

“CREATED BY THE WORD”

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I.) Introduction. I would like to introduce my sermon by reflecting briefly upon what it means to be a **parent**, and about the **role of parents**. And I do that from the perspective of one who has been married for over 60 years; the father of four children, ten grandchildren, and four great grandchildren. But without dwelling upon our obvious responsibilities as parents to feed and clothe our children, and generally look after their safety and well-being, my primary point is this: “there is not a whole lot more that we can do”. Oh we can encourage them to get some education, learn some skills and develop a healthy life-style. We can even encourage some principles to live by, such as honesty and integrity; respect for all people and for creation; a concern for justice and compassion for all forms of suffering. And we can make a supreme effort to see to it that the **examples of our own lives** promote those values.

But what we cannot do is provide them with a prepackaged list of answers to any question that might come up in a future that we can not even start to imagine. We can't supply a list of “do's and don'ts” that they might refer to in any situation. And above all, we cannot promise them safety and security.

The Harvard philosopher, Josiah Royce thought long and hard about this human need for security. His conclusion was that there can be no absolute security in this life. Nothing can ultimately protect us against the vast array of events that might arise to crush our dreams and steal our tranquility. But he points out that what we can do is develop the courage, faith and strength of character that will allow us to cope with whatever might come our way.

If Josiah Royce is right, and I believe he is, then by far the most important thing that we as parents can do for our children, is to help them develop that kind of character. And instill in them the values that will prepare and equip them to go forward from our homes as free agents, to face life with courage and confidence. Our task then becomes simply to set them free and trust that they will make good decisions, be good people and find for themselves that which Jesus called “**abundant life**”. (And without sounding too pious, I would suggest that it wouldn't hurt if we prayed a whole lot).

II.) But **my purpose** in all of this is to say that I believe that **God, as mother/father of all of us, faces challenges similar to human parents**. For God also sets God's children free. God also trusts that in our freedom we will choose to become the people God wants us to be. There are some who would argue that the entire Biblical story, is the story of God's attempt to reset our values, reshape our character and recreate us as new creatures in God's image.

In our text from II Corinthians, Paul says that if anyone is in Christ, he is different, he is changed, he becomes a “**new creation**”. In Galatians he speaks of “**putting on Christ**”, and he implores the church at Colossae to “**Put off the old nature and put on the new nature**”. Six centuries before Paul, the prophet, Ezekiel told how God will “**give us a new heart**”. And even before that, Jeremiah declared that the time is coming when “**God will write his law into our hearts**”.

So no matter which metaphor you choose, the point is the same. God is about the business of transformation, recreating us and making us into new people. And the Apostle Paul is quick to explain

that this new creation is marked by “compassion, kindness, forgiveness and humility, and above all, by the love and peace of Jesus Christ”.

The **Bible** is the record of God’s work in history, at least as it was experienced and understood by the ancient Hebrews and the early Christians. It is for us “**The Word of God**”. It is the source and touchstone of our faith. But it is not an easy book. It was written at a particular time and in a particular geographic area. The Biblical world-view, or (if you like) the **mythology** in which the Bible is set, has been almost entirely rejected in our age. We no longer believe that the earth is flat, or that the earth is at the center of the universe. We reject the notion that all disease and illness is due to demonic possession.

In addition the Bible was canonized (i.e., set in concrete) nearly 1700 years ago, and then it was given the task of being the “**Living Word of God**” to all people in all places for all of time. Surely no one would expect that the Bible could offer direct, unambiguous answers to specific issues that any of God’s people might face at any time or in any place throughout all human history. But what the Bible can do, is instill in us the **unchanging values** and **principles** to guide us through it all. Then send us forth as free agents to do God’s work and will in the world.

There is an emerging consensus among Biblical scholars and theologians, that this task of transformation is best accomplished by embracing and struggling with the Biblical stories.

III.) Several years ago a friend gave me a book entitled, “Storytelling: Imagination and Faith,” written by a Roman Catholic scholar named **William Bausch**. Bausch argues that the source of our faith is embedded in a whole compendium of events that have happened in human history. And the Bible is, by and large, a huge STORYBOOK filled with narratives about those experiences.

Churchmen and theologians have labored mightily over the centuries to distill the truths of these stories into doctrines and creeds, or into systematic theologies in order to create a coherent, orderly, non-contradictory belief system which will be pleasing to our Western, rational minds.

However, Bausch points out that whenever we do that, there is much lost in the translation. The doctrines and creeds can never capture the **power of the original stories**. They can never fire our imaginations or arouse our passions like stories are able to do.

It takes stories to bring tears to our eyes and lumps to our throats. Stories can make us angry and fill us with righteous indignation over injustice and brutality. They can stir compassion in our hearts for those who suffer. They can move us to heroic deeds and acts of charity and mercy. They can lead us to take vows and make resolutions. They can fill us with a sense of awe and wonder, and a feeling of the mysterious and the unknown.

Stories inspire our imaginations, and Bausch argues that FAITH always has its origins, not in the rational mind, but in the IMAGINATION OF OUR HEARTS.

