

The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost
November 13, 2016

"SO WHAT'S YOUR STORY?"
by Mary Anne Biggs

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 ~ Luke 21:5-19

Have any of you ever had a chance to attend an old-time revival? I liked going with my Baptist friends because they were such a stark contrast to Sunday Mass. They were very popular every summer ... which doesn't make a lick of sense because they were always held out in some field ... under some huge tent. I don't mind sharing with you that it was always hotter than the hinges of hell ... but people came in droves. They followed a standard formula ... lots of hymns, lots of healings and lots of fiery preaching. But what I remember most was the "testimony time." People would share personal stories of how God had rescued them from disaster or brought them to glory. Sometimes these were people you knew, or at least thought you knew until you heard them tell how God had saved them from a raging elephant which escaped from the zoo ... or an enslaving addiction to candy bars. But just as often the evangelist would import some stranger with a walloping tale to tell.

I must have heard dozens of these testimonies ... dramatic accounts of rescue from drugs, alcohol, illness, car wrecks, house fires, plane crashes, mean bosses, evil demons, wicked women and men, you name it. You could have started a circus side show with the guest preachers parading through those pulpits ... the world's shortest evangelist, the world's tallest evangelist, Christian stunt drivers, weight lifters, clowns for Christ, guys who broke boards over their heads to demonstrate the power of God. And there were plenty of football players and television celebrities (well, truth be told it was always the weatherman from our local station) telling how God had made him great. I actually preferred the testimonies of the ordinary people. Usually they were not trained orators, but that made them somehow more eloquent, speaking their own words.

Their testimonies were all good news, of course. I never heard anyone say, "I decided to tithe and the bank repossessed my car," or "My life was rather dull, and ever since I became a Christian it's been pretty much the same." Some of the evangelist's testimonies were just too good to be true ... thoroughly scripted by idealistic religious language which tells us how things are supposed to be ... but never quite really are. And some had told their stories so often they sounded like a politician's stump speech ... too canned and rehearsed ... all the feeling squeezed out ... as the story was wrung repeatedly for one more drop of inspiration. You had to wonder whether God had done anything for them lately.

All that being said, I think I liked the testimonies best because I wanted to hear what God was doing in somebody else's life ... in the hopes that I might somehow figure out what God was up to with mine.

Speech is the way we make sense out of things ... it brings order to the chaos around us ... it transforms the raw data of our existence into a meaningful narrative. Genesis one is true for most of us I think ... our world is not real until we speak it into being and can say, "That's good." We are like Moses, who could not look upon the face of God and live ... but could only see the glory where God had passed. We too seldom see God in the crisis of the moment. We cannot force God to show up ... and do a handy miracle or two ... prove that our faith is well placed. But when we weave together the threads of our journey into the tapestry of our own stories, a picture of God emerges. Looking back we see those places where God has comforted, counseled, and confronted us. And then we see what we could not see before ... that we've been shadowed all along by the mysterious and loving Presence.

No doubt the church to which Luke addressed his gospel had trouble seeing God in their crisis moment. All their religious expectations had led them to believe that the world would end when the Messiah came. (But if the scripture tells us anything, it's how often God surprises us by doing something other than our religious expectations. The God of the Bible is paradoxically both consistent and unpredictable!) They believed that the Messiah had come ... Jesus of Nazareth ... crucified like a common criminal ... but raised by God to vindicate his teachings and provide us a way to move beyond death. But the world didn't end. Still, they believed it would be ending soon. Any minute now Jesus would return to rescue his people. Any minute now God would stop history ... judge the wicked ... reward the good ... obliterate evil forever ... and begin the eternal reign.

The world ... the way it was ... made them long for his return. Their hunger made them vulnerable to demagogues and quacks who said "He's over here!" or "I am he!" They expected Jesus to come ... but their families came and told them they were crazy. They expected Jesus to come ... but their neighbors came and told them to get out of town. They expected Jesus to come ... but the Romans came and threw them in prison and burned their homes and put them to death. They would allow no talk of revolution ... and no unpatriotic cults who refused to worship the emperor ... and swear first allegiance to Rome. The Jews who didn't believe in Jesus persecuted them. The Gentiles who didn't believe in Jesus persecuted them. They even had trouble getting along with each other. Not forty years after the resurrection the Jews revolted against the Romans. Jerusalem was leveled ... the Temple was destroyed ... and many people thought the end must be near. But the Christians, whose beliefs were so similar, were attacked by the Romans the same as the Jews. Their property was confiscated ... their homes destroyed ... their families sold into slavery or executed ... because of their faith. It wasn't the plot twist they had expected. It just didn't fit the script called "Messiah."

Luke helps them make sense of their story by telling them the story of Jesus. And Jesus tells them:

Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you

over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name (Luke 21:8-12).

By the time Luke quoted these words, the followers of Jesus had experienced all this. And what is his answer to the crisis? *"This will give you an opportunity to testify"* (Luke 21:13).

