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The Power of Story
I Corinthians 1: 26-31

It was about ten years ago as a group from St. John's was traveling near the Syrian – Israeli border when Danny, our guide, slowed the bus and pointed to a nondescript, open field. He said, "There's a story that goes with it."

A few years before, a Palestinian terrorist rode a glider into that field, advancing upon the guard house across the road, killing six soldiers before being gunned down.

While the event warranted scarce international mention, it sparked a great, if temporary, hue and cry across Israel.

Shortly thereafter, a careless Israeli bus driver hit a van full of Palestinian workers, killing six of them.

The rumor swept through the Palestinian community that the truck driver was a brother to one of the slain Israeli soldiers and had purposefully caused the wreck in order to wreak revenge.

The rumor was false, but in that emotionally-charged atmosphere it carried the ring of plausibility.

In response, young Palestinians used this event as a catalyst to embark upon the intifada,

a prolonged uprising that created such chaos as to provoke both sides to negotiate a political agreement that eventuated in the creation of a small Palestinian state. The story of that lone Palestinian terrorist

spawned a thousand other stories, creating a ripple effect that shaped the narrative of an entire geopolitical area

and continues to have an impact upon our own lives. The power of story!

Sometimes the power of a single story can exert an influence that lasts the whole of our lives.

I think of a fireman who crawled inside an overturned truck to comfort the driver trapped inside.

Gasoline dripped on both men as rescuers with power tools worked to cut the driver free.

Both knew that a single spark from those tools might immolate them both.

The driver kept saying, "I'm so scared." But the fireman kept reassuring him, "I will not leave you.

No matter what happens, I'll be here for you." Soon thereafter the driver was freed, and he asked the fireman,

"Why would you do such a thing for a stranger? Why did you promise to stay with me?"

The fireman replied, "It's strange, really, but when I was a little boy, I had five teeth pulled under general anesthesia. The nurse said to me before surgery, 'I'll be here for you. No matter what happens, I'll be here.

I will not leave you.'

When I came out of surgery, she was there, and I found her presence a great and lasting comfort.

For some reason, when I crawled into your cab that nurse's words came back to me, and I knew exactly what to say

to you and exactly what to do." The story of another's love from decades before remained so deep in this man's psyche that it gave him heroic strength.

For many, tracing the motivation for why we do what do in our professions involves acknowledging the power of story. I think of a famed counselor who was asked to explain how she entered the counseling business.

She replied, "When I was a young woman, I endured a traumatic time of failure and, fortunately,

I had a friend who listened to me every single day. I probably said the same thing every single day –

but she listened. When I emerged from the mess of that trauma and began to pull my life together, I realized that I wanted to do for others what my friend had done for me. One woman's listening to my story taught me the value of listening and helped empower me to listen to a thousand other stories."

Sometimes it is only through the analogy of story that we can truly see ourselves for who we really are. Remember Bathsheba, working on her tan, sunning herself on her roof top, catching a few rays? King David happens to look over and see her and says, "She looks good." He desires her for himself. He places her husband in the hottest part of a battle to ensure that he will be killed. Then he takes her for his wife, thinking that maybe nobody even noticed his stratagem. He may even have told himself that what he did was okay. But God appoints a prophet named Nathan to come to David and say, "Did you know there is a poor farmer who had but one little lamb, and he loved that lamb, nurtured it and raised it in such a way that it became an integral part of his family? But he lived near a greedy, stingy, rich neighbor who had flocks without number, but who when a guest came for dinner refused to dip into his own flock, but stole the single lamb from the poor man to serve his guest." David is outraged. "As the Lord lives," thunders David, "this man deserves to die." Nathan snaps shut the jaws of his story's trap, saying, "*You are the man!*" Through the power of story David sees his sin for what it is. We are gathered here on this Sunday we call "All Saints," to celebrate the fact that our faith has been shaped by the power of the stories of those believers who have gone before us. We have gathered to acknowledge *our indebtedness* to the stories of saints and servants who have gone before us. All of us trace our story of faith back to Abraham, that nomadic Mesopotamian shepherd who sensed God calling him to take leave of everything he had ever known and strike out for a new land on the basis of a promise. Abraham was no better than anybody else around him, but he had a great capacity for trust. Paul says of him, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Abraham lived as a paradigm for every person of faith who has come after him. We are products of his story.

