

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

I gave up self-loathing for Lent. Noticed I was telling myself terrible stories about God and myself. God as creator. Me as failed product of creation. God too polite to throw me out.

Psalm 23: Popular for a reason. Paints a scene. Pulls you in. Psalmist telling a story about God and about himself. A truer story. A story we need to hear. And we listen and enter in. And then we bring the story into our own lives (movies, funerals, etc.).

Opening of John as a story about God's story: "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not/has not/will not/cannot overcome it."

And then the Word became flesh and lived among us. Like postmodern novel. Collapses author and character. Loved how last sentence different in every translation. Plays with tenses. Postmodern before postmodern was cool.

Coming out of era of modernism. Church suddenly had to answer with facts, proof, answers. Black and white. View stories as finished products with only one interpretation. Mine stories for evidence, for proof. Our job is to get the answers right. To understand it in the one right way. To determine who's in and who's out.

But the Bible not a legal document. Like all best stories, wildly complex and fraught with contradictions. Flawed protagonists: Moses, Noah, Miriam, David, Sarah, Paul. Human Antagonists: Pharaoh, Pilate. Priest in the Good Samaritan. They are human and relatable.

Jesus tells parables where it isn't even clear which character we are supposed to relate to. The stories are open. We can enter in a variety of ways.

Retell Good Samaritan parable from pre-K Sunday School. Telling stories that are precious, full of space for questions and wondering. Children readily enter into stories because no one has told them they are closed yet. Develop empathy and the capacity to grapple with mystery. They bring themselves/their stories into the story God is telling.

If we are the body of Christ, then we all get to be part of the story. Big enough to hold all of us. Shifts and grows as we enter in, but stays true. Like oral tradition, but our lives tell the story.

Question remains: if I am prone to anxious stories, if I am both character and storyteller, how do I know I'm not lying to myself about God? How do I know I'm not getting the story wrong?

Prayer. Merging my stories with God's by creating space through prayer/spiritual discipline where God can interrupt/reshape my stories. Lectio Divina/Psalm 23/"anoint" story. Lent practices and prayer for others that reshapes relationships/grows empathy.

Essential we do this with our communal stories, as well. Our collective stories that justify greed, violence, racism. Manifest destiny. We are heroes. God-ordained. Still with us. America as a Christian nation. Redlining. These stories are terrible. When we insert God into them, they are worse.

We can use our communal rituals as one way to address/repent of/reshape these stories. Humans as ritual creature. Will tell these symbolic stories whether we intend to or not. Organize them around what we find important/they tell us who we are. Never empty, because we bring our stories to them, and they become a part of ours.

We have to utilize ritual to create spaces where we can collectively enter God's story, rather than letting them tell us terrible stories about God. Can tell our communal story of self-righteousness/fear/piety/personal holiness/culturewars/anxiety or communal story of redemption/embrace/hope/love/mercy/and a loving God who is both mysteriously vast and intimately near. A story that subverts cultural norms of consumerism and nationalism, or capitulates to them.

We know we are there by the fruits Loving more fully, open and free, joy, peace, empowerment. Humanizing. Or are we closed, anxious, ashamed, shaming, policing boundaries and practicing exclusion?

Here is the thing. God's story has SO MUCH ROOM. It is complex, and flexible, and full of possibilities. But--and this is extremely important--IT IS STILL ABOUT SOMETHING. Individual texts and stories contradict, but it all points in the same direction. In the end, God's story is a story about justice for the poor, orphaned, widow. It is a story where weak are called strong and given blessings. Where underdogs are heroes, rejected are embraced, where mercy shows up over and over again to subvert the usual expectations about how stories are supposed to end.

Instead of inserting God into the destructive stories of fear, self-righteousness, greed, and despair that we seem hellbent on telling ourselves, we are called to participate as characters, as storytellers, with our voices, with our rituals, with our lives, in God's prophetic counternarrative that interrupts the usual story, cries out against the pain it has brought into the world and reshapes it into something made of hope. We are called to use every fiber of our beings to tell the story that has been told since the first breath, the first word. God's story of love. A word so powerful that it has the power to redeem everything and everyone.