

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 44:1-8, Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24

“Alan Watts once remarked that the most profound questions are reflected in ordinary language and asked in everyday conversation. “Who do you think you are? Who started this? Are we going to make it? Where... do you think you’re going?...Is it serious?”¹

These phrases trip off our tongues and are expressed without emotion, yet at the deepest level drive to the root of our self-understanding. How we answer these familiar questions express the stories that we have woven together to explain who we are and what we are doing in this life.

Jacques Lucan, the French psychiatrist has said, that each person is essentially a story, a narrative. Adults tell their stories to a therapist or to a trusted friend because we perceive our lives in story form moving in and out of the narrative from the actor to the narrator.

We all have stories we weave about our lives. And those stories change as time goes on, as we see them in a larger context and with the frequent retelling of it. We are changed by where we stand in the story, and as we speak about where we have been as we see its broader vistas.

A friend tells the story of his daughter climbing in his lap, and grabbing the wedding album, and asking to hear about the wedding day again and the time when she was not; or she wants to hear the story about the day she was born, or the time when everyone went to the beach and got sunburned.

None of us gets to comment on the ending of our story because none of us know where and how it will end. But the last word is essentially the same anyway. In one way or another it is the story St. Mark tells about the end of Jesus’ life, described in that terse fashion. How is it he puts it? “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.”² Sometimes a cry, sometimes a whimper, always a last breath.

The Psalmist of Psalm 139 begins his own story this way, like a prayer, like a song...

...it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

... I am fearfully and wonderfully made...

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Not bad writing to summarize a life!

What a gift for words she has, this psalmist who writes of a time before known time when God was, and we were not, not yet. *Your eyes beheld my unformed substance...*” she says, and in so saying expresses her faith more than her memory.

These words were not meant to be a polemic either for determinism or for right-to-life arguments. It is simply a view of faith’s time, of an eternity that cannot be measured in units of seconds or hours or days, but in dimensions of timelessness, when “before” did not exist, and “after” was yet to come.

So it is not fair to the psalmist to superimpose on her a scientific understanding of the temporal, because the psalmist thinks only in terms of the eternal, of God’s time even more than ours. It is the psalmist’s affirmation of an assertion about God, not about us, a God who knew us first, before we even knew ourselves.

No wonder the psalmist writes, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

Isaiah, like the psalmist echoes a timeless view of life when he writes,

Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you... I will pour out my spirit upon your descendants and my blessing on your offspring.³

In other words, both Isaiah and the psalmist of Psalm 139 have a view of life in which time is not the ticking of the clock that metes out God’s hours and days, but the story of our lives as seen against the backdrop of God’s timelessness.

Eternity is the subject, the real story here. It cannot be bound by our clocks and measurements, for God knew our life before that time when we were in our mother’s womb, and God will take us back again when this life is over beyond the horizon of life we see here. For in God all things are kept and secured and time has no limit, no beginning and no end.

Our lives are but a portion of measure in the eternal unfolding of God’s creation. And while there is a sense of each of us having a bit of that story known from our perspective, there is a larger story being told as well, God’s story.

Every now and then you get a glimpse of that larger story, perhaps unexpectedly and you realize as life intersects that more is going on right in front of us than meets the eye.

I was at a meeting of the Macalester College trustees in January. And we all had been assigned randomly to small groups of six or so, and we were given several conversational topics to help us get to know one another better and also to help a capital fund consultant understand better some of the stories that ought to be told about how the college has affected the lives of its graduates.

So, in my group, I told my story. I was student body president at my high school and one of my duties was to lead school assemblies by getting everyone to stand, say the pledge of allegiance to the flag, sing the national anthem, and introduce the day’s speaker.

Well, it was the Viet Nam era and I wasn’t very pleased with the lack of enthusiasm of my fellow students in singing the national anthem, so I stepped to the podium and asked everyone to stand up again, say the pledge of allegiance like they meant it, and sing the national anthem with feeling, because after all there were graduates of our school who were then in Viet Nam fighting in a war and we would want to know that back home the under classmen that we had known were supporting us.

In the audience that day was an admissions counselor from Macalester College. After the Assembly, he made some inquiries and encouraged me to attend the presentation that he would make about Mac after school that day. So I agreed, and after attending his presentation he asked me what I thought. I said it looked like a great school but I was the youngest of four children and my mother was a widow and I couldn’t afford a school like Macalester.

