

A Story Worth Living

Fr. Thomas Ryden

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Scriptures: Micah 4:1–5; Psalm 98; I John 1:1–2:2; Luke 24:36–49

Who in your family is the repeater of stories? This used to annoy me when I was a teenager, because that was the kind of teenager I was, but now I fear I am the one who is more prone to repetition as much as anyone else. You know the stories. The ones that you can probably recite word for word along with the teller, but you never stop them because it is so delightful to hear them so pleased with themselves as they share some nugget from the past. Or maybe the content of the stories doesn't repeat all that often, but the style of the telling, or the life lessons retroactively placed in the story are the things that come up again and again.

If you saw these stories on a page, even if you took all of the identifying information out, you could tell that this was your family's story. The signs would all be there. Even when there is a new story, those signs remain. It is like opening up that first chapter of the new novel from your favorite author. What you are hearing is all new, but delivered in that same style, that same prose, that same sense of timing and vocabulary.

We have a bit of that situation with our New Testament reading this morning. I am sure I am not the only one who began thinking of the prologue to the Gospel of John upon hearing those words from the first letter of John,

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”¹

Talk of the beginning, talk of life, talk of the relationship between the Son and the Father, the fingerprints of John the apostle are all over this text. It is almost as if his letters begin like a second volume of his gospel, the first volume beginning with that beautiful, cosmic language, “In the beginning was the Word.” Check out John chapter 1 when you have a moment this week and think about it in concert with this first chapter of 1 John.

It is almost as if this letter is the sequel to the gospel. And this is exciting for me because it means that the next chapter of that epic, cosmos-scale drama of John 1 begins with an invitation for me and for you and for all the people of God to enter into that story. John writes that his gospel was written so that all would believe and have life in Jesus’ name. For those who have accepted that gospel, the letter of 1 John is the guide for that next chapter. You are invited; you have a part to play.

¹ 1 John 1:1-4

But of course, this is not news to us, because Jesus has already said this. The task of New Creation that begins at the resurrection is a call for us to partner with him. That is the mission of Eastertide. What did Jesus say in our gospel reading for today?

“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”²

We are familiar with the Great Commission from Matthew’s gospel. This is Luke’s version of that same command. Jesus tells his followers to preach repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations, and that they should wait until the coming of the Holy Spirit to do so.

Our reading from 1 John is evidence that mission was begun by the disciples. John is writing to the converted, giving them the same message about life in Jesus’ name and handing that mission to them so they may spread the gospel themselves.

This is our mission, too! You remember that image Fr. Jack gave us from Narnia on Easter Sunday, that as Aslan is victorious he urges his creatures to join in with the fullness of the work he is doing in his world. We are written into the greatest story that could ever be!

² Luke 24:46-49.

And if we are on this mission with the disciples and all of the other people of God through history, we need to get a couple of things clear: our destination and our role. These are important aspects of any journey. I think back to the family road trips I would take with my family growing up. We needed to know where we were going: often Grandma and Grandpa Hatfield's house somewhere in Ohio, Illinois, or Indiana, depending on what year it was. We needed to know what our expected role in the trip was. The roles were varied and important - when we were old enough, if we were going to help drive, if we were the one that was going to hold the trash bag when we stopped for fast food, if we were the one who would figure out what music we would listen to (which for us meant switching out CDs from the discman that was plugged into the tape player), etc. If we didn't have clarity on our destination or our role, that led to problems. You all know the chaos that ensues when there are too many people vying to select the road trip music.

With regard to our destination, we would know we were on the right track by seeing some of the familiar landmarks along the way. There was the Gibson guitar building in Nashville, usually passed very slowly in lunch rush traffic. There was the Dodge Viper hoisted atop a pole 30 feet in the air in Evansville, Indiana. You can tell these landmarks were the ones that teenage me picked out. When I saw those things, even before the days of GPS, even if I wasn't doing the navigating with a paper map, I knew we were going the right way.

It is similar if we think about our destination in our mission that is given to us by Jesus, where we are going in the story into which we have been written. That end is

the New Creation reality of God's Kingdom. Thankfully, the signs and attributes of this work have been given to us in the scriptures, and so when we see the landmarks, we know we are on the right path, and when we see unfamiliar and contrary things, we know that change is necessary.