This will give you an opportunity to testify?! What kind of help is that? It's a great help, actually. Notwithstanding the trivial and silly examples we've heard now and then ... testimony has been a central feature of our faith from the earliest days, especially during times of persecution. And Luke's community shows us why. *"They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify."* So deep is their faith that even a crisis of biblical proportions is simply an opportunity to bear witness to the goodness of God in Christ.

This has been the glory of the church through the ages. Not just the witness of resurrection: "I was in trouble, but God delivered me, so now I give thanks" ... but the witness to the resurrection during the experience of the cross. In the midst of the trouble comes the word ... "God is with us. We are not afraid. God will deliver us in the end." And God does. God does!

So what if the testimony contradicts all appearances at the moment? It turns out to be true. And the testimony is important because saying so makes it so. *Testimony* is how we make our way in the world. *Testimony* is how we connect with God's presence in every situation. *Testimony* is how we write our story as co-authors with God. In fact, our testimony is often contradictory, as Walter Brueggeman suggests ... a *subversive* text ... a *counter-testimony* to the world. When faced with hardship ... we give thanks. When faced with persecution ... we offer love. When faced with rejection ... we proclaim peace. When the world lifts up its guns ... we lift up our prayers. When they worship their power and wealth and the will to dominate, we say ... "Jesus Christ is Lord." And then they are powerless because they can threaten only death ... but we can tell them Christ is the resurrection and the life.

Luke tells these beleaguered Christians the story of Jesus and Jesus tells them:

You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls (Luke 21:16-19).

It doesn't make sense if you take it literally. "They will put you to death... But not a hair of your head will perish." But of course, the point is spiritual. The point is resurrection. What can anyone do to us if God promises to raise us in Christ?

We do not face such a hard road as those early Christians. But we do have our challenges. In some ways it's harder for us ... because instead of threatening us directly ... the world tries to seduce us. How subtly they co-opt us into worshipping their gods of death ... power and wealth and consumerism ... the romance of perpetrating violence. Join the haves against the have-nots. Reject the wrong people so you can be accepted by the right people who claim the power to

decide who the wrong people are. But we have a different story to tell ... about a God who loves every person ... about a God who wants the haves to share with the have-nots until everyone has at least enough ... about a God who hates violence ... about a God who throws no life away as insignificant or irredeemable.

Postmodern thought has come to recognize that absolutes are beyond human reach. We have no Archimedean point from which we can move the whole world. We cannot enter the past to say exactly what happened. What we have is our own perception ... our own experience ... our own testimony. I cannot say "This is unquestionable truth." Only God can say that. But I can speak my truth and see if it resonates with yours. I can speak my truth in defiance of the lies which masquerade as truth, but oppress and kill people in the name of the good. I can tell my story as an antidote to the horror stories that others want to tell.

You see, the world bombards us every day with stories that put us in deadly competition with one another and pit class against class ... race against race ... gender against gender ... tribe against tribe ... faith against faith. But when we come here, we tell the story of Jesus. We tell a story of compassion and justice and equality and love. You know what? We have the better story! And when we tell the story it comes true. We create a different world by telling the Jesus story ... a better world ... a world worth living in. And we tell our own stories, too, confused and incomplete though they may be ... because in telling them we discover where they connect to "The Greatest Story Ever Told." And that is why bearing witness is so important. Not only as a means of inviting others to faith ... but as a means of living that faith ourselves and creating a new reality in God.

In the last century secular psychotherapists have discovered the importance of your personal narrative as a means for self-understanding and health. Somehow, in telling our stories we see ourselves as if for the first time ... we take ownership of our lives ... we learn from our experience ... and can even reinterpret and write new chapters for healing and growth. But the church has known this all along. For when we join our stories with one another ... and with the sacred stories of the scripture ... we realize that we are privileged to be part of that great narrative entitled "What God Is Doing in the World" ... even to be co-authors with God in a new work. It isn't finished yet, but already we know it will have a happy ending.

When seminary students begin their journey through the rigors of a Clinical Pastoral Education program, they most often start with "story day." Each shares his or her personal narrative. And if ... in the telling ... they neglect the sacred, which surprisingly even ministers are apt to do, they are asked, "Where do you see God in your story?" How would you answer? Is God a part of your story?

"Listen to your life," counsels Frederick Buechner:

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and the pain of it ... no less than in the excitement and gladness ... touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it ... because in the last analysis all moments are key moments ... and life itself is a grace.

So what's your story? May we pray?

Creator God, Author of our lives, thank you for the story of your love through the ages and for your presence hidden but effective in our own stories, too. Though the plot may take unexpected twists and turns and lead us through both victory and defeat, not to mention long chapters of suspense, you do not fail to make us a book worth reading. You do not fail to write a tale of grace. As co-authors with you in the narrative of our lives, we pray others who hear our stories might encounter you therein and rejoice that a good God is creating a better world. So teach us to testify in the name of Christ. Amen.