After imagination has inspired and suggested faith, then the rational mind examines it, tests it, and either validates it or rejects it. If faith takes hold, then emerge the creeds and doctrines that provide us with the language to express and explain our faith. And the stories that have been the source of it all become our SACRED STORIES.

IV.) I think it is true that the Biblical authors understood this process better than we do today. They simply told it how it was, or at least how they understood it to be (or perhaps even how they wanted it to be) but then they let the story “stand alone” and speak for itself.

The two CREATION STORIES of Genesis 1 and 2 are classic examples. The first story is the familiar account of the seven days of creation. It has all kinds of problems from a scientific point of view. How in the world was a day defined before there was an earth to rotate on its axis? And then the light is created before the sun. But those sorts of details were not important to the storyteller, because he/she was not telling a scientific story. The truths that were important to convey were that the creation did have a beginning, and that God was behind it all, and therefore God is Lord of all. What’s more, we Human Beings are special creatures, created in some **spiritual** sense in the very image of God. And we were given special responsibilities to care for God’s creation.

The second CREATION STORY, in Chapter 2 of Genesis is the story of Adam and Eve. It is quite inconsistent with the first account, in the order of events for example, but that didn’t seem to bother the redactor or editor who put the two stories together. For this story is intended to speak to fundamental questions about why there is so much suffering and pain in the world, and why God sometimes seems remote and distant, and why we are the way we are—rather than how we know we ought to be.

The New Testament is like that too. The four Gospels are all stories of the life and ministry of Jesus. They are certainly not identical stories. There are all kinds of differences and many contradictions among them, but the Church in its wisdom has resisted all attempts to clean them up or harmonize them. Like photos in a picture album, they are all different, but each adds something to our sense of who Jesus was, and what he was all about. Each story makes him a little more real, a little more familiar. So they are all there for us to read and to ponder.

V.) The Biblical heroes understood well the importance of stories. Moses stood looking over into the Promised Land and delivered his farewell address. His central message was that the Children of Israel must never forget the stories of God’s mighty acts in delivering them from captivity in Egypt. He said, “you must teach them to your children. Talk of them, tell the stories wherever you go. Make them as a sign upon your hand, and as frontlets before your eyes. Write them on the door posts of your houses and upon your gates. But never, never, never forget the stories”.

And nobody understood the power of stories more than **Jesus**. He taught almost exclusively by telling stories, usually short stories that we call **parables**. And He often responded to questions by telling a story. He didn’t get technical or legalistic. He often didn’t even answer the question. He just told a story and implied that “If you don’t get the idea from the story, then you aren’t really trying.”

We all remember that when the lawyer asked Jesus the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus said, “Let me tell you a story.” And He told the story of THE GOOD SAMARITAN. When Simon, the Pharisee, wondered why Jesus allowed the woman of the city to kiss his feet and anoint Him with ointment, Jesus said, “Simon, let me tell you a story.” Then He told the story of the TWO DEBTORS: one was forgiven a little and therefore loved little; the other was forgiven much and therefore loved much.

Yet another time a man asked Jesus to make his brother share the family inheritance, and Jesus simply told the man the story of the RICH FOOL. That is, don’t be so concerned with accumulating riches in this world. Better to be concerned about being reconciled with your brother.

Jesus knew what all great teachers have known, that ideas and understanding are best expressed and represented, not in some kind of philosophical or psychological discussion, but in stories.

VI.) **So the Bible is best understood as a storybook.** A storybook about God, about God's Son, and about God's people. There are stories about how people are, and about how people ought to be. The plan is that we should read and hear these stories, and then our VALUES, our CHARACTER, our SENSE OF RIGHT AND WRONG, of GOOD AND EVIL, and how we are to RELATE TO EACH OTHER, all of that should be formed and shaped by those stories. That is, we are to be people who are **created by the Word of God** as contained in the Biblical stories.

EXAMPLE. Several years ago, there was a resolution on the floor of the METHODIST Annual Conference of which I was a member, which would put the Conference on record as being opposed to Capital Punishment. The resolution was preceded by a whole series of "Whereas's", each listing a Bible reference intended to support the resolution. In the debate that followed, Biblical sound bites were being hurled back and forth across the room in support of and in opposition to the resolution. It was then that it first occurred to me that we were somehow missing the point of the Bible. The Bible clearly does not address directly the question of "Capital Punishment". And the "Whereas's" certainly did not provide a legal argument that settled the issue. Rather, they were illustrations. But they did point to the Biblical stories that had shaped many of us as people who for a whole host of reasons simply could not accept the idea of capital punishment. I think it is as simple as that.

The Bible is not a book of laws. It is not a treatise on systematic theology. It is not a book of science. It is not a blueprint for correct political action. It is not a cookbook of do's and don'ts for making life's decisions.

Whenever we try to use it in any of those ways we get into trouble, because we are asking it to be something that it is not. Because the Bible is simply a storybook, it cannot be taken either literally or legalistically. **The Bible is sometimes history, sometimes myth, sometimes wisdom, sometimes parable, sometimes metaphor**, but it is always the **WORD OF GOD**. And if we will allow ourselves to be shaped by its stories, we will find ourselves putting off the old nature and putting on the new, and becoming new creations in Christ, created by the WORD. Let us pray: