



“Tell it Again”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. James Blay at Myers Park Baptist Church

On January 26, 2025, from Isaiah 40:1-11

Tell it again! Tell it Again! This repetitive phrase is what we would utter once someone told a story they thought was funny, but the story fell flat. Lately, I have found myself silently reciting that phrase to many different things. I have recited it to stories about history, to stories about faith, to stories about working systems. Stories have always been an integral part of human society. For a long period, the telling of stories was how we passed down information from generation to generation.

We have heard stories about our origin as human beings, about how the world came to be. We have heard stories of our heritage as a particular people and our place in the world. Stories have been told of how nations came to be and the sacrifices our ancestors made to make it possible. We have been told stories about our faith and about how God relates to us, what God expects of us, and how God guides us. These stories for the most part have long been accepted as is without question, because those who have, or are in power tell them to us.

The problem with a lot of these narratives is that they tend to leave out the voices and experiences of so many, especially those who have little or no access to power. As Dan Brown notes in *The Da Vinci Code*, “by its very nature, history is always a one-sided account.” Think about it; consider Thanksgiving, for a long time the narrative around the history of Thanksgiving downplayed the exploitation and oppression of the Wampanoag people at the hands of early European settlers. The more we freely accept these one-sided narratives the less likely we are to live in a truly inclusive society.

The need for reframing and retelling of stories that define us as a people and a nation cannot be overstated. What kind of story are we going to tell about our lives, about our faith, about our sacred text? Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us, “we are not a people of the 24-hour news cycle – we are a people of a sacred story.”

In the past, present, and future of America, who gets to belong in the story of God? Who gets to be seen as human? Who is in and who is out? In the stories that are told, the voices and experiences of too many have been left out because they do not fit a particular account. History in a lot of ways has been airbrushed or whitewashed to paint a rosy picture of what was. We need to retell these stories. We need to retell not just the stories of our society and country, but also the stories of our faith. We need to be attentive to those who have been left out and those who we continue to push out with the stories we tell.



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Our stories must include those on the margins who are so willfully neglected. They must include those who do not look like us, think like us, or practice faith like us. These stories must embody the hope of renewal and redemption for all God's people. Now more than ever, that message of hope needs to be expansive and inclusive. Now more than ever it's time to proclaim comfort hope and peace to all people like the prophet in Second Isaiah.

The message of Isaiah 40 comes to a people already struggling and destitute. They are living the destruction forewarned in earlier chapters by the prophet Isaiah. They are in exile in Babylon, their homes and places of worship have been destroyed. These are people who are far from their ancestral home. They have been in exile for so long that some of them have settled and even prospered, some had turned their back on their faith and identity, but many still yearned and hoped for a return home to Judah and Jerusalem. But even those who hoped deeply and passionately for this return had their doubts not just about the possibility of a return, but anxiety about what they were returning to.

These disheartened Israelites who have suffered the hardship of living in exile in the midst of discrimination, needed a reminder that the God who calls for their hope and trust could in fact deliver. Hope for the people was indistinguishably bound to their recognition of the coming of God's presence in the midst of their seemingly hopeless situation. Having lived what seemed like perpetuity in the hardship of the exiled life, recognizing or even hoping for the presence of a God who forgives, and delivers is not an easy thing.

They were living with uncertainty and apprehension about a future they could not wrap their minds around. Still fresh in their minds are the words of the prophet Isaiah proclaiming their doom and the devastation of their homeland. Is it even possible that there is light at the end of the tunnel for them? Is it possible that they could once again be home, returned to a familiar life and existence as a people? It is to these people living this hopeless circumstance that the prophet speaks words of hope and redemption in chapter 40 of Isaiah.

The words of the prophet in chapter 40 mark a crossover from the message of tragedy and destruction previously prophesized in the earlier chapters of Isaiah for the people of Israel. Beginning with Chapter 40, the prophet in what is referred to as Second Isaiah brings a message of hope and comfort from the God of Israel to the people of Israel. Ingrained in this message of hope is a retelling and reminding the people of God's sovereign love and grace. The prophet declares from the Lord that Israel's debt is paid and that she has served her term, and it is time to return home with heads held high.



