

HOW DO YOU TELL YOUR STORY?

Isaiah 49: 13-23, 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

How do you tell your story? How do you tell the story of your life? Is it a story of victory or defeat? Is it a story of success or failure? Is your story one of great accomplishments and achievements, or is it one of failed opportunities and regrets?

Now for most of us, life is not experienced in such extremes. We can't just look at all of our lives in one way or another, be it positive or negative. There have been some good things in our lives, but also some unfortunate things. No matter who we are as human beings there are some things we regret in our lives whether we're responsible for what's happened or not. But also, most of us can think of things in our lives we feel good about, things we are proud of. And so, when we encounter people who walk around leaning too heavily on one extreme or another, it's difficult to take them totally seriously. Those who see themselves and their lives as such success stories, for example, and keep reminding everyone around them about their success, are probably living an illusion at some level. The need to tell that story so often is an indicator that at some level they themselves may question it. On the other hand, those who see themselves and their lives as abject failures are missing the recognition of a hidden human potential in all of us to be and do something that makes a difference in this world of ours, in spite of the negative circumstances of life. Negative talk about myself is also a sign that I am protecting myself from the challenge of doing something positive and being something different than what I have become so comfortably miserable becoming. It's a cop out. I need to be challenged.

But let us go a little further this morning. Let us take a little time to ponder our human temptations when telling our life stories. And then, as we ponder these temptations, let us consider God's call to us to bear witness to an alternative humanity. And to help us in our pondering let us consider our scripture readings this morning. Our reading from Isaiah points to one pole of human experience, while our reading from 1 Corinthians points to another.

Let's begin with Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecy is given at a time of great difficulty for the people of Israel. They have been defeated as a nation. They have suffered incredible loss and have fallen into despair. Their land has been decimated of inhabitants. Many of their able-bodied and talented have been taken to foreign lands to serve as servants of alien masters. And so, the repeated longing of the people put into poetry, lament and song, the repeated longing, is this: 'When, O Lord, when will be restored? When will we be vindicated? How long must we put up with this terrible state of affairs?' To this situation, the prophetic word is a word of hope. "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted God's people and will have compassion on God's

suffering ones." (v.13) But when?! When will all this take place? 'In time' is the prophetic word. 'In time you will be vindicated. In time your fortunes will be reversed, and those who have done you the wrong will be brought to account. In time, you will know the strength and power of your God.' But in the meantime: "those who wait for me," declares God, "those who wait for me shall not be put to shame." (v.23)

But can the people believe such things? Or is the raising of their hopes not a pouring of salt on open wounds? Questioning and doubting among the people are rampant, and this, in fact, is where the temptation for the people of Israel is most fierce: questioning and doubting. "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.'" (v.14) The temptation here is to despair of any hope. The temptation is to give in to fear. 'I cannot accomplish anything significant; my best opportunities have forever passed me.' This type of attitude and feeling are so deeply pervasive in our humanity when bad things happen to us. How easily we are tempted to give up. How easily we cave into defeat. How easily we give in to circumstances that have intimidated or overwhelmed us. How easily we question our capacities or our abilities. How easily we come to feel we are useless. How easily we can become crushed in the face of life's vulnerability and dead ends.

But given this proclivity in so many of us, we must listen to the prophetic word as Isaiah reveals it, not as salt on open wounds, but as a wakeup call to be the human beings we are made to be. Isaiah prophesizes that we should sing praises to the One who represents all possibility for good. This also means we must resist giving in; we must refuse to accept that demonic tendency in us to diminish our human potential. God will not let us off the hook so easily. Not only can we sing, but we can also wait, and the posture of waiting is a posture of openness and trust. Even when we can't see the change ahead for the better, we remain open and trusting to what may be and how it may be. The story of our lives has not yet been finished. We must entrust the remainder of our story to God's telling of it.

