

“Never-Ending Story”

Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34

Makemie Memorial Presbyterian Church

October 25, 2009

Reformation Sunday, Bibles Presented to the Children, & Soup!

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This ends the reading.

I have two stories to tell this morning. The first is a Halloween story.

A man is walking home alone late one foggy Eastern shore Halloween night, when behind him he hears, bump, bump, bump.

Walking faster, he looks back & through the fog he makes out the image of an upright casket banging its way down the middle of the street toward him...bump, bump, bump.

Terrified the man begins to run toward his home, the casket bouncing quickly behind him. Faster, faster, bump, bump, bump.

He runs up to his door, fumbles with his keys, opens the door, rushes in, slams & locks the door behind him. ..however, the casket crashes through his door, with the lid of the casket clapping, clappity-bump, clappity bump, clappity-bump, on his heels, as the terrified man runs.

Rushing upstairs to the bathroom, he locks himself in. His heart is pounding; his head is reeling; his breath is coming in sobbing gasps.

With a loud crash, the casket breaks down the door. Bumping & clapping toward him.

The man screams & reaches for something, anything, but all he can find is a bottle of cough syrup! Desperate he throws the cough syrup at he casket...

And,

(hopefully you're ready for this!!!)

The coffin stops.

The second story has to do with a discovery. Today is Reformation Sunday when Protestants support Martin Luther's disillusionment with the Catholic church. Of course the Catholic church sees Luther as a monk who overreacted to the problems of the day & who caused a great deal of needless trouble. This trouble came to a head October 31, 1517 with the 95 theses Luther nailed to the door of the Wittenberg castle.

Now our discovery, I was down in the basement this week, putting away some Chi Rho items & saw a piece of parchment, vellum really, sticking out

behinds some bricks. I cleaned it off & was astonished to see that it was the five missing theses of Luther's. Yes, there was originally 100 theses, addressing the top five items Luther believed should be heard in the church, said by the people.

So this morning , Makemie church will be the first to hear these missing five: I hope you're ready for this.

1. Hey! It's my turn to sit in the front row!
2. I was so enthralled, I never noticed the sermon went 25 minutes over time!
3. I love it when we sing worship songs I've never heard before!
4. Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment like our annual stewardship campaign!
5. SINCE WE'RE ALL HERE, LET'S START THE SERVICE EARLY!

In the text that Ted read just a moment ago, we heard the Covenant God made with the people as witnessed by the prophet Jeremiah.

God said: ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. This new law was not written on tablets of stone to be taught; this new covenant was a re-formed, living, breathing covenant in their hearts.

One of the things about reform is that if our lives & systems are never reformed, they become stagnant, irrelevant, & even abusive.

Presbyterians believe we're called, to be re-formed, based on new needs. Hearts need re-forming to include new ways of loving, new ways of knowing God. Jeremiah writes, ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.

If God is at work among us, then we're going to need re-forming. Churches need refurbishing so they don't become stone markers of past theologies that represent what the church stood for in the past. We need to refurbish our building & sanctuary to give it new value, new beauty, and new life in this community. Our hearts need reforming simply because we are human beings who take a wrong turn more often than we care to admit. But the good news is with the help of God, we can re-form our lives.

All of us have a direct connection to the God who liberates us from our sins or mistakes, frees us from dysfunctional ruts & re-forms our hearts into new creations. All of us can go directly to God. It is not necessary for us to go through a system of belief that requires us to follow a set of confining rules, or to believe only the clergy can speak to God on our behalf. All of us can be re-formed people, we believe, through the unconditional love of a forgiving God.

Martin Luther's disillusionment brought him down into a darkness, a night of the mind. Almost all of us have had these nights, of dreams robbed of hope, of the fear of loss, of the feeling, "nothing will change."

But down in the darkness below those dreams – in the place where all our notions about God have come to naught – there is still, listen to me, reason to hope, because disillusionment is not so bad.

Disillusionment is the loss of illusion: -- about ourselves, about our world, about our God – and while it is almost always painful, it is not a bad thing to lose the lies we mistake for the truth. Disillusioned, we begin to understand that God does not conform to our expectations. We glimpse our own size in the universe & see that no human being can say who God should be or how God should act.

We run over in our minds our requirements of God and recognize them as our own fictions, our own frail shelters against the coffin bumping up the stairs. Disillusioned, we find out what is not true & are set free to seek what is – if we dare.

Everyone who passes through the wilderness of disillusionment passes through these places where the wild beasts of wrath and resignation stalk their prey. There is a lot of attrition along the way, but for

those who elect to go on the best advice is to keep moving. Putting one foot ahead of the other is the best way to survive disillusionment, because the real danger is not in the territory itself but getting stuck in it.

For those willing, like Luther, to keep heaving themselves toward the light, things can change. What has been lost gradually becomes less important than what is to be found. Curiosity pokes its green head up through the asphalt of grief, and fear of the unknown takes on an element of wonder as the disillusioned turn away from the God who was supposed to be, in order to seek the God who is.

Over and over, our disappointments draw us deeper into the mystery of God's being & doing. Every time God declines to meet our expectations, another of our idols are exposed. Another curtain is drawn back so that we can see what we have propped up in God's place is not God. So who is God?