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph echoed Abraham's story of faith, which was then revived, recreated, redefined and redirected by Moses, who led the Hebrew people out of bondage to that climactic moment at Mount Sinai,

where Moses received the two tablets containing words that have endured throughout the ages. Moses led them through the wilderness for forty years, taking them to the cusp of the Promised Land. Then he died. One of the questions I ask my Vacation Bible Schoolers every year is "Where is Moses buried?"

The kids now know it is a trick question: nobody knows where Moses is buried. God buried Moses in an unmarked grave so his people would be looking forward to new challenges, not looking back to the tomb of one who represented past days of glory.

We are the products of Moses' faith and story.

Joshua, Samson, Deborah, and Gideon kept God's people moving forward.

Young men like Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha kept God's story alive, answering the divine call, "Here am I."

The great David managed to unify all the Hebrew tribes into a functioning nation, and under his son Solomon,

Israel enjoyed a modicum of success, a small golden age. But subsequent kings could not keep the tribes together and they split into two countries, to the eventual destruction of both.

But even in the exile of Judah, the Jews found God's voice through prophets like Ezekiel, maintaining a hope in the story that God would not forget them, reaffirming a story of hope that had been articulated for them earlier by great poet-prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Even so, the flame of his hope seemingly lay dormant until it was rekindled in a cradle in Bethlehem.

Here God's story took a strange turn, a turn that only God could have authored. For though the infant born in that cradle was of the house and lineage of the great David, there was nothing aristocratic about his upbringing. His mother was a simple peasant girl; he was raised in a carpenter's home. His ministry never really satisfied people's preconceived image of a Messiah as a conquering hero. This was a Messiah who in fact revealed God's strength through modeling God's weakness, who revealed God's strength through crucifixion and death, so that the mother who laid him in the cradle would eventually gaze upon him on the cross. Yet out of conditions of death and destruction, the eternal God resurrected not only his Representative Son, but an entire movement, a new creation.

Here God's story took an even stranger twist. Though God's Anointed was a Hebrew, and though his ministry was almost solely among his fellow Jews, amazingly, the Good News of his life, death and resurrection attracted mostly pagan Gentiles. Aiding in their evangelization was God's enlistment into the divine story of another Jew named Saul, an avowed opponent of the Christian story. Yet, though he was Jewish, he had been raised in a Gentile environment, was, in fact, a full-fledged citizen of Rome, and thus perfectly equipped to create a bridge to bring Jewish and Gentile Christians together. This Saul, turned Paul, witnessed the wonder of this God whose Representative died on a cross in scandalous weakness, unleashing a Spirit that called together the most motley set of people on earth to become a new entity, a spiritual nation. As Paul would write to some of this spiritual nation's inhabitants: "Not many of you were wise, not many of you were wealthy, not many of you were powerful . . ." but out of such a people God has fashioned a people who were no people, a story out of no story, creating a way out of no way. Amidst the greatest empire the ancient world ever knew, this people who were no people, formed a spiritual nation, drawing people from all cultures, all colors, walks of life. A dozen dozen times God's story should have ended under the persecution, ridicule and hatred of the Roman empire, but somehow the story of God continued to live, not only live, but prevail!

Then came that fateful night when a Roman general slept restlessly before a decisive battle the next day, and saw a vision bearing two Greek letters, "Chi-Rho," the symbol of Christ, and heard a voice saying, "By this sign you shall conquer." Constantine awakened the next morning to order his soldiers hastily to paint this Christian symbol upon their shields, and went into battle literally bearing the banner of Christ, only to emerge victorious. When Constantine the general became Constantine the emperor, he declared that Christianity, heretofore an illegal religion, would now be the official religion of the empire. In time the empire would decline and die, but the story of Christianity would not die with it.

We leap ahead more than a thousand years. Christianity's ever-dynamic spirit seemed to have succumbed to mind-numbing medieval scholasticism and papal greed, but God raised up a strange genius in the form of Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was a simple priest, but he reclaimed the freedom and competence of the individual conscience to wrestle with the Spirit of God.

When church authorities pressured him to conform to their official orthodoxy, Martin Luther declared, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and by reason I cannot recant what I believe.

God help me, here I stand! I can do no other!"

Out of those militant words, God's story burst forth anew in flames of Reformation.

Leap forward in time again.

Fourscore and six years ago, the Hackney family and a few others from nearby First Baptist founded upon this very hill a new congregation named St. John's Baptist Church.

