

Retelling the Old Story

Revelation 22: 6-10, 16-21

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 8) 2024

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It matters who gets to tell whose story. How they are told and to what end matters as well.

-Raj Nadella, Columbia Seminary, (*Sojourners*, Sept/Oct 2024)

The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance.

-Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*

Who gets to tell your story? Have you ever thought about that? I remember when I was a young Baylor preacher-boy, I was introduced by a well-meaning family member to a church lady's tea and prayer group as, "Kyle is our little preacher who will someday preach, the Book, the Blood, and the Blessed Hope." I thought, "Everything you've just said is wrong!"

Who gets to tell the story of say, this church? Is the story of Austin Heights Baptist Church told by us or is it told by White Fundamentalist Nationalists here in town? Over the years our story has been told as the story of a small group of heretics and/or radicals, as "children of darkness," and as a cult. Many years ago, at an East Texas Baptist meeting, I overheard a big-steeple preacher say, "Austin Heights? Oh, they don't matter." We've often been dismissed simply as a group of

Democrats because the teller of the story, could not imagine Christians believing anything other than Right Wing Fundamentalism.

Jane reminded me of a couple of weeks ago at the City Council meeting we saw about 30 young adults most all under the age of 40, excitedly gathered because they believe in building community, nurturing relationships in town, and supporting the Garrigan girls' new business venture focused on a child-friendly place for young families to get together for coffee or a beer. Others there that day, saw all those excited young adults as a threat to the status quo, and were defensive and angry.

Sometimes different people and different communities see the same thing but see it differently. But other times, as C.S. Lewis said, "It is not that we see different things, it's they see and hate what we see and love."

Palestinian literary critic, Edward Said, in his important book *Orientalism* observed that people in power often get to produce knowledge, and they produce it in ways that justify and enhance their privilege. So New Testament professor Raj Nadella says, "It matters who gets to tell whose story. How they are told and to what end matters as well."

It matters who tells the Biblical story, too. Perhaps most.

This morning as part of our kicking off a new Sunday School/Bible Study year I want to retell the old biblical story from a somewhat different perspective. I've been reading a new translation of the New Testament called the *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*, as well as books like Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, and Randy Woodley's *Becoming*

Rooted or Journey to (pronounced: Ay-luh-hay) *Eloheh*, both by indigenous authors. So hear the Great Story by a new retelling.

The Great Story does not begin with the violence of divine beings in war or sacrifices in gilded temples. It does not begin with creative entrepreneurs or venture capitalists starting a new venture. It begins with the Great Mystery speaking creation into being. It begins with Earth children living in harmony with each other, with themselves, with all their fellow creatures, and with the Earth itself. They are made from the earth. “Adam” means “child of red earth” and the Earth children are one species among many.

They are given the “breath of life” by the Great Mystery, the Great Spirit, and they are given “dominion” (Gen. 1:28), which does not mean “domination” but means to practice the same tender, loving, responsible care as the Great Mystery, because they are the Great Mystery’s image bearers. In the second creation story a few verses later (Gen. 2:15) the Earth creatures are instructed “to work with the Earth and care for it,” not dominate it or exploit it or diminish it.

The very next verse (2:16) says there are limits: “Eat of any tree except one: the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” The Earth creatures, the humans (related to humus of the earth) enjoy broad freedom (“enjoy the fruit of every single tree”) but they must live within limits (“except one tree”). Refusing to honor that one limit is, in a sense, refusing to live like Earth children, refusing to live as humans with humility (close to the earth), refusing to live within the limits of the garden and taking out more than the garden can replenish. The tree’s name suggests its purpose: “Follow the limits and you will know good. Violate it and you will know evil.”

In other words, if you leave your place as one beloved creature among other beloved creatures in a sacred creation, you will experience suffering, tears, violence, sweat, and in the long-term, extinction. You will no longer fit within your place. You will compete with it, struggle to overcome it, fight to master it, and in your bid to become masters the story suggests, you will die and bring death to sacred creation.

