

"God's Story – and Yours"
La Verne Church of the Brethren
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Whether we know it or not or whether we like it or not, we are a product of our history. The big question of our existence is: what will we do with what we've been given?

My great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather was the co-founder of the Amish movement, along with Jacob Ammon. (Which raises the question, why weren't they called Hostetlerish's?) His grandson Jacob moved to America in 1736 (on a ship called the Herl – which is a great name for an 18th century ocean-going vessel, I think) as a result of the 30 Year's War in Europe, which decimated the population, created the present system of nation states, and wasn't so good for pacifists.

They settled near Philadelphia, and in 1757, they were drying apples on a cold winter day when some people of the Lanape tribe came to the door begging for food and shelter. Great-grandmother Hostetler refused them, and later that night they came back and shot the son, stabbed great-grandmother and took Jacob and his son Christopher prisoner. (This is a good reason to give people food if they need it.) Eventually, Jacob escaped and made it all the way back home from the Ohio Valley, but Christian stayed with the Lanapes until a prisoner exchange arranged by General Washington after the French and Indian War. Historically, the thing is known as the "Hostetler Massacre" but I prefer to think of it as the Great Apple Blunder.

Jacob's grandson moved to Gettysburg Pennsylvania in 1833, and coincidentally enough, lived a few miles from my great, great, great grandparents on my mother's side – the Johnsons – who lived on the outskirts of Gettysburg in a German Baptist community. After the battle of Gettysburg, two of the Johnson sons died of typhoid as a result of being impressed by the army to bury the rotting corpses. (It's ironic that 2 of the 3 civilians who died as a result of the battle were pacifists.) As a result, the Johnsons moved to the prairies of Indiana – some of the first white settlers there – to get away from the world, while at the same time my great, great grandfather Hostetler joined the Union Infantry in 1865 and fell in love with an English speaking woman. (I don't think one had to do with the other.) He was kicked out of the Amish Church as a result of (I don't know which) and moved to Indiana, where his father had already moved, coincidentally enough, within the same county as the Johnsons.

Their grandchildren were my parents – Otho Dwight Hostetler and Retha Ruby Moyer. There's a pair of names for you. (Their parents were Clayton and Virginia and Josiah Christian and Cecile Marie. Thankfully, they named their children Steve, Mark and Tom.) So, I was born in Indiana, as a result of the 30 Years War, the French and Indian War, and the Civil War. It took a lot to get me here.

I'm a product of those stories, those "his – stories." And you are a product of stories that are unique to you. You wouldn't be you without them. I wonder if you've thought much

about how those stories of your parents and grandparents - their lives and sufferings, joys and accomplishments, defeats and loves and dreams affect you?

Add to that the collective story of our culture and society. President Biden calls it the “unfolding great American story.” In no recent time have we been so bifurcated about what that story is. But the truth is America has always been a tale of two realities, depending on who you are, how wealthy you are, and what the color of your skin may be: Are we a nation of domination or liberation? Of violence or peace? Of racism and bigotry or tolerance and forbearance? Of equality or disparity under the law? It seems to be up for grabs. We are living in a dysfunctional time.

“Cognitive dissonance” is defined as “the mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time.

Well that might be us, and is also a part of our “story”, at least for now.

Yes, we have these stories, all of us, but there’s something more. There’s also your own individual story. And though it touches other lives, it is decidedly different, differentiated from our parents, our siblings, our wider family and even our friends and society. And isn’t that a good thing? The world can only take one me – and one you for that matter. I am relieved to know that God designed it that way. That you are unique in all the universe. There has never been another you and never will be.

I love the story about Charlie who had been poor all his life, never had any luck, all his life had been a struggle. But his rich uncle died and left him all his money, and suddenly Charlie was a millionaire. He went out, bought a fancy car, fancy suit, diamond rings, had his teeth fixed, a fancy haircut, bought a huge mansion with a swimming pool. He was engaged to a beautiful woman, but on his way to the wedding he was struck by a lightning bolt and died. When Charlie got to heaven, he asked God, “Why Lord, just as things were finally going well, did you take me off the earth?” And God says, “Oh Charlie, is that you? I didn’t recognize you.”

As Margaret Mead said, “Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.” Or, as someone else put it: “Embrace your weirdness.”