So he said if I was interested and was willing to come for a visit he would do what he could to help make it affordable to me.

I went to the campus, fell in love with the school, and at a meeting with the Admissions Director was offered a full academic scholarship, \$2000 a year for four years (my how things have changed), a scholarship made possible by a man by the name of Ralph L. Smith, a person who had made his fortune in the lumber industry in the Midwest. It was to be awarded each year for four years to four African American students and four White students who showed promise for leadership in citizenship.

Sitting next to me as I told that story, was a man by the name of Michael Davis, whom I knew in my days at Macalester as a very tall, very accomplished basketball player, an African American man, who had gone on in life to become the Senior Federal District Judge in the District of Minnesota. And Mike turned to me and said, “I was one of those African American students who also received a Smith Scholarship.”

Our life stories intersected for a moment in that conversation, and our individual stories touched and became caught up in the ongoing story of what God is doing in the world in all our lives in ways that we likely do not even notice.

What's your story? The backdrop against which you live? The formation that God has been bringing about all this long time?

How does that story begin? Where is it going? What are you doing? What's the meaning of it in God's measurement?

I think it was the late James Sanders, Old Testament scholar at Union, who said, "the reason God created Adam and Eve was that God liked a good story.

And it was Andrew Greeley who wrote, "Stories have always been the best way to talk about religion because stories appeal to the emotions and the whole personality and not just the mind."⁴

Stories help us to make order of our lives, to see them as connected, as *religious* in the Latin sense of that word, *religio*, bound together. So we tell our stories, and make a narrative of it, string it on a string of pearls. Make it into a charm bracelet reminding us of the times when there was a turning point, a time we scarce can forget.

We don't know what's going to happen next, so it is essential that we know who we are, or at least to whom we belong.

And so the psalmist writes,

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

We all have a story we could tell about our lives and about the places where we have realized God was there in the picture as well.

My favorite of these occurrences is a story told by Fred Craddock, one of the preachers who has most influenced me over the years. I've told it before, no doubt, but at my age repeating yourself is something you know is a part of the package, so hang in there with me.

It's a story about Fred's being on vacation one summer in the Great Smoky Mountains. Fred and his wife Nettie had stopped at a restaurant near Gatlinburg called the Black Bear Inn.⁵

Early in the meal an elderly man made his way over to Fred and Nettie's table and said, "Good evening." And Fred said, "Good evening."

"Where you from?" the stranger asked.

"We're from Oklahoma," Fred said, beginning to wish the man would go away. "We're on vacation."

"Oh, what do you do," asked the stranger.

"I'm a Christian minister," Fred said, realizing he had made a mistake as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

"I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church," the old fellow said and pulled up a chair.

Fred thought, "O Lord what have I gotten myself into now?" Whatever it is requires a chair.

But Fred was polite and so he said, "Please have a seat." Trying to hide his displeasure at this tableside invasion. Fred said he wondered, "Who is this guy?"

The stranger said, "I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on my mother, of course, fell on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess and I ate lunch alone.

In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was, as they put it, illegitimate. So I would just go in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would slip out because I was afraid that someone would say, "What's a boy like you doing in a church?"

One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was the minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. [You know how in the South they say, "Who's your daddy?"]

A moment later he said, 'Well boy you're a child of...' and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, 'Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, "Now you go claim your inheritance." I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.

Fred Craddock said he was so moved by the story he had to ask the old fellow, "What's your name?"

And the man said, "Ben Hooper."

And Fred said he recalled though vaguely, his own father talking when Fred was just a child about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor an illegitimate by the name of Ben Hooper.

Every one of us here has a story to tell about our life. And each of us may have taken circuitous and indirect routes to bring us to this day. And yet, we all share one story whether we realize it or not, a psalm that bears the secret of our identity, a psalm, the 139th of which we all share.

...it was you who formed my inward parts; you who knit me together in my mother's womb.

...Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

I see who you are. Your story is no secret. It's written all over you. You are a child of... You are a child of God. There's a striking resemblance. Now get on out there and claim your inheritance.

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¹ John Shea, **Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography**. Thomas Moore Press: Chicago, 1978, .41

² Mark 15: 37

³ Isaiah 44:2-3

⁴ Andrew Greely, "Novelist, Journalist, Sociologist, Priest," as quoted by Mark Harris, *New York Times Magazine*, sec.6, May 6, 1984, p. 104.

⁵ Taken from Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*. Ed. Mike Graves and Richard Ward. St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001. 156-157.