We get two such pictures of the Easter-reality of New Creation from our readings this morning, both of them from the Old Testament. If you are looking, there is a lot of Easter in the Old Testament. God does not change, and his promises do not change. He is the same, faithful and true, from the times of our forefathers and mothers in the people of Israel all the way up to today. Easter was always the plan.

So let's look first at our Psalm (98). Verses 1-3, emphasize that this work of New Creation is God's own work. We don't redeem or fix the world; he does - with his own right hand, he has won the victory, he has declared *his* salvation. You can easily spot an imposter kingdom when someone other than God takes the credit for it. When you hear the words, "Only I can save you," and those words aren't coming from the mouth of the Lord, that is your sign that you are not in safe territory.

This victory of God is then celebrated by his covenant people with his praise. See verses three to seven. The covenant people, so at the time of the Psalm the people of Israel, now all the people of the nations who follow Jesus as Lord, celebrate his victory with music, singing, and playing harps and horns. The Kingdom of New Creation is marked by praise of the King.

There is that oft attributed to St. Francis quote that the Church ought to preach the Gospel at all times and, when necessary, to use words. While this can be a helpful reminder that there is a temptation to leave off the deed part of proclaiming the gospel in word and in deed, we cannot make the opposite error. The Psalm shows us that where the Kingdom is, the King's praises are sung. The good work we do, is work we do in Jesus' name. And we joyfully say so!

Notice in the Psalm as well how all of creation is included in God's victory - the land, the rivers, the trees, all celebrate the goodness of God; they are included in God's New Creation. The Kingdom isn't about leaving the world behind in search of heaven, but in awaiting the unification of heaven with God's good creation on Earth. We await the world as it should be, not a merely spiritual plane that replaces it.

For one last landmark, let's switch to our reading from Micah 4 today. This passage describes to a people facing exile what God's renewal and justice will look like, not just for them, but for the whole world:

He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,

for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

True, just peace. True provision and prosperity, not marked by over consumption and greed, but the true meeting of needs. These are signs of where we are headed. These are the things we work for in the here and now. These are the sort of things we celebrate, we point out, that make us say, "look, we're on our way!" This is particularly poignant as we hear of wars and rumors of wars around the world. We pray for the kingdom of just peace where the vulnerable will have no reason to be afraid. May it come soon!

What then is our role? We know the landmarks and where the journey ends, but what are we to do along the way? Here we return to the words of 1 John:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.³

³ 1 John 1:5-10

John takes us back to basics. Using this image of light and darkness he makes the life of a Christian sound so grandiose and yet so simple at the same time. Walk in the light of truth. Live a life of integrity. Confess our sins when we are wrong. John will build his argument to the reiteration of Jesus' New Command he gives that we love one another. Our role is to be agents of New Creation⁴ through love and light.

I began this morning talking about stories and I want to close there, too as we reflect on our role in the unfolding story of Easter and New Creation. I was reminded this week of a young filmmaker in the 1970s who was desperate to get the rights to make a full length adaptation of the Flash Gordon shorts that had mystified him as a child. But a producer who owned the rights had other ideas and the rights were not secured. His dreams to be a part of that story set aside, this director went on to create something on his own, a whole new galaxy of storytelling that has enchanted far more people of all ages than a simple Flash Gordon adaptation ever would have. Because it is me up here today, you have probably already figured out that the name of this director was George Lucas and that if he had gotten those rights to Flash Gordon, we would have never gotten Star Wars.⁵ Thank goodness for that cantankerous producer! There was a better story out there.

There are a lot of stories that we really want a part of. There are a lot of stories that the world really sells us on. The story of wealth, the story of fame, the story of comfort and ease. If we had it our way all the time, we'd spend much of our lives

⁴ I am using N.T. Wright's language here, from too many places and interviews to cite. It is part of his vernacular.

⁵ <https://collider.com/george-lucas-flash-gordon-star-wars/>

chasing those things. But there is a better, truer, and more beautiful story out there, not one of our own making, but one that was made for us. And we've been invited in. Easter, the empty tomb means that death itself does not stand in the way of God's good news. We get to share it, we get to live it. King Jesus invites you to a better story. May we all rejoice and be glad as we accept the offer.