

## “Retelling Stories”

Ephesians 1:9-10, Colossians 1:18-20, & Psalm 107:1-3

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Humorist Bob Orben tells how his son came home from college for the holidays: "I asked him, 'How are things going?' He said, 'Good.' I said, 'How's the food?' He said, 'Good.' I said, 'And the dormitory?' He said, 'Good.' I said, 'They've always had a strong football team. How do you think they'll do this year?' He said, 'Good.' I said, 'How are your studies going?' He said, 'Good.' I said, 'Have you decided on your major yet?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'What is it?' He said, 'Communications.'"

In the beginning, God created the cosmos. All was good. God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. God is good. God is joy. God is love. God is healing, forgiving, transforming, invigorating, retelling each creature and the entire creation to shalom. Shalom is a wonderful all-encompassing word that seeks to express God's loving goodness that is permeating all. Shalom is peace, unity, wholeness. Shalom is to be safe, and complete in body, thought, feeling, and soul. Shalom is belonging, blessed with overflowing abundance, tranquility. Shalom is full well-being, pure joy, ever-growing love.

The cosmos were created good, to operate harmonically, with all creation intimately and intricately coordinated into a cohesive whole. God sustains all with imbedded generative forces that are wholesome. But something went amiss. The Bible is a way God communicates with us, attempting to explain that "something," and more importantly to reveal how God is redeeming all. The Bible is full of ugly stories told by confused, imperfect people trying to express their experience of God's grace that filled them with shalom. Unfortunately, humanity does not have the capacity to comprehend the enormity of God, God's grace, or God's joy. Communication is hindered even more because we do not have words to express God's goodness. So, we retell stories that give us glimpses of God.

Several Biblical scholars have expressed that the three most important aspects of interpreting the bible is context, context, context. Knowing the context makes a vast difference to the meaning of the story. Strive to be aware of the historical and cultural context. The context of the author's life and the context of the interpreter's life. At every point some of the message is distorted. If your pastor is a backpacker and farmer, you will likely hear them express God through backpacking and farm stories. As a preacher one of my most challenging tasks is to always be true to the context. All Presbyterian pastors are required to read the entire Bible and must pass a Bible content exam. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Sometimes English lacks a word that can express a similar meaning, so all Presbyterian pastors are required to learn Greek and Hebrew. Pastors study who wrote scripture, who was the audience, what was their context, what are their themes, from a variety of perspectives. All of this is to help us understand the context in hopes of us perceiving the meaning God is communicating to us.

A challenge of being a preacher is we only have time to examine snippets of scripture that can easily be misunderstood, because we have not explored the context together. A few times I have been tempted to use a verse of scripture that would have expressed the main point of my sermon perfectly, but alas when I looked at the context I determined that would be forcing that verse to say something different than its intended meaning. Did you know that it wasn't until the twelve hundreds that some people started dividing the Bible into chapter and verse? It was not until the fifteen hundreds that the use of chapter and verse was common.

Although I strive to be true to the context of scripture, I know that my experiences color my understanding, interpretation, and retelling. I am sure some of my insights are flat out wrong. I wish I knew which ones are wrong. Thankfully God gives you the Holy Spirit to help you reflect on scripture and sometimes disagree. Part of my role of pastor is to stretch your thinking, to ask questions, to help you see a different facet, to say things you disagree with, so you can formulate your beliefs enabling you to retell your story.

Read scripture with a clear and open mind; because, if you are looking for something in particular you will find it, then bend scripture to say whatever you want. Find a rhythm of going deep into a few verses of

scripture, pondering them and reading the entire book. Read the entire Bible. I suggest following a reading plan. If you read two Old Testament chapters and one New Testament chapter per day, you can read the Bible in just over a year. Read a study bible that explains the context. Read different translations. Explore a variety of commentaries, being aware that each one has unique biases. Be aware that the authors of scripture wrote at a particular time, to a particular situation, to a particular group of people. Each Biblical author had their own personal blind spots, opinions, views, and biases, some of which contradict God's will and are expressed in their writing. The Bible contains foul words. The Apostle Paul swears several times. The English translators decide it is best to clean up this language. There is humor in the Bible, inside jokes and personal stories. One of my favorite is John commenting on his speed and physical fitness in the Easter account writing, "And the other disciple outran Peter". All of this should help us resist the temptation to take a snippet of scripture out of context, to abuse scripture bending it to say something that we might want it to say but is not God's will.

When reading the psalms keep in mind that in Hebrew they rhyme, it is poetry and song. Many believe that Matthew was a Jewish tax collector writing specifically to the Jews, that is why it is full of Old Testament connections, begins with a genealogy and is abundant with insights that you will miss if you do not have some understanding of first century Jewish beliefs and culture. Mark was writing to the Gentile Christians. One of his themes is the Messianic Secret. Often Mark has Jesus saying, "Tell no one". Most scholars believe this is not historically accurate, rather Mark added these words to try and explain why most people did not understand who Jesus was until after the resurrection. Luke was a Gentile doctor writing to Gentile Christians. You will find references to illnesses and diagnoses in the numerous healing stories. John is the only gospel written after the fall of Jerusalem, during a time of widespread Christian persecution. John's audience is searching non-Christians and new Christians. John blends in Greek philosophy. These are just few contextual points. There are volumes written on the context of the Bible. The three most important aspects of interpreting the Bible is context, context, and context.