It is a question of a lifetime & the answers are never big enough or finished. Pushing past curtain after curtain, it becomes clear that the failure is not God's but my own, for having such a poor & stingy imagination. God's greater than any imagination, wiser than any wisdom, more dazzling

than the universe, as present as the air we breathe & utterly beyond our control.

That is, in short, is what makes me a Christian. And as the creature of a God like that, I need a mediator, an advocate, a flesh & blood handle on the inscrutable mystery that gives birth to everything that is. While Jesus is, in his own way, just as inscrutable, he is enough like me to convince me that relationship with God is not only possible but deeply desired by God, who wants me to believe that love is the wide net spread beneath the most dangerous of my days. To believe this is an act of faith – a denying of ourselves & a taking up of our cross & a following Christ. And for those of us sitting here we know this isn't a one time decision, but a daily & sometimes hourly choice to act as if this were true in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

As a preacher & teacher, I make my living telling stories. While I know people who say that they "use" stories to make important points, I am one of those listeners who consistently remember the stories & forget the points. That is because the points tend to be perfectly clear & well behaved, as very little in my life ever is, while the stories star flawed characters with muddy motives whom I recognize at once.

So when it is my turn to talk, I generally skip the points & get right to the plot; the messy tales of encounters between people & people, between people & creation, between people & God; the stories in the Bible.

And our central story is the biblical one, told for millennia around campfires, altars & ordinary supper tables by parents, teachers, preachers & friends. If these stories sound different from other stories that shape our lives, maybe that is because it wasn't written by George Lucas or J. R. R. Tolkien but by a whole host of people struggling to speak of things that were beyond them. Their collective efforts were so luminous in one way or another that the keepers of tradition bound them together & called them sacred, declaring that no humans could have written them without a lot of divine help. What this means is that the biblical story is not only our story but also God's story, which places an extra burden on those who are stewards of it. Not only are we called to tell it well, but we are also called to tell it all & not just the parts that serve our own purposes.

If you use your Bible very much, then you can pick it up, look at it from the side, & tell what your own sacred scriptures really are. See the pages that are darker than the others? They are dark with the oil from your own fingertips, which have searched out the parts of the story that are most

meaningful to you. But if your Bible looks anything like mine, then there are lots of pages with very few fingerprints on them. Spent much time with the book of 2 Chronicles lately? How about Ezra & Nehemiah, or the middle section of Revelation?

There are good reasons not to go there. There are whole chapters of John's Gospel that I would like to snip right out of the book so that no child ever has to read what John said Jesus said about Jews. But as long as Bibles keep coming out with those passages in them, then I have a responsibility to address them, if only to explain how they ever became part of the story in the first place.

I have a neighbor who says that she left church for good when she was 12, right after she read the Bible for herself & discovered what a colossal snow job her Sunday school teachers had done on her. Most of us can recall our own versions of her disillusionment, but since I count the loss of illusion as a good thing, I have to rejoice for her & for all of us whose illusions about God are routinely exposed by stories in the Bible.

Lately I have been tracking the illusion that God favors my group to the exclusion of all other groups -- which is fairly easy to maintain, depending on which stories I choose to tell. Since the Bible contains the

foundational stories of two distinct faiths it is chock full of attacks on those outside the fold. Sometimes the attacks are sanctioned by God & other times they erupt from pure human meanness, but In either case they come as no real surprise. When any group of people is trying to discover who they are, they usually begin by declaring who they are *not*: we are not Canaanites, not Samaritans, not Pharisees, not Romans, not Greeks, *not them*.

These are satisfying parts of the story to tell around the campfire, because they reinforce the boundaries of the group as well as its rightness. Sarah orders Abraham to cast Hagar & Ishmael out into the desert so that Isaac's inheritance is sure. The Egyptians are drowned in the sea. Jesus turns over tables in the temple. No one comes to the Father but by me. If these stories are beloved, then at least one reason is because they guarantee the privileges of those who tell them.

But the truly astonishing thing about the Bible is that it also includes stories from outside the fold, where God seems determined to work through those whom the community of faith has cast out. God visits Hagar in the desert & promises to make a great nation of Ishmael. God anoints the Persian King Cyrus to end the Babylonian exile. Samaritans star in at least

two of Jesus' own stories, & he almost gets killed in Capernaum for reminding his own people that God sometimes skips right over them to go take care of people who don't share their faith.

As disturbing as such news may be, it is our assurance that God's plot is always larger than the ones we weave to reassure ourselves, and that even when we say the story's over, the story's not over. As long as anyone is alive to play a part or talk about it afterwards, the sacred narrative continues -- at least until the day we wake from sleep to find that there is room in God's story for us all.

Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, when given a chance to take back his theses, to admit his mistake to the Pope, he did not. His famous quote is this:

Unless I am convicted by Scripture or by right reason (for I trust neither in popes nor in councils, for they have often erred and contradicted themselves)-- unless I am thus convinced, I am bound by the texts of the Bible, my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I neither can nor will recant anything. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.
God help me. Amen