telling a story about the future that references the past reminds me of the ponderings of my heart early in the Covid pandemic that started 5 years ago. Early on, many folks were trying to find stories from the past to help us contextualize the otherwise unprecedented things we were going through. I remember reading that there was not much in the way of cultural records of the 1918 flu epidemic. Part of that was the way the First World War overshadowed it. But the implication was also that it was simply so hard that society just collectively tried to move on as quickly as possible, not wanting to think or talk about it any more than absolutely necessary. I remember wondering if that would happen with covid. Would we just try to move on, without memorializing this collective trauma in novels and plays and tv shows and podcasts and Facebook memories? It turns out that is not what happened, presumably at least partially because of the dramatic turn our culture has taken toward documenting every facet of life through social media. And still, when I try to remember what it was like, it's often like trying to remember a dream.

Even here in this room, where those Peace of Christ signs and the existence of our Zoom worshipers testify to how we were changed, it's sometimes hard to remember how it felt and the shifts between the various stages of the pandemic. Do you remember how we were making plans in May of 2020 to return to worshipping here in the Sanctuary by August? Do you remember how, instead, we finally moved to worshipping on Zoom in October of that first year, thanks to the prodding of our Ministerial Assistant Tesa Hauser? What do you remember? Can you lift up something that was hard for you during the shut-downs? [Pause for answers] Were there good things that came out of this hard experience? Can anyone think of a gift that the pandemic gave? A favorite moment? [Pause for answers.]

Here we are, like the compiler of Deuteronomy, thinking back to the past, trying to remember the stories we were telling ourselves then about how the future could be. What were the things we told ourselves not to forget? Do we remember them or have we already forgotten? What did we learn about being neighborly that we might carry into the rest of our lives? What did we learn about caring for the vulnerable that might guide our choices going forward? What are the stories we need to retell and document so that the wisdom they brought us isn't lost?

If a church is a community shaped by the stories we share, what about our present moment? What are the stories you hope we will be telling in the future about the moments we are living through right now? What are the stories from our individual lives and our common life as a congregation that will shape who we

become? How can we draw on our shared past to strengthen our intentions for today, to make sure we follow Jesus together, as God is calling us to do? We heard a story today that prods us to move deeper into compassion and away from judgment. We've begun thinking about how we might amplify our proclamation of Christ's welcome so that the future of this congregation might be brighter and more colorful. How will your story intertwine with the story of this community? Who else might enter into that story that isn't here yet? What will the next chapter look like? How will it be shaped by the previous ones? At the moment, it is "unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see." But the stories we tell now will impact how the rest of the story turns out. Let's open our hearts to memory and hope and live boldly in the present moment! Amen.