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg says generally speaking there are three ways to read the Bible. Precritical Naivete, taking for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our life tell us to be true, we accept to be true. I am become freer from this way of reading scripture. Every week, I receive suggested scripture readings and the usual way each scripture is preached. It would be easy to preach these classical insights; however I find it more insightful and fun to see what else God is saying to us. Another way to read the Bible is with Critical Thinking. And another is Post Critical Affirmation, that is affirming the Bible as true stories, even though you know they are not literally true or factually true. Most people use this approach on Jesus' parables not worrying if the parables really, literally, factually happened, rather exploring them knowing they are full of meaning, are meaningful, and meaning-filled without being factual accounts.

God created great variety and wide diversity. All was good. In your scripture reading strive to move past dualism, beyond right or wrong, past good, better, best to both and.

Keep in mind that the Bible comes to us from a long time ago, addressed to two particular groups of our spiritual ancestors, the Israelites and early Christians. The Bible has its initial meaning in those ancient contexts.

Marcus Borg says, "to interpret the Bible without context is almost a certain guarantee of misunderstanding it and also makes scripture say perhaps more or less whatever you want it to say."

What do you think of Marcus Borg's quote? "Sometimes the Bible is wrong. Not just right for back then, but wrong for today. But always wrong. No diminishment to say, Bible is sometimes wrong, it actually helps us understand it for what it is namely the product of our spiritual ancestors in those two ancient communities and it contains their wisdom, insights, their stories about God and what life with God is like and it also includes their limited vision, desire for revenge against enemies and so forth."

Would it surprise you to know that Biblical Inerrancy coupled with Biblical Literalism is only about 150 years old? Yet, there is a sizeable number of people who think this way of reading the Bible has been around for a long time, that it is ancient, traditional and orthodox, rather than a current trend largely by members of independent, protestant, United States churches. Biblical Literalism and Inerrancy is a modern innovation.

Is it possible for the Bible to become an idol? To worship the Bible rather than God? To use the Bible to put God in a box, to limit God, to define God in an attempt to be in control? To misuse the Bible to hurt people, exclude and control people?

All of this is why it is critical to explore scripture in groups. To listen for each person's unique insights. Realizing we all have different experiences and learning, so different facets will resonate with each of us. It is critical to read books from authors with different viewpoints of scripture, even radical viewpoints that are on the opposite end of the spectrum from you. To be willing to do some unlearning, to see things differently, from another perspective. We are reformed, always reforming. Is it possible that scripture is so abundant, so alive, so Holy Spirit filled, that it can have different meanings for different groups, and even a unique meaning for each individual, some of which are in contrast with each other, and for all of these unique, diverse meanings to be right?

Marcus Borg says, "My passion is for a recovery of the riches of scripture with spacious Christianity." The shalom of God's love for all revealed on each person's unique life long path of transformation. If you have not already, then try reading scripture for personal transformation and a desire to expand your love, joy, and grace. Try reading scripture to form your identity. Who are you? Who is humanity in relationship to God? How does being a beloved child of God transform your being, your thoughts, your feelings, your relationships?

If you want a fresh perspective, read Rob Bell's book *"What is the Bible?"* **Ephesians 1:9-10 "God made known to us the mystery of God's will according to God's good pleasure, which God purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."** God is retelling the story of all things because it brings God pleasure, joy, delight. God is retelling each person's story and the cosmos' story to bring unity, to sum up, to gather up. God retells each of our stories, washing away our ugliness, cleaning away our mistakes, healing our wounds, wiping away our tears, nurturing our giftedness, mending our relationships, enhancing our love, deepening our joy, polishing our goodness. God retells our story to transform us. God is retelling everything. The cosmos is fractured, broken, parts are lying scattered all over the place and it brings God pleasure to bring it all back together in unity. **Colossians 1:18-20 "Jesus was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—Jesus is supreme in the end. From beginning to end Jesus is there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is Jesus, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in Jesus without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies."** All of it. All of history. All plants. All animals. All people. There are no boundaries to God's love, no limitations, no disclaimers, no strings attached. Peter says in Acts, (*Chapter three*), **God will restore everything.** Paul writes in Colossians, (*Chapter 1*), **God was pleased through Jesus to reconcile to God all things.** Jesus said, (*Matthew Chapter 19*), **Truly I tell you at the renewal of all things.** Retelling, restoring, reconciling, renewing all.

The Bible communicates how God is retelling our stories through the world of the author, through the world of the translator, through the world of the pastor, through our world and in all of these worlds, some words are common and some are not and some concepts are familiar and some are totally new. Just coming up with a translation of the Bible in a particular language involves making thousands of decisions about what words to use. As you read scripture, open your senses to the Holy Spirit, searching for the meaning, the transformation, your identity, the connection between the way God retold our ancestors' stories in the past, with the retelling of our stories today and the retelling of your particular story.

The Psalmist sings, **Psalm 107:1-3 MSG "Oh, thank God—God is so good! God's love never runs out. All of you set free by God, tell the world! Tell how God freed you from oppression, then rounded you up from all over the place, from the four winds, from the seven seas."** **Psalm 107:1-2 NRSV "O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; for God's steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so."** Strive to retell your story from God's perspective. How do you tell your gospel story? If you were to write a gospel today what would you write? If you were to write a letter to North Presbyterian Church to be read in 2028, what would you write? How about in a letter to other denominations, to other religions, to those with no belief in God? God is retelling all stories, bringing all together in harmony to enjoy abundant, eternal life with every growing love and joy. Amen

