

GOD’S STORY, OUR STORY

The Story That Forms Us

Genesis 2:4b-25

PENTECOST 13

September 8, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

I am grateful for our church secretary, Diana McArdle, in many ways, not only for her responsibilities as an administrative assistant, but also as the creative spirit behind our church publications.

According to today’s textual reading from Genesis, Diana is also my “helper,” in that she serves occasionally on Sundays as a worship assistant, and, on the occasion of my recovery from surgery earlier this summer, she filled in my stead as worship leader.

Diana also contributes to the planning and preparation of all our worship, fellowship, and educational activities.

I hope you are beginning to get a picture of what Diana means to me and to this congregation.

This morning, I am grateful for Diana’s decision to recreate on the back pages of our worship bulletin, the entire article I wrote for *The Messenger*, which you received by mail earlier this week.

There I introduced the purpose and schedule of the Sunday Narrative Lectionary readings that form what is called “God’s Story.”

I would like to set the stage, so to speak, by quoting from the article’s first paragraph:

“There’s something about stories, especially great ones.

We all love stories — both children and adults.

Stories entertain, teach, inspire, and provoke.

Stories are containers for truth.

Neurologists have confirmed that we are hardwired for stories.

Stories are the way we make sense of the world and our place in it.”

The contemporary Scottish philosopher, Alisdair MacIntyre, has said:

“ ‘Who am I and what am I to do?’ We must answer the question, ‘What story am I part of?’ ”

On this 13th Sunday after Pentecost, we start at the beginning — well, almost— of God’s Story, the second creation story, which immediately follows the first in the Bible’s first book, Genesis.

As I wrote in *The Messenger* article, our baptisms join us to God’s Story.

The Second Chapter’s second creation story makes humans part of God’s story.

For us Christians, Genesis is the First Book of the Old Testament, or Covenant.

For Jews, it is one of five Books of Moses, called the Torah.

Genesis is a book about beginnings: the birth of creation, the universe, the origins of humanity, and, subsequently, the story of the people that would be known as Israel, and, after the Babylonian exile, the Jews.

Genesis narrates how this people began, first, as an individual, Abram, who heard God’s call to leave his land, his birthplace, his father’s house and gods, and begin a journey of faith with his wife, Sarai.

Genesis, over the course of 39 chapters, details how a barren couple forms a family and closes, with their progeny, standing on the threshold of becoming a nation.

This journey turns out to be unexpectedly complicated and fraught with setbacks, just as our lives are.

This is why Genesis is so vivid for us.

We can relate to its characters and their dilemmas.

We are part of their world, as they are of ours.

No other ancient literature has so contemporary a feel.

This is God’s story, but it is also our story.

This is where we came from.

This is our journey and destiny.

Speaking of the Torah itself, God is the primary concern of these books.

That accounts for their nature of authority and dignity.

But, it is not only about God, since we get included.

We want to know how and why we were formed and how we fit into the nature of things.

The Books of Moses are made up of stories and signposts.

These stories show us God working with and speaking to men and women in a whole variety of ways and circumstances.

God is not presented to us in ideas and arguments, but in events and actions that involve each of us personally.

The signposts that appear along the way provide immediate and practical directions to guide us into behavior that is appropriate to our humanity in the particular place and time in which we live.

That is honoring God.

The Torah is a book written for all.

We learn about what exists by way of the story about creation.

We learn about ourselves through a tangled tale of Adam, the first man, Eve, the first woman, a tree and a serpent.

We begin to understand human freedom and responsibility and its abuse through the story of Cain and Abel.

We learn the importance of faith through the lives and travails of Abraham and Sarah and their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The Torah's story is universal.

It is a book written for us all.

One of its greatest themes is its constant battle against elites, especially the knowledge of elites.

The Torah defines Israel as "*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Exodus 19:6).

The Apostle, Peter will apply this same quote to the Church in the New Testament.

Judaism is about the democratization of holiness and righteousness, and the

creation of a society, whose people have access to religious knowledge, if they are sincere and willing to be formed and shaped by it.

Hence, the importance of stories from which everyone can understand and learn.

Yet, not understanding and learning at the same level is another feature of Genesis.

Each of its stories has layer upon layer of meaning and significance, which we only grasp after repeated readings.

Our understanding of this book grows as we grow.

Each age adds insights, commentaries, and interpretations of its own.

The book's literary style allows it to be read afresh in each generation.

That, too, tells us something significant about the Torah's view of human knowledge.

The truths of the human condition are simply too deep to be understood at once and on the surface.

Most importantly, only stories adequately reflect what it is to be human.

Tell a story, even to young children, and they become instantly attentive and inquisitive.

They want to know what happens next.

In logical systems, there are no surprises as to what happens next.

Take, for example, the syllogism: *All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal.*

The conclusion is already implicit in the premise.

But in a story, as in life, we never know what will happen next, because human beings are not puppets on strings.

In the weeks ahead, we will ask:

Why and how does Sarah have a son at her age?

Who does Jacob wrestle, and why is his name changed to Israel?

How does an enslaved people become released from bondage and form a nation?

All of this begins with the second creation of man and woman, as we have already read.

By endowing human beings with His *“image and likeness,”* God gave us the ability to relate with both God and each other.

We may be, like the first human, *“dust of the earth,”* but there is within us the *“breath of God.”*

We are shaped by our environment, but we can also shape our environment.

We are created, but we are also creative.

To a degree, shared by no other life form known to us, we can choose how to act and how to react.

That is good news, but also bad, as we discover in Genesis’ narrative.

We can obey, but we can also disobey.

We can create harmony or discord.

Our fate does not lie in the stars, nor in the human genome, or any other form of determinism.

We become what we choose to be, because that’s how God created us.

Therefore, we do not know what will happen next.

If some form of determinism were true, human fate could be controlled by a system — Marxist, Freudian, Darwinian, or others.

Determinism is not the truth, and the best way of showing this is by way of stories, in which the outcome is in doubt.

We don’t know what will happen until it does.

And in Genesis, things never happen quite the way we expect.

Not by accident, is Genesis a book about family.

The family is the place where we learn social, relational, emotional, and spiritual intelligence.

There is nothing simple or idealized about the families of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

There are tensions, rivalries, jealousies, setbacks, and unfulfilled hopes, as well as love, kinship, and loyalty.

Only much later in the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, the Tanakh, do we discover that the family will turn out to contain the most compelling metaphors for our relationship with God.

God is our Father, and we are the children.

The God of Abraham is a personal God, not an abstract force, a first cause, or a prime mover.

God relates to us as persons, senses our sufferings, hears our prayers, and is present in our lives.

Beloved people of God,
the Book of Genesis is a book of beginnings, opening with the creation of creation and its creatures.

The most important creation is the relationship between God and Adam.

In Chapter One, the Hebrew word for God is *Elohim*, the author of nature.

In Chapters Two and Three, God is described as *Hashem*, the God who is a person who speaks.

It is only after Adam becomes aware of his wife as a person, that he becomes capable of understanding and relating to God as *Hashem*.

Genesis Two is the story of relationships.

It is the story of how the love we feel for another person leads to the love of God, and robes us in garments of light.

AMEN