God has made us and God knows what is in us better than we do. The challenge of faith in the prophecy of Isaiah is the challenge to sing and to wait. Are you up for it? If not, is your stubborn refusal to be open to God a cop out and sell out to the forces of doom and gloom waiting to swallow you whole? Think about it... to sing and to wait, even if your singing includes some lamentation for loss in your life. Sing... and wait... and see what the power of Love who is God can yet do in and through your life...

On the other side of things, we have the situation the apostle Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians. The opening verses of this letter must not fool us into thinking that the apostle has no issue to raise with this community of faith. He refers to them as "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." And even though they have been enriched in "speech and knowledge of every kind," it is the "testimony of Christ's strengthening in them" that must shine, not their egos. It is the fellowship of Christ and all the people of that fellowship that

must benefit from any spiritual gift, not those who claim to possess gifts and vaunt themselves above others.

The reality is that the Corinthian faith community was a fractured and divided one. The people came from diverse backgrounds economically, culturally and racially. Many who were well-off, educated, or had status in the world, immediately presumed to take on leadership and control of the congregational life as well, assuming themselves to be the natural leaders blessed with gifts and authority in the service of God.

The problem, however, as the apostle addresses it, is that in the process they have transgressed the priority of love as the basis for community - "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" the apostle also tells them in the very same letter (1 Cor. 13:1). Love humbles itself in order to recognize others and welcome others as equals, as fellow members of the same body of Christ. Paul reminds them throughout the letter that every spiritual gift is intended to serve others, not make a person feel superior over others. Spirituality is not about being extra holy but being bathed in God's love so deeply, that one is able to engage others as equals, as fellow human beings on a journey toward mutual blessedness. The test of authenticity, according to the apostle, is the test of love. Without love, true community is impossible. If the Corinthians want to prove their higher spirituality, let them perfect the love that is necessary if they are to bear witness to Christ collectively.

And both the Corinthian challenge and the apostle's words are highly relevant to us also, not only as a church but as individuals. How often is it the case that our accomplishments or achievements become tyrannical tools to vaunt ourselves over others and remind them in different ways that we are better than they are. How often we say things and do things so that others respect us and give us their attention. How often we need to feel superior to others and want them to take us seriously without us willing to invest in taking them seriously and accommodating ourselves to their concerns. How quickly we want to bring others to account but fail to remind ourselves that we are accountable to God for our relationship to others every moment of every day. How easily we measure ourselves by our achievements instead of our openness to others, recognizing them in their achievements and rejoicing in their successes.

O how difficult it is to build genuine community. How difficult it is to be genuine human beings toward one another, genuine friends, genuine spouses and partners, genuine parents, genuine children, genuine people who are interested and concerned in the humanity around us. How difficult it is for us to trust that whatever we give to others will be returned to us ten-fold in our sense of self before God, and our peace and fullness within. But alas, we fall into temptation all too often. We fall into the temptation of giving in to the demon of defeat in one or more of its many headed manifestations. Or else, we

get caught up by the demon of egotism, arrogance or narcissistic self-interest, treating those around us as there to serve our needs and concerns above all else.

God's word to us through the prophetic and apostolic witness is clear. To those who tend to despair the word is: remember and wait. Remember who you are, a child of God with whom God is not yet finished; therefore, wait with openness and trust, wait actively by singing and questioning and pushing, expecting that God will blow the Spirit into your inner sails one way or another if you cultivate an openness in your spirit. To those who are self-absorbed and full of themselves the word is: remember and look. Remember who you are, a child of God dependent on others and ultimately on God, for your life, with all its possibilities despite the limitations and challenges. But also, look, look around you and see the human and non-human creation requiring friendship and care, delight and concern. May you open yourself to your place in the world, as a partner with others and a servant of God, not as lord, master, expert or moral superior.

May God inspire our story telling so that as we think of our lives, we resist the temptations to despair or to egotism. May God intervene in our lives so that as we tell our stories, we may be challenged to sing and to wait with trust in our hearts. May God move in our lives so that as we tell our stories, we may feel compassion toward those around us and receptive to their stories as we build relationships of friendship and concern.

Amen.