

“This is My Story”
Psalm 137:1-9
08.29.21

Introduction

About five years ago, my son Carter and I were sitting at the dining room table eating breakfast when he asks me one of those questions that only a six-year-old thinks about: “Dad, what would happen if it stopped raining?”

I said, “Well, we would experience droughts and famines, which means that farmers could not grow crops and we would run out of food. Eventually life on earth would cease to exist.” He gave me a look of exasperation and said, “Dad, we could still go buy food at the grocery store