The Story in Your Story

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 3:1-10
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I used to car pool our daughter, Emily, and her friends to preschool. It could get rowdy in a car full of four-year-olds, so I fell into the habit of telling stories. Storytelling proved to be the perfect sedative. No sooner were the girls buckled in than I would hear, “Mr. James, tell us a story.” So, I told stories. Shamelessly, I borrowed from stories I had learned as a child featuring big bad wolves and diminutive Lilliputians.

So, here I am a generation later, telling stories to our children’s children. Our two oldest grandsons, Luke and Wesley, are big into Thomas the Train. So, I tell them my own version of Thomas the Train. My stories always originate at the Difficult Run Train Station near our home. It isn’t long before Luke and Wesley learn the awful truth that the sinister Diesel 10 has been up to no good again. So, they must travel to the Land of Sodor to make things right again. Luke and Wesley always save the day. Always!

Have you ever noticed how so many stories have three essential ingredients: a good beginning, a villain and a rescue? Most every story has a good beginning. “Once upon a time there was a beautiful girl named Cinderella” or “A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away….” Most every story has a villain. Stories need antagonists to create plot—an evil stepmother or Darth Vader or the White Witch—you know, the one who cast a spell over Narnia so that it is winter and never Christmas. And almost every story has some sort of rescue, a hero to save the day. Luke Skywalker saves the galaxy just as Aslan rescues Narnia.

Most stories follow pretty much the same story line. Once upon a time things are good, but then something awful happens, so a battle must be fought or a journey taken in order to make things right again. Could it be that all such stories borrow from a larger story? Could it be that they draft off the biblical story? Scripture is the quintessential good beginning, villain and rescue kind of story.

Scripture does not present itself primarily as a set of propositional truths to be believed or commands to be obeyed. Rather, the Bible comes to us chiefly as story—sometimes as a love story, comedy or soap opera, but almost always as story. The Bible must be read on its own terms as a theologically narrated story.
For the next eight months, we’ll devote ourselves to reading an abridged version of the Bible called *The Story*. A team of editors have reformatted the Bible into a series of 31 chapters arranged in chronological order to help us understand its principle themes.

We read books and go to movies in large measure to help us find something in people’s stories that will assist us in understanding the meaning of our own story. We read the Bible to aid us in understanding how our stories can participate in God’s big story. This is not merely an academic exercise. Our goal is to connect our personal stories with God’s big story.

The Bible has all the ingredients of a great story. It has a really good beginning, a formidable villain and a dramatic rescue. It’s really good beginning is called creation—God’s once-upon-a-time start to the world. Genesis tells the good story of creation as God intended it. We’re only three chapters into this good story before it takes a horrible wrong turn. Satan, disguised as a serpent, tempts our first ancestors to eat fruit from the forbidden tree and fall out of fellowship with God. Theologians call this representative act of disobedience “the fall.” Once Adam and Eve sin, the world becomes a broken place. Now, our story requires a rescue.

We pick up the action in Genesis 3. God is walking in Paradise in the cool of the day. It has become customary for God to meet Adam and Eve about this time each day, yet they’re nowhere to be found. So God calls out, “Adam, where are you?” (3:8). The original King James language still replays in my mind, “Adam, where art thou?”

They are hiding! How do you hide from One who knows all thoughts and can see with penetrating, x-ray vision?

Genesis introduces us to two major themes in its initial chapters. The first theme is creation. We are created to live in relationship with God. Never mind all the fuss over creation versus evolution. The primary focus of Genesis is not to tell us how God made the world but why God created us. We are made for relationship: relationship with God and each other.

The second theme is fall. We fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us
from God and one another. Sin is what causes Adam and Eve to hide from God and blame each other. Imagine, hiding from God? Hey, people do it all the time.

God will not allow people’s hiding to have the last word. Persistently in Scripture God goes looking for people. Genesis 4 through Revelation 22 testifies to the extent to which God will go to rescue people.

Most world religions emphasize human ascent to God. In Islam, Allah is revered as wholly transcendent and beyond people. The whole approach in Islam is based on the practice of reaching up to God. Adhering to the call to prayer five times daily and memorizing the Quran are the means by which people can ascend to God.

The Muslim religion rejects all anthropomorphic language about God in Genesis. Human flesh through Jesus Christ is abhorrent to Muslims. God is simply too holy to inhabit a body and assume human characteristics.

Eastern religions adopt a similar ascent to God-approach. The task of Hindus is to appease as many deities as possible with their ritualized practices. The Buddhist eightfold-path becomes a primary way that people reach after God. The belief that God would come to earth and die for people’s sins does not compute in Eastern religious thought.

Two world religions approach religion in entirely the other direction. Judaism and Christianity stress God’s descent rather than our ascent to God. God reaches down to us rather than we reach up to God. The preeminent Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel entitled his epic work on God as God in Search of Man. The essential story line of Scripture is God seeking us. The question God asks, “Adam, where are you?”, is replicated many times over in Scripture. God repeatedly makes overtures to people. God leads His people through the wilderness with a pillar of fire by day and a cloud by night. He sends prophets and etches commandments into tablets of stone. God engages with people in Scripture. God walks with people and wrestles with Jacob.

God’s ultimate act of seeking Christians is most evident in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross demonstrates the extent to which God will go to rescue people back to Himself.
So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have two suggestions for your consideration. First, join us in reading the story. It’s available in our church bookstore or on Kindle. Our assignment this week is to read chapter 2 concerning God’s promise to Abraham. The reading isn’t strenuous—most chapters are 10 to 12 pages in length. We’re urging you to gather in micro-groups of two to four people to process what you are learning. This reading and discussion will give you a leg up when you come to worship next Sunday. You’ll wonder how it’s possible that my preaching can improve so much within a span of a single week.

God’s promises to people like Abraham turn out to be a major theme in Scripture. I’ll invite you to consider ways you can live into God’s promise next Sunday.

Second, be alert to ways you can connect your story with God’s story this year. Allow me to illustrate with today’s themes of creation and fall. We are created by God. Our worth is not measured by appearance or possessions. Our lives have intrinsic dignity and worth. We’re not here by accident; we’re here for a reason. God has purposes in our being here. You may know your purpose or are still in the process of discovering it.

We are created by God for relationship, yet we fall out and away from it. Every last one of us is shot full of sin. No one is exempt from this biblical indictment. We are broken, flawed people. Life in this fallen world is messy, interpersonal relationships are complicated and families are dysfunctional. That’s why we talk so much about Jesus Christ in this church. That’s why I conclude many of my sermons with an invitation for you to open your lives to this Jesus.

Some of you don’t want to be rescued. Some don’t think you need to be rescued. Trust me: you do. We all need rescue.

One evening, a woman was driving her car on an interstate when she noticed a truck following her that was driving uncomfortably close. She accelerated to gain distance, but the truck sped up also. Now frightened,
she exited the freeway with the truck following close behind. She drove through a red light on a busy street but the truck did also, continuing the chase. Reaching a point of panic, the woman whipped into a gas station and bolted out of her car, screaming for help. The truck driver jumped from his cab, ran over to her car, opened the back door and pulled out a man crouching in the back seat. You see, from his high vantage point, the truck driver spotted a would-be assailant in the woman’s car. She was running from the wrong person. The truck driver was not trying to harm her. He was seeking to save her.

Some of us are running from God’s means of rescue. God is not trying to spoil our fun nor do us harm. God seeks to save us.