The inside scoop is that some of the Hackneys didn't see eye to eye with the pastor at First Baptist, but whatever their motives, the Hackneys and others thought the time and place felicitous for embarking on such a venture, and this beautiful sanctuary was dedicated in 1929, which quickly became an inauspicious time to be deeply in debt.

Many of you know the story: as the Roaring 'Twenties morphed into the Great Depression of the 'Thirties, the church neared bankruptcy, its future existence seemed tenuous, but the Hackneys and others resolved to park their cars and walk so as to use the saved gas money to keep the church afloat.

There was a time when circumstances seemed to suggest the death of this church's role in God's eternal story –

but by their sacrifice and their courage this congregation held on in faith, until the God of resurrection brought them through that crisis into a time of unparalleled success, growth, service and new mission.

We are the beneficiaries of their faithfulness to God's story. We are built upon their story and faith. We are also part of their story.

On days like All Saints one is reminded of the great truth that the past is never past.

The past is always present in the present.

The story of all these prior stories of faith raises the question for us, what will be our part in God's story?

What role will we play in the story of God's people here in this place?

Will your courage and your creativity and your sacrifice and your commitment be a catalyst for change in our congregation?

Or will the enormity of the challenge cause you to throw up your hands in despair?

What role will you play in keeping the story of God alive at 300 Hawthorne Lane?

Will you be one of those people who simply stand on the sidelines, an uncommitted observer, an uncommitted witness?

Or are you willing to pledge your life, your resources, the depth of your being, and the core of your faith to live your story in such a way that you help bring God's story alive in this place?

Is there a magnetism to the way you live your faith that draws other people into this fellowship and into God's banquet table?

Is there a joy about your faith that draws others to the warmth of your story?

Is there a depth to your faith that answers the questions of somebody else's pilgrimage?

The stories of the past provide a key to our future.

Yes, we live in a time when our world and our country and our church seem imperiled.

Yes, we live in a time when our church's existence hangs in the balance.

But the story of our past provides the key to unlocking our future.

Those believers of old who parked their cars shared a kinship

with those Christians communing in the catacombs under Roman persecution; they had a kinship with those Jews exiled in Babylon, homesick for Jerusalem, they had a kinship with those Hebrews wandering in the wilderness, wondering if they would ever find home.

All of them knew that times were tough. All of them knew that they might not survive.

All of them knew that the story of God and the story of their faith was endangered.

But all of them held to the conviction that God was not finished with them yet,

God is not finished with us yet!

In time, as they hung tenaciously to God's promise, they prevailed!

That can be our story, too.

Some years ago biologists tried to re-establish a breed of bighorn sheep in the American West in a place that had supported bighorn sheep in the past. But no matter how many sheep they inserted in the area, no matter how extensive their preparations, the biologists couldn't manage to ensure the sheep's survival. Their numbers would always dwindle down to nothing.

The biologists finally realized that the bighorn sheep had lost the knowledge of their migration patterns from their summer range to their winter range.

The biologists realized they could put the sheep in an ideal habitat, provide for them adequately, even inoculate them from diseases, but they could not teach them the migration patterns.

That was something bighorn sheep could only learn from living with other bighorn sheep.

When taken out of their story, something essential to their being was lost.

My friends, we only learn how to practice faith, we only learn how to grow in faith, we only learn how to mature in faith, we only learn how to share faith by living in community with other believers.

If we try to maintain a relationship with God outside of a community of faith, something essential to our story will be lost.

This morning if you entered the little church in Kentucky where I first pastored, you would find iron tie rods stretching from one wall to another. There's a story there.

The members decided to build the sanctuary themselves, but their ambition outstripped their aptitude.

Not long after construction ended, the walls began to lean outward. They called in a consultant who ordered them to install a series of tie bars in the walls to bind the walls together.

When I was pastor, someone suggested encasing these bars in ersatz wood beams for aesthetic purposes.

They asked me my opinion and I said, "No, let's don't do that.

Let us keep them before our eyes to remind us each Sunday that there is a story that holds this church together."

When we come in here every Sunday, let us remember that a story holds us together.

For as I read the names of saints like Dick Williams, Rickey Pope, Ben and Evelyn Boone and so many others

whose stories helped shaped our heritage, the question arises,

"Who will take their place and by their story enrich us?"

Who knows? Maybe these children who have helped me in the tableau this morning may grow up to be the next Moses, the next Luther, the next Constantine, the next Mary. One thing is certain:

their stories and ours will blend together to define the ongoing story of God in this community of faith.

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Third in a Series on The Powers That Shape Our Being