Humans cannot have it both ways. They cannot live harmoniously as Earth children in the garden, “walking with God in the cool of the day,” while at the same time violating creaturely limits. Ecologists call it “overshoot,” when the demands of humanity exceeds what the biosphere of Earth can provide through its capacity for renewal. Theologians call it “the fall.” The Bible calls it “sin.” Scientists call it an unsustainable and suicidal civilization.

These Earth creatures “progressed” from life as hunter-gatherers tending the Great Mystery’s sacred Earth (like Adam and Eve) to life as nomads tending their own herds (like Abel) and to life as settled farmers, tending their own fields (like Cain). Cain’s and Abel’s two ways of life result in two ways of religion. Hunter-gatherers offer meat in worship and farmers offer crops and grains. Religious tension leads to violence, as the more “advanced” settled farmer kills the more “primitive” nomadic herder. Human creatures continue to “progress” and by Genesis 4 they take the next step and build cities.

Cities multiply, and soon, more people are living, but their lifespans grow shorter (Gen. 6:3), reflecting declining environmental health. The desires and actions of civilized humans become more twisted, and violence is everywhere. According to the story, the Great Spirit is so distraught over the mess humans have made, that the Great Spirit seeks to wash the evil away. Normal climate patterns

are disrupted, populations concentrated in fertile river valleys experience a flood like nothing before. God, the Great Mystery, promises to never do such a thing again.

But the human creatures don't seem to learn from the climate catastrophe. They quickly repopulate the Earth and by Gen. 11 they are developing new technology, learning to use bricks rather than stone. Building processes go faster and taller buildings can be built, allowing more people in concentrated spaces, which also speeds up economic growth. They celebrate their great civilization with the tallest tower ever and call it Babel. Everyone speaks the same language, which makes it easier to consolidate power and make more money and do more harm. God, the Mystery, disrupts this centralization of power and suppression of difference. Babel collapses and its peoples scatter and preserve their diverse identities through multiplicity of languages.

Nevertheless, cities proliferate including one called Ur, which happens to have a couple of elders, Abram and Sarai. Abram has a dream-vision to leave Ur, leave the cities behind and become a nomad on a kind of wandering vision-quest. Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah and through their dreams, the Great Mystery calls them to be members of a tribe, rooted sustainably in the land, with a distinctive language and culture, never to be another Babel or Ur. Instead of a threat to other nations, this Abrahamic tribe will be a blessing to them. Not imperial or colonial or dominating, but a tribe that is ecologically humble and sustainable, with a strong sense of solidarity and mutuality.

But toward the end of Genesis there is another climate disruption. This time it is not a flood but a drought. And, as always, famine follows. Abraham and Sarah's tribal descendants become climate refugees, crossing the border into the

powerful and prosperous civilization of Egypt. Over time, the hospitality of the Egyptian empire becomes fickle like that of other empires across time. The empire turns the refugees into slaves. Yet, over a longer time, these enslaved people, begin the Great Exodus, an extraordinary anti-imperial story. God, the Great Spirit, is not impressed with pyramids, pomp, and power. Instead, God hears the cries of the enslaved at the bottom of the plutocratic pharaoh's pyramid scheme and liberates them.

The newly liberated Hebrew tribe become hunter-gatherers again, refugees from Egypt's exploitative empire. In a kind of starting over they wander in the wilderness, learning to live reverently with the Earth rather than trying to dominate it, trusting it rather than taming it, and learning to tend to each other and what is around them instead of controlling it. For a generation, they deprogram from imperial miseducation and detoxify from the pyramidal economy. They learn again to be interdependent and trusting of God. They learn to travel lightly upon the Earth.

They are given laws that are meant to teach them how to live together and protect both the people and the land from human exploitation. Where there is justice and neighborliness and sustainability ingrained in their society. They are told, "Live wisely and you and your descendants will live and thrive in the land. But if you break the tribal law, if you try to live again without limits, the land will spit you out" (see Lev.18:28).