Sometimes it takes a lifetime to be comfortable with the thought that who you are authentically is alright.

There are 7.6 billion people on this planet. And yet, there is only one you.

There’s only one person who thinks the exact way you think.

There’s only one person who looks the way you look.

Who processes things the exact way you do.

Who works the way you do, who prays the way you do, or chants the way you do, who breathes the way you do, who snores the way you do...

When you take a moment to really think about that fact, it’s a beautiful way to think of life.

You are unique.

You are beautiful.
God made you perfect....

You know what that word “perfect” means, right? In the bible it doesn’t mean “without any bad spots or never make a mistake”, it’s defined as “a thing that is just right for what it’s used for.” A hammer is perfect for pounding nails. A screwdriver is perfect for turning screws. A shovel is the perfect tool for digging a hole in the ground. You are the perfect instrument for your place, in your time, to make an impact that only you can make.

And we’re living in a time when that is really important. When it is critical that each of us see ourselves as God’s instruments in the small corner of the world that we find ourselves in. Martin Luther King, Jr. ended his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech with this remarkable assertion: “When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.” And so we are.

[Robert F. Kennedy](#) said, “Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, they send forth a tiny ripple of hope, crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring. Those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

“Each time a person stands up” ... that means you, and me.

Your story is unfolding, and when you embrace who you are, it will propel you further in life. Somebody famous said, “Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else.” That’s good advice.

525 thousand, 600 minutes. How do you measure a year? Seasons of love, the song says.

God loves you, you know, just as you are; but is never finished with you until you are done. And you’re not done yet.

So, we are a product of the stories that have gone before us; the story of our culture; we have our own stories; and over and around it all is God’s story.

Our scripture text this morning points out that Abraham, the great father of faith, thought he was living out his own story, going on his own way, doing his own thing. What he came to realize was that God was in it all, and behind it all, and before it all and beside him all the time.

“The greatest story ever told” is more than just a cliché. God’s story is the story of creation, when God pulls out all the stops and has never finished creating. It’s the story of God walking alongside humanity from the beginning until today. It’s the story of God’s

love for the earth and everything in it. It's the story of God's forgiveness, which God is always more ready to give than we are to receive. It's the story of the great lengths God will go to for justice, to rescue lost and hurting people, over and over.

This is Bible Sunday, the day in the year when we distribute bibles to students, and when we recognize the rich resource of the sacred scriptures in our lives and faith. Our Brethren ancestors called the bible "our rule of faith and practice." It's how we measure truth. It's how we measure right and wrong. It's how we measure justice and right ways of living and doing. We measure our lives against the life and teachings of Jesus.

"Bible" means "books" and for most Protestant Christians, there are 66 books in the bible. It's divided into 2 main parts called Testaments: the Old Testament (which is some of the Jewish scripture) and the New Testament (which is the story of Jesus and his followers). Other books are sometimes added to the list, including some which were written between the Old and New Testament period. All of them, and each part of them offer inspiration, revelation, and direction. We read and study the bible because we find in it God's eternal and essential principles that must be firmly grasped and communicated afresh if we are going to survive what Kennedy called "the wall of oppression and resistance." We need fixed points to hang onto – firm, solid handles that will help us steer our lives in a meaningful manner. What we really want is something to grab – believable, reliable truth that makes sense for our lives today, essential principles for our aimless world.

I worry that we unwittingly read the bible in a jumbled way. Many of us only ever hear the parts of scripture read on Sunday mornings. Or others of us grew up memorizing bits of scripture and are accustomed to absorbing individual bible verses outside the context of the larger narrative of scripture. Approaching the bible that way risks distorting the bible's teachings, or even using it as a tool of domination or oppression. If you grew up that way, you know what I mean.

But if we allow people, especially young people to come to scripture with an open mind, with questions of their own, looking at the text from their own experience and perspective, with intellectual integrity, and sincere respect for others opinions and traditions, rather than forcing down their throat blind allegiance to rigid doctrines and dogmas, or somebody else's ideas... they will find in it an expression of God that speaks to their own life and need. I believe that.

And what we come to discover is the God who has been with us always; who was there to hear our borning cry, and will be with us to the end.

God's story is your story. It didn't really end with the last words of Revelation. It goes on in you. You are the 67th book of the bible. I wonder what that book says?