

First Sunday in Lent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Paul Eldred

March 5th, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who are you? What's your story?

Perhaps you have been asked this question before – “What's your story?” It's a question that can tell us a lot about a person.

We each have a story. On a personal or communal level, stories are important. They help explain who we are – they help form our identity. Like how our national identity is informed by the story of the men and women who created this country through revolution and democracy or the countless immigrants who helped make this country great. Or maybe family stories that give you a certain understanding of who you are and where you come from. Our congregation has a story, so does this neighborhood, and so do each of you. Stories are important – they can teach us valuable lessons, they can give us a moral framework for our lives, they help define us and give us a sense of understanding of who we are.

This past week, an important story in the history of the LGBTQ rights movement was told in a new way. The mini-series “When We Rise” documents four decades of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activists who marched, fought, advocated, were beaten, and – far too many – died for the rights, dignity, and life of their community. For many people, especially those in my generation, these stories have been all but forgotten. The series creator, Dustin Lance Black, said that he felt called to tell these forgotten stories to remind the LGBTQ community of their identity – who their ancestors were and what they did. “I think for many reasons we’ve lost our history,” he said. “We’ve lost so many of our mentors who would have handed down their stories in the great oral tradition.” Watching the series this week, I learned so much about a history I had never been taught. I experienced a story that I am a part of, but that I never knew. In an era of LGBT history where I don’t have to constantly fight for survival, it can be easy to forget the work of my forbearers. And sadly, I don’t think I’m alone in saying that I learned new parts of our community’s story this week. Hopefully, this miniseries can be a step in binding our community together in our common heritage. Because if a community loses its story, it is missing...something. It loses a cohesive understanding of where it has been that can inform where it is going. It loses an essential part of its identity.

Our scripture readings from Genesis and Matthew this morning share some common threads and I think they are linked in the lectionary because they both deal with temptation. And for those of you who have started a Lenten discipline this week, you may feel that stories of temptation are especially relevant this morning! But I think that they also have another major theme in common: they explore what it means to remember one's own story and identity.

In the first lesson from Genesis, Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent to forget all that God has done for them and it tricks them into thinking they can do it all on their own. But the real cunning of the serpent in this is that it sows doubt into the relationship between Adam and Eve and God. It causes these new humans to forget how God created them and placed them in the Garden with everything they could ever want. And because they do not remember what God has done, they begin to think they don't need God anymore – that they can even be like God. Adam and Eve forget who they are and whose they are and are swayed into breaking their promise to God.

Now contrast that with our gospel reading: Jesus is in the wilderness constantly tempted by the Tempter, but Jesus remains resolute. The devil knows how to tempt him too:

Turning stones into bread would feed the hungry.

Angels of God saving his life at the Temple would show the world he is chosen by God.

If Jesus had dominion of the world, he could rule in justice and peace.

And yet, Jesus does not give into his doubt or temptation but rather takes refuge in his relationship with God. No matter the temptations the devil offers to Jesus, he remains secure in his identity – an identity that was proclaimed immediately before his time in the wilderness. Just before this story in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River and the Spirit descended on him as God declared in a loud voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And no matter what the tempter can throw at him, Jesus holds on to this identity. He responds to each temptation with a firm statement and declares, “Away with you Satan! I am God’s beloved child!” Jesus is so secure in his relationship with God that he relies on God for food, for safety, and trusts God to fulfill God’s promises. Jesus lives into his identity as beloved child of God who depends on God to provide.

And as the Apostle Paul reminds us, Jesus provides us an example for the temptations in our life. We may not find ourselves in literal wildernesses for forty days on end, but each of us live in a wilderness where the tempter comes to us and seeks to undermine our relationship with our God. This devil may not look like the famous image with horns and a trident, but comes to us in many and various ways.

In the doubt we each have – the inner voice that says ‘you are not enough.’

In society telling us that we are not good enough.

In abusive relationships that degrade us.

In the thought that we don’t need God anymore.

Or as the force that makes you question whether God still loves you.

This voice may be especially loud in the 40 days of Lent. A season so often associated with repentance and adopting disciplines of service and love can easily be twisted into a season that tells you that you are not enough, not doing enough, not pious enough to merit God’s love. But historically, Lent served a very different purpose. From the earliest days, Lent was not meant to be a time of self-deprecation or denial of pleasures, it was designed as a final homestretch for those who were preparing for baptism and provided the Church community an intentional time to remember their own baptisms. This is a season of remembering that through our baptism, we have been claimed by our God as worthy, beloved, and enough. And that because of our baptism, we are liberated to serve our neighbor through works of love. This entire Lenten season leads us along a path to the Great Vigil of Easter, the center point of the Christian year where we remember and live into Christ’s passover from death into the new life of the resurrection, and historically the night when new Christians were baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection.

In preparation for Wicker Park's first Easter Vigil, Pastor Jason and I will focus each week of Lent on one aspect of that divine liturgy to both inspire you to come that Saturday night, and to teach a little bit about what has been called for centuries the queen of festivals in the Church year.

One of the hallmark elements of the Vigil is the Exultet, the Easter Proclamation, which calls on all creation to recount the saving history of God as it declares the victory of Christ rising from the dead. The entire cosmos, from the hosts of heaven to the lowly bumble bee is encouraged to remember and celebrate in the story of God's salvation. From the creation of the world, to the rescuing of the slaves in Egypt, to the protection of Israel, to the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's salvific story is recounted to remind all Christians of their own story. Of who they are and whose they are. To ground us in our common narrative that we, through baptism, are children of God and that God continues to work wonders in our lives and in our world. It's a chance to remember that we are not alone, but we are in this together as a community and dependent on a God who has worked throughout all creation in loving and liberative ways.

Our story, beloved siblings in Christ, is that we are a people of our baptism. Through the waters of this font we have been grafted into God's story and it has become our own. Through our baptism, when we rejected the devil and all his empty promises, we have an identity that can never be taken

away and that we can live into and find refuge in. It's said that when Martin Luther felt tormented by his own demons, he would stand resolute and echoing Jesus in the wilderness declare, "Away with you, Satan! I am baptized!" My friends, our identity comes through our baptisms. Our story tells us when we are tempted or tormented by our own doubts, we can stand firm in our identity and respond, "Away with you! I am baptized! I am God's beloved child!"

Our story tells us that we have a God who has claimed us, who loves us, and continues to save us. Our story gives us an identity that cannot be torn away from us no matter how tempting it may be to give into the doubts that question us from within. We are God's beloved children. We have been called by God to live into an identity of freedom and love. We can trust in God's promises. We know who we are and whose we are. And nothing, nothing can hold us back.