

**“Telling the Story of God”**  
Gen1:1-10; Phil. 2:1-10  
10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Knox Church

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During the time that novelist Tracy Chavelier, award winning writer, was composing her novel, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, Chavelier would often spend inordinate amounts of time staring at a two dimensional print of the master work by Vermeer, in order to imagine a three dimensional story.

Andrew Stanton, the creator of animated features such as Toy Story, and Wall-E, describes story as something that contains some truth that deepens our understanding of who we are. A story, Stanton says, is something that affirms who we are, and reminds us that our lives have meaning.

Stories cross the barriers of time, past, present, and future. Stories transcend culture, nationality, race, and perhaps even religion.

Stories are who we communicate what it means to be who we are- with all the highs and lows, joys and sorrows- that being us entails.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the role of stories in what it means to be a Christian. I’ve noted that most of my most significant Christian experiences have come through an encounter with a story.

In it’s most basic of forms, I am increasingly convinced that God, that is, the God that is revealed in the stories of the bible, is both primarily known through story, and engaged with through the telling of our own story.

In my time in Christian ministry I have to come to realize the singular most powerful question I can ask a young adult is simply, “can tell me your story, how did you here?”

That’s how I first became a Christian when I was at university. I new very little of the bible, nothing of doctrine, nothing of the ecumenical councils and their pronouncements. But what I did know, what I had ben told was the story of a god who was fundamentally about power, rescue, liberation, subversion, and most importantly: self-sacrificing love.

You can imagine my surprise when I started reading the bible only to find so many stories that just didn’t make any sense.

And it wasn’t only the bible that challenged the validity of the story that I believed had captured me. For it was also the concerted effort of some fellow Christians to convince me that in fact, the bible was not a story, but a book of commandments. That what the story of God was primarily about was not engaging my imagination, but to discipline my behavior. That what it truly meant to be a follower of Jesus was to be a person whose way of being in the world was dictated by the ethical commands found in the scriptures.

But I’m no dummy. That just didn't work for me. What do you do with the bibles instructions for living to be found in say Leviticus for instance? To what extent should I heed the call to own a slave? Why was it when I saw my neighbor gardening on the Sabbath I couldn’t quite bring myself to stone him to death. What was wrong with me, in my inability to believe that at the communion table I was eating the flesh and blood of the Son of God. (Perhaps too many vampire movies growing up).

In my more than a decade of being a Christian, I have struggled with, and realized others struggled with ho to engage the story of

God. That is, they struggled with how to read the bible as a whole. And so they advocated a way to read the bible that focused more on particular lines rather than the whole brought together. Rather than read the bible as a cohesive narrative, they preferred to treat it as a book of rules. Now, the bible has some rules in it. But the purpose of these rules seem to always be the promotion of human flourishing.

And as I began to see the wide ranging disagreement having to do with what the bible says about the equality of women, slavery, the treatment of the environment, the role of women and sexual minorities in the leadership of the church, I realized that stories matter, how we read them matters, what we believe they call us to be and do matter.

African novelist and activist Chimamanda Adichie puts it like this, “stories matter, they have been used to disposes and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize, stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair the dignity of a people.

What happens when stories are pulled apart? What do we do with parts of a story that we suddenly think are better read like rules, moral truth-isms, and law. What happens when you take the narrative of the Bible, God’s story, and suddenly treat it like the dictionary, or the rules of golf, or the New Zealand road code?

Do we not run the risk of using this story to malign, to disempower, to break the dignity of a people? In this way, does not the bible seem more like a weapon than a narrative of love?

And, in using the story this way, as a reader you will begin to lose a sense of the overall story. The story will become less and less apparent to you, and you will get stuck in the details, in the places that confront the way you think things ought to be. And sooner or

later you will simply not want to hear that part or that part of the story, and after that you will simply not want to hear the larger story, because it no longer makes sense to you, or it's simply too painful.

But the bible offers us a narrative, a meaning making, healing, thought provoking narrative about what it means to be alive, about what our lives are to be about, about how we might invite others to hear this story so they can see and hear themselves within it.

The Bible, God's story, is like a story that has been given to us unfinished, that is, we are expected to play a part in what God is wanting to do in the world.

Act one is creation, the ordering of all things out of nothing. Act two is the fall, a turning away from God. Act three is the story of Israel, where God is faithful, liberating, protecting.

Act four, the climax, is Jesus, where God enters onto the stage. And notice what Paul has to say about this entry of Jesus. In Philippians, we are told that the author of this story is God. But this God is not like any other God, for this God comes in the form of a man, a servant. Now, I don't know how many museums you've ever been to. But I can tell you that there has never been a time where I looked upon a statue of an ancient God and thought, hey, he kind of looks like me. But this exactly the point of that story, that God comes into the story, happy to be on the stage with all of us, in order to tell the story of God.

Act five, is the time between the times. And that is where we find ourselves. We are told that all things are being renewed, but we can still see the brokenness of the world. And, as Paul says in Romans, Jesus has given to us a ministry of reconciliation. Jesus has invited us into being part of God's cosmic drama.

So what do we do with a story? Many churches, in their reading of the bible, by necessity will need to pick and choose which verses they find as authoritative, and by default the story will collapse on itself. They do this because they believe that the bible must have some level of authority on their faith and practice. And stories, they might say, undermine the authority of scripture.

N.T Wright, a NT scholar, offers an interesting hypothetical to refute that claim, to point to the way in which a story can have authority.

Suppose, Wright offers, suppose a group of archeologists discovered a lost play they believe to have been written by William Shakespeare. The only problem is that this play is missing a fifth act. But the first four acts are so good, so important, so powerful, that they believe it should be performed. So, a group of literary scholars decide to give this play to the Royal Shakespeare Company and ask them to mount a production. And in order to have a full experience they ask the members of that company to study the plot and characters, the trajectory, protagonists, antagonists, so well that they might be able to improvise a fifth act.

Imagine that. There would need to be consistency or faithfulness with the first four acts, but there would be freedom and imagination to improvise and innovate the way the story resolves. The first four acts would have absolute authority on the way that the final act unfolded. The players would need to be not only creative with the way they closed the story but they would need to be true to the world that Shakespeare introduced us to in the first four acts, they would have absolute authority on the story that was told in act five.

The Bible is kind of like that grand drama. Its purpose is to invite us to get to know the world as it is, a world that God is responsible for, that he has also called good. And Jesus, who the story says is

the very author of the story, has stepped into the plot as a character and invited us to help tell this story. The story of a God that rescued Israel from Egypt and Jesus from the grave, who wants to rescue us from all that ails us as well. It is the story of a God that has ultimate authority. God speaks and the world comes into being. This God has the authority to heal, to forgive sins, to set the world aright. And best of all this God knows all too well what it feels like to live the lives we live, cry the tears we cry, laugh the deep laughs of joy we all relish. And so, we dedicate ourselves to the story because we also find ourselves in this story, and we tell and retell the story so that others will find that this story is their story as well.

May we be worthy story-tellers, as we continue to tell the story of God.

Amen.