

St. Paul's Church Healdsburg
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell
January 4, 2015, The Second Sunday in Christmas
Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12

We human beings are storytellers. We tell stories about ourselves so that we can make sense of our lives, and we tell stories about the world so that we can make sense of what we observe to be happening around us. Basically, stories are how we take random facts, and put them together into a coherent narrative that gives us a sense of meaning, and from which we derive our sense of purpose.

Think about this from the standpoint of your own life – from the standpoint of your individual story. I would be willing to bet that those parts of your life which you feel most important, most defining, carries with it a story – a story that follows the same kind of dramatic arc that all writers and tellers of tales know is the essential part of storytelling. There is the story of how you met your spouse and the path you took to the altar. Maybe there's the story of how you avoided marriage. I would bet all of us have stories about overcoming things: stories of the discovery, treatment and cure of an illness. Stories of coming to terms with addictions, stories of turning our lives around, of pursuing goals that were a long time in coming, stories of dealing with challenges of all kinds. All of those stories are revealing of the kind of people we are, and perhaps more importantly, of the kind of people we believe ourselves to be.

There are many stories of course of “how we got here,” wherever “here” is. Immigration stories are tremendously important, whether we tell them about ourselves or about our ancestors, because they are always about the journey that has brought us to where we are. To an extent, all of the stories we tell about ourselves are journey stories, because we've all arrived at where we are – this moment in time, this church pew, sitting next to whomever you're sitting next to – from some place else.

The best journey stories have a lot of twists and turns and challenges along the way. Being chased by an army, inspired by a dream to leave in the middle of the night, or being guided by an unusual star in the sky are dramatic plot devices that make for exciting journey stories. Most of us don't have such dramatic plot devices in our personal stories, but I do believe we all have tales of quiet courage to tell, stories of hard-won wisdom and the transformation that comes slowly through persistent effort and dedication. What's most important about journey stories is that embedded in the telling of how we got to where we are, there is another story – an unfolding story – of where we are going.

Although I believe it's true that we live in a post-Christian, post-religious culture, we who are part of the Judeo-Christian heritage are trained to think in terms of stories because of our orientation to the Bible. We get our most fundamental psychological and social bearings from the stories we hear repeatedly in the Bible, and so often those stories are about journeys. Today, for instance, each one of our four Bible lessons is about a journey of sorts.

The story in our Gospel lesson is about one of the most famous journeys of all – that of the wise men who follow the star in the sky to find the newborn king. That’s one of those terribly exciting journey stories, with lots of plot twists: an evil king, treasure and deception. It’s one of the action adventure stories of the Bible--sometime no doubt Hollywood will make a movie about it.

The story we hear from the Book of Jeremiah is about the journey on which God plans to take his people into the Promised Land. This is a journey back into the Promised Land, because although they had been led there once before (in another action/adventure Bible story that has already been made into two Hollywood movies) most of them wandered back out of it. In today’s lesson God is telling them that it’s time to make the journey home again. “See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,” God says. And it’s going to be the journey of an entire people – this trip will be for everyone, not just the “shiny happy people” who tell the nice, predictable stories that are the usual fodder of Facebook and Christmas letters. On this Journey God is going to make a special point to include “the remnant of Israel”: “the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor.” In other words, those who usually get left behind because they are such difficult traveling companions, are going to be part of this journey story. All of these people, the easy and the difficult alike, together will form “a great company,” says the Lord, and they shall return together. In this passage, God is saying that he’s going to collect the stories of all of the people, their wayward stories of getting scattered and separated, lame and blind and far from the promised land, and he’s going to bring them all together and incorporate them into one great journey story of being God’s own people who will be led by God back home.

Our Psalm this morning touches on this same theme of journeying with God and the joy, comfort and gladness that comes from being included in the trek into the Promised Land. “Happy are the people whose hearts are set on the pilgrims’ way,” the Psalmist tells us. The “Pilgrim’s Way” of course is a sacred journey to a sacred place, whether it be to a new land, the new Jerusalem as the Pilgrims who traveled on the Mayflower believed America to be, or to an ancient holy sight where people travel in the footsteps of centuries of pilgrims who have gone before them. To have a heart “set on the pilgrim’s way” means that regardless of where you’re going, you embrace the journey before you.

You have to look a bit harder to find the journey story in our lesson from Ephesians, but it’s there. It isn’t a journey from one place to another, but it’s certainly about a journey of the spirit, and a journey of understanding. In this letter, Paul is preparing that just-formed church of newly baptized Christians for a cosmic shift of perspective. He tells them that they were chosen “in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy” and they have been destined “for adoption as God’s own children through Jesus Christ.” Paul is certainly reminding them, telling them, that they are on a journey of becoming Christians that will shape their understanding of who they are and of who they are called to be. Paul is telling them that they are on a journey of formation. “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to

know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.”

Their journey is one of coming to know God, and as that happens they will come to know themselves as new people, with a new story. It has the dramatic arc and the plot twists of a good story, and the transformation of an important journey: you were chosen, made holy, adopted as God’s own, and now let the eyes of your heart be enlightened, and know that hope to which you have been called. That is the journey story that Paul is giving to the people of the Church in Ephesus. He’s telling them a story, and showing them the path they need to travel to make it their own.

I was glad when I saw that these would be the Bible texts for today, on this first Sunday of our new worship schedule at St. Paul’s. I was glad because change is hard – it’s a plot twist in the stories of our lives, and it makes us uncomfortable to not know exactly where it will lead. I was grateful to have some examples today of how others before us, our ancestors in the faith, have told their journey stories and handled their own plot twists.

The fact of the matter is that we’re always on a journey. Quite honestly I’m not sure that it’s part of God’s plan for us to ever feel like we’ve arrived at a stopping place. A resting place, yes – God is adamant about the necessity of a Sabbath rest – but I don’t think God intends for us to get too comfortable anywhere. I read a paper recently called “Why Religion Matters” (written by our parishioner Roger Hull) that suggested we think of “‘God’, the ‘Divine’, the ‘Holy’, more as a direction than as an object.” This makes a lot of sense to me, because it captures the sense of God as a force in our lives that propels us forward, propels our stories forward and propels our journeys forward as we move toward him. Thinking of God as a direction saves us from the folly of thinking we can capture God, or even that we can catch up with God. But we can get close. God does promise to meet along the way.

The question I have to ask you, as the priest and pastor of this church, is what journey is God calling us to today? Like God’s own self, the answer to that question will always be somewhat illusive, and the only way we can answer it is to keep moving. As a church, as this body of people who have been gathered together by God and bound together in the common story of St. Paul’s Church, God has set us upon a common journey. We have a path to follow, together. None of us knows exactly where all of the bends in the road will take us, but trust in God, trust in one another, your sisters and brothers in Christ, and trust in your own pilgrim heart to lead us to that holy place where God promises to meet us.

Making the Journey, having the pilgrim’s heart, is necessary because God is never stagnant, and we have to keep moving if we hope to stay close. Remember that God will always be more than we expect, greater than we expect, because our finite little minds just can’t conceive of what all God is. And I believe with all of my heart that if we undertake the journey God calls us to – if we undertake it in good faith, and together seek to follow where God is leading us, we will discover that we are more than we expect as well. Our own stories will surprise us.