

Every Good Story has a Great Beginning

Genesis 1:1-5, Luke 1:26-38

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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For Lent this year your pastors will be preaching on the theme *All the Elements of a Great Story*. Stories dominate our lives. It is true. Sure, there are those things we need to do to survive -- breathe, eat and sleep. But even those things have stories imbedded in them. While we sleep, we dream stories. The food we eat has a story connected to it. I cook from recipes handed to me from family and friends. I get take-out from the Mongolian barbecue restaurant that my grandparents introduced me to back when I was a college student. So, when I need comfort....when I need to feel surrounded by family stories I go there. While I breathe, I think stories in my head....stories about the couple walking past my house....stories about my mechanic who suddenly seems happier than usual....stories about the meaning behind a frustrated Facebook post of a friend. We live surrounded by stories.

When my youngest son, Brett, was in kindergarten, my husband Bryan (without consulting me) got Brett a goldfish. Eight fish funerals around the toilet bowl later and lots of added equipment, we finally had a goldfish that did not die in the first week. One day Bryan, who now understood that purchases connected to pets should never be done unilaterally, came to me and said, "The goldfish wants a castle." "How can you tell?" I asked. "I can tell. She is not happy. She has no place to hide. She feels constantly on display. She really needs some private time." Then he went on to spin the most elaborate tale about the goldfish's inner life and desires. Goldfish as Rorschach inkblot. I said, "You should hire yourself out as a fish psychologist." But we got the goldfish a castle and, I admit, she did seem happier.

Stories...the ones we read and live, and the ones we tell and dream...permeate our lives. They also shape our lives. Stories are the way we pass on complex meanings from one generation to the next. Like an idiot, through the avenue of story, I told my children that they came from a legacy of bold adventurers. They soaked up those stories and boldly went out to live the family legacy of adventure....and worry their mother.

Our lives, our days and our faith are rooted in story. Even if you didn't first hear the stories of David and Goliath or Jonah and the whale or the little boy who shared his fish and bread and helped feed a multitude, while a child sitting in a Sunday School room, you have heard stories from the Bible. We live in a Bible-saturated culture. But either way, what you have heard have been individual stories that have been taken from the longer narrative of the Bible. There are hundreds of stories in the Bible and dozens of main characters. We know many of these vignettes, but do you know **the** overarching story? Have you stepped back and taken a wider look at the story of God's long-suffering and redeeming interaction with humanity? Have you thought about the

elements that go into God's story? This Lenten season we want to see the big picture by looking at the different parts that make up this great story. What do we learn about God through this lens? Today I want to talk about the beginnings of the story.

When I was a teenager, my grandparents decided to write their memoir together and call it *How Wide is My Valley*. They began separately, by each writing about their lives until they met each other. Then my grandfather took over the bulk of the rest of the writing. This made sense to everyone who knew my grandparents. My grandpa, Desmond, had authored six books. He had been an editor of a magazine. He was a fabulous storyteller. He was even named for a character in a novel. It turns out that my great-grandmother, a devotee German Baptist Brethren, a plain woman, had a love of reading and named her sons, not biblical names, but the names of the leading men in her favorite romance novels. My grandfather was a great storyteller who was named after a character in a story. Even our names have stories.

Not too long ago, I dusted off my grandparents' memoir and made a copy for my oldest son, Matt. He loves to read. Plus, he is interested in his family stories and his religious tradition. Matt called me shortly after he received his copy and said, "Your grandma was a better writer than your grandpa, you know." I laughed with absolute derision at his comment. But Matt learned competitiveness from me. He said, "Okay, then. Get out their memoir and read me the first sentence that your grandpa wrote and the first sentence that your grandma wrote." I did and then I fell silent with this new revelation. "Every good storyteller knows how to capture the reader with a great beginning," he said in triumph. "I wonder who the better storyteller was in your family."

It is true. Great storytellers know how to begin. Think about it. Do you recognize any of these great opening lines from beloved novels?

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.

In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.

Every good story has a great beginning...and the Bible, as it turns out, has its share of beginnings. You heard two beginnings read today. The first one you hear today came from the first verses of the first creation story in Genesis. Wait, there is more than one creation story in the Hebrew Bible? Why, yes there is. There are two different creation stories....two different beginnings laid side by side. Genesis 1 begins with the words Brandt read, "In beginning God created the heavens and the earth" and ends with God resting on the seventh day. The second creation story tells us about God forming Adam out of the dust of the ground and Eve from Adam's rib. It ends with the first two human beings being banished from God's garden.

They differ in literary style and in the story they tell. In the first one, God is transcendent, hovering over all of it. In the second one, you could say that God is more “down-to-earth”, taking an active role in the affairs of humanity...going for walks in the garden in the evening breeze. These two creation stories use different names for God, different methods of creating, different views of humanity. The fact there are two lets us know right from the get-go that they are not to be read literally or historically. The fact that the Bible begins with two different and distinctive beginnings gives us direction on how to read and understand this sacred book. God’s story can be told in poetry or with prose, with transcendence or with earthiness, from our perspective or from a cosmic perspective. The magnificence of God’s creation story cannot be contained in one beginning.

Janice read to us another beginning story...this one from the New Testament. It is the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, saying yes to being impregnated by the Spirit of God, the beginning of the Word made flesh. But just like the Hebrew Bible, there is more than one beginning story in the New Testament. Luke tells us this story of young woman, chosen by God, to birth God’s own child into the world. The Gospel of John starts with the Word existing before anything else that is made was made. Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, placing him in the long line of Israel’s history. Mark begins with Jesus as an adult, being baptized in the Jordan River. That beginning story reminds me of when I asked my mother why I had never seen a baby picture of her. She said, “I was born twelve, honey.”

The New Testament has four different beginnings. The details of these beginnings are different in more ways than they are similar. Again, these multiple beginnings let us know up front that this story is not to be read literally. It lets us know that this sacred story will require something of us...something more difficult and complex than just reading an historical narrative. Each gospel beginning tells us something unique but important about who God is and who Jesus is and will be in the world and therefore who he is and can be in each of our life stories. For each of us has different beginnings and multiple beginnings depending on where we start the story and just who is telling the story and if it is necessary for us to begin again.

That is great news for me right now. If you are like me, you are at capacity for this pandemic experience. You are ready, past ready, for it to end...for us to gather again. We can see that possibility, but we can’t yet touch it. We are ready for a new beginning for all of God’s people. That is the wonder of God’s story and God’s love for us, for that matter. There is always room for another beginning. There is no limit to the beginnings of the story.

Sam Tanenhaus, an American historian, journalist and winner of a Pulitzer for Biography writes: *In literature and in life we ultimately pursue, not conclusions, but beginnings.*

Thank goodness that God’s great story has many of them. Amen