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Now we could argue with the prophet's assertion that Israel's exile has been a direct result of Yahweh's punishment – and believe me I for one do make that argument – but whatever the reason, God is declaring now that it's time to go home and not like the journey from Egypt with all its peril, time to turn the corner, time to return to life as they once knew, time to retell the story of Yahweh's great love, time to retell the story with a new flavor that emphasizes Yahweh's compassion, grace, and forgiveness, time for hope to come alive again for all people because the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Comfort, O comfort my people, is what God says. God declares that our iniquity is pardoned. Now it is time to proclaim from the high mountains and be heralds of good tidings; to lift our voice with strength and not fear and say to all people, God has not abandoned us. God is here. This story of hope and redemption for all is a story we must retell faithfully throughout all seasons.

The story of God continues to be written in the world. And when there is injustice and disrespect, we can be certain that is not the end of the story. And when there is oppression, we can help write a new chapter of the story, while being honest about the failures that came before. And when there is suffering, we know that those are the places that God is gathered with the people. When people use the Bible to enslave and to oppress and to dominate, we do not have to be silent about the ways we instead use it to heal and restore. We can amplify the voices of the prophets who are doing this work, whatever their faith background may be, whether they have one or not. We can look to our history and the long history of God's presence with the people to understand the ways that we have gone wrong and will go wrong again. We can proclaim the ways that God's people are, again and again, gathered to God and renewed in order to keep alive God's new Day of Reconciliation and justice and peace.

As we continue to tell and live God's story, let us examine the stories we tell, and consider the voices of those left out. Let us strive to retell stories of welcome, stories of inclusion, stories of a God who abides with us, who loves us, a God who accepts us as we are, a God who is not interested in pushing us away, a God who says we are enough. Let us retell stories of our history acknowledging systems of oppression and the oppressed, especially people of color who continue to suffer at the hands of these systems. Let us retell stories about immigrants and all the ways they have sacrificed to make this country work. Let us retell stories about people in prisons, especially those who are there because the system failed them. Let us retell stories about the LGBTQ+ plus community and repent for all the ways we have caused and continue to cause them pain and distress. Let's retell stories of the possibility of a better society, stories of a more inclusive church, stories of an unimaginably loving God. We find hope in the retelling of these stories.



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As with all change, attempting to retell stories that threatened the power structure faces staunch opposition. When Moses tried to retell the story of a freed people, Pharaoh resisted. When Joseph tried to retell his story of leadership to his brothers, he was sold into slavery. When Jesus retold the story of the Kingdom of Heaven, thereby threatening the religious and state power, he was crucified. This list goes on and on. I can tell you about so many others who tried to retell stories for the better of all, I can tell you about Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Billie Holliday, Rosa Parks, Susan B. Anthony, Nelson Mandela, could tell you about activists across the spectrum, but I think you get it.

Trying to retell stories in any meaningful way to bring change and spread the message of hope is a hard and dangerous undertaking. But is this not what we are called to do? Is this not what following Christ entails? Is this not the cross we are called to bear? If we are to live faithfully in the world, then like the prophet in Second Isaiah we too must be heralds of good tidings.

So here is my challenge to you today. When you hear stories that amplify division and push us to hate each other, say tell it again!

When you hear stories that ignore justice and glorify unjust laws and systems, say, tell it again!
When you hear stories that speak only of God's judgment and not of God's unconditional love, say, tell it again!

When you hear stories that dehumanize people because of their gender, ethnicity, economic status, or sexuality, say tell it again!

When you hear stories spreading falsehoods claiming them as truth, say, tell it again!

When you hear stories that are full of judgement and lack a call for grace, and mercy, say tell it again.

By retelling we inspire hope, we allow ourselves to imagine the possibility of a better world where we all belong. By retelling we inspire the fight for justice, and equality. By retelling we paint beautiful pictures of not just what can be, but what should be. I hope today you will draw strength, hope and inspiration from the possibility of retelling stories. Our people are yearning for hope, and we have a task to retell stories that remind them that even in uncertainty and expectations, hope is alive, and we must tell it again, and again, and again.

The comfort and peace the prophet proclaimed as the word from the Lord was not for the religious or political elite, it was for the people, especially the forgotten on the margins of society. It was a message for the voiceless, those who abusive systems and empires had oppressed. Our message, the stories we retell must also speak to these marginalized people we must do all we can to allow them to retell their stories based on their experiences and truths. We must seek to amplify their voices and let them participate in the reimagining and retelling of stories that give them hope and meaning.



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As we continue retelling stories in our words and our deeds, let them be stories that uplift rather than bring down, stories that heal rather than hurt, stories that redeem rather than shackle, stories that welcome rather than shut out. For it is in the retelling of these stories that we reveal the glory of God for all people to see it together.