Sixth Sunday of Easter May 1, 2016

All Saints’ Church Year C

Acts 16:9-15 Revelation of John 21:10; 22-22:5

Psalm 69 John 14:23-29

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that that the only thing sacred is the integrity of our own minds. He has a point. But I disagree. I think what is sacred is the integrity of our own stories.

We are a relational people, created that way, as part of our DNA, by the Sustainer of all Life. We thrive when we are a part of healthy communities, when we are with dear friends, and when our families support us. We need to connect with others, and to find meaning and sustenance in our work and in our play, in our beings. Our stories emerge out of these connections. And stories from others influence us as well as they became a part of the narrative we call, “our lives.”

Once when a colleague of mine was challenging my life choice of being “religious,” she asked me to explain my reasons. I remember sighing, but I really liked what came out of my mouth next:

“We all live by narratives, whether we are conscious of it or not. And it’s not a choice. That’s just how we are made. And the secular world, the world you embrace, gives you lots of different narratives: be successful, win, be beautiful, earn lots of money, be athletic, be cool, watch your back, be independent, be sure to look out for #1, be smart…. and these competing narratives are pressing upon you all the time as the Truth.

“I am choosing something different. I want to live by the unfolding narrative of the lives in the Bible, which is The Story (from beginning to end) that continually invites us into a relationship with a loving God, and which in the end reveals to us the capacity to accept all of reality, God, ourselves, our neighbors, strangers, our enemies, all other people and all of creation just as they are, just as we are and to find hope and love and redemption. That’s the narrative I want to live by."

“Good answer,” she said. And then we laughed.

We are in the middle of one of the Paul’s defining stories, a story that will define our lives as well.

Paul has just left the first general church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) and is resuming his missionary activities, fortified by the growing understanding that the Christ is for all, not just the Jewish nation. He is stoked. And he is keeping up with his Blog….his travel log. He is heading west from Jerusalem and has traveled through the Roman provinces of Syria and Cilicia, and then into Asia Minor (present day Turkey). Paul has lots of ideas of what should come next. While in Troas, Paul wants to travel north but tells us that he is “forbidden by the Holy Spirit” …..twice. Think of God as “cooling Paul’s heels.”

And then Paul has a dream at night, a vision, and a man comes to him pleading with him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

This is unimaginable for Paul. He is being invited to Greece, to Europe, deep, deep, deep into the Roman Rule. Really?!? He is already on the western frontier of Asia Minor. He will be so far away from home and culture if he travels across the Aegean Sea. Just as Dorothy tells Toto, “we’re no longer in Kansas,” I imagine Paul telling Timothy, his travel partner, that “we’re no longer in a known land.” Could God really want them to venture this far away? Their people are not going to be in Philippi. But trusting in the Holy Spirit, Paul and Timothy go… this is a tremendous leap of faith: they are no longer “scripting” God’s vision, but “receiving” it and following it to the ends of the earth. They are in God’s hands.

When they get to Philippi, the leading city of the district of Macedonia, a town founded by Philip the father of Alexander the Great, they find no synagogues to visit, (of course) so they go to a place of prayer outside the gate where women had gathered for prayer. This gathering is a completely foreign to Paul and Timothy.

And they meet Lydia, a seeker, a worshipper of God, not Jewish, but longing to connect with the Source of all Life. She is a dealer of purple cloth; as a dealer in purple cloth, everyone knows that she is wealthy and established, rooted in elite society. The Phoenicians became rich when they discovered that by boiling mollusks and sea snails and letting them basically rot, producing an awful smell, and yet the result was a glorious purple dye. It was an expensive process, which is why purple became the color for royalty. The dye is the hot export of the ancient world. Lydia is dealing with these textiles; as a lone woman, in her own right, with no man attached to her, she has power, lives by power and delegates power.

Yet, all the narratives of her society, pressing upon her, she ignores. She is listening to her desire for God. And there at the riverside, as Paul and Timothy share the life of Christ, Lydia found the God who was finding her. And Paul, out of his depth, probably afraid, with no place to build his base, strangers everywhere, is invited to make his home in Lydia’s home, a home he returns to often. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is filled with joy and thanksgiving because of all the generosity poured over him.

Lydia was his first convert in Europe. This was no “chance” encounter. Here at the heart of the story, on the bank of the river, at the moment of intersection between human obedience and divine initiative, longing and grace meet. [[1]](#footnote-1)

And from then on, the whole Gentile world came to Paul. We are Christians today because of his power to turn a world upside down with the love of Christ.

This is our story because All Saints’ is in the middle of discerning God’s call for us a community. Like Paul, we are being asked to cross some deep waters and go to a new land…. A land called a parking lot. OK, I know it’s only next door, yet so foreign….

As you know, we will be purchasing the River Center to sustain a parking lot that we have always used, and now it will be ours. Your vestry is busy at work as we discern next steps and we will be keeping you informed.

But I don’t think this is just about a parking lot, a “chance encounter.” Somehow (with God’s sense of humor) God’s dream for All Saints’ is coming to us wrapped up in a parking lot, and so we are in prayer, in discernment, needing to listen for all the ways God is calling us to be.

We are being practical, of course. Paul and Timothy sailed across the Aegean Sea in a sturdy boat. Yet, we are also like Paul and Timothy relying not on how we want to script God, but how we want to receive God’s gift to be uncomfortable, in a foreign land, not knowing exactly what will come next, and how we will find our way. We are in the middle of our story, an encounter between human obedience and divine initiative, where longing and grace meet. It’s a great story- a great narrative that we live by: We trust that God is leading us.

This is what Jesus means when he says that the Peace of Christ surpasses all understanding. “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, do not let them be afraid. I am with you always.”

This is the gift of the great narrative by which we live. AMEN.

1. Bartlett, David., and Brown Taylor, Barbara, eds. *Feasting on the Word*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)