But over time, this tribal people mirror the societies around them and use violence to control and exploit and to centralize power. They have kings, even kings who use slave labor to construct massive buildings, cities, palaces, and even

a temple that demonstrates that God is their god, and this god chooses them to dominate and discipline and control.

Nevertheless, mystical leaders of a movement for justice and right living arise among the people. They have visions of what will happen if the tribes do not change their ways and remember the limits within which they will know freedom. Within a few generations, a series of superpower civilizations conquer them. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans – known as the People of Iron for their military power running roughshod over everyone else. The Empire of the People of Iron seize the land and people for more exploitation and extraction.

This Great Story says that in such a time and place, one named Jesus, meaning the Creator Sets Free, arises. He is born completely apart from the violent patriarchy of the People of Iron and exploitative and controlling civilization. He is unique, a human child born of a woman alone, and laid in feed trough among God's creatures of sheep and donkeys, cows and chickens in a shed, in a tiny village called the House of Bread or Bethlehem, far from the patriarchal palaces and powers.

When this Jesus comes of age, he speaks and shows an alternative way, a good road that God wants us to travel. It is the way of Harmony with God, with each other, and with all of God's creatures and creation. We are called to attend to and learn from birds and wildflowers, growing seeds, and resilient trees. We called to learn from the ancient wisdom of the Elder Visionaries, the prophets, and the old Way. Instead of the Iron People's love of power, he calls us to the power of love and nonviolence. We are told we must love God and turn away from the currency of the People of Iron who gain wealth from oppression and exploitation and extraction. We are to learn together, trust God and trust each other and love each

other with no exceptions. While the Empire of Iron controls by fragmenting and dividing us, the Harmonious Way of God calls us to community, to relationship, to neighborliness with all of creation.

But Jesus and the Way of Harmony prove to be too much among the People of Iron and all who prefer control and dominance. Jesus, the Creator Sets Free, is publicly tortured and executed and made a public example to all who might be thinking of following the Way of Harmony.

The Great Story says that though the Empire killed him, they could not control him. There was an underground movement that spread like wildfire, under the surface, outside the palaces, away from the spotlight, word spread that Jesus, Creator Sets Free, was free from the shackles of death, even Roman death could not control him. This message spread and wherever the message spread, messengers proliferated, meeting in caves and backrooms. Letters of encouragement and instruction were circulated from underground leaders like Paul, who had previously been a rising young leader among the Big steeple religious elite, before seeing the light of – this is what the followers of the Harmonious Way said, the light of a risen and resurrected Jesus.

Paul said that though we live in the Empire of Iron, we are not to live of it. In one of his letters, he says that all creation is groaning, waiting for a new day when human beings will stop destroying and exploiting the Earth and each other and become the humble humans we were created to be, the true children of God, true children of the red Earth (Romans 8).

Toward the end of this Great Story in the ancient book, there was an old mystic and visionary who was in exile on an island. He wrote of visions and dreams of civilizational collapse, economic desperation, religious corruption,

fanatical political violence, and ecological catastrophe. There will be a Doomsday when all this collapses. But the old Mystic says do not give up hope, because there will be a new Way of Harmony and Wholeness. A New Jerusalem, a new city of peace and harmony will come, not a new Rome, not a new Washington, and in this new city of harmony and wholeness both God and humanity are one and are at home, and where the light of God enlightens everyone. It will be a place of safety and security and at the heart of the city will be a spring-fed river of life and a tree of life, evoking memories of the old and ancient story. The fruit of this tree of life will bring healing to all nations and peoples, and there will be no more suffering and grief.

Well – what a story. It’s the Great Story and one I’ve attempted in a modest way to retell so that we might hear it anew. It’s our story. It challenges us, calls us to change, and gives us hope and guidance. And every Sunday morning we read and study and discuss this old and ancient story.

Here and there are pockets of the people of the Harmonious Way, who remember and retell this story, and who try to live into it. We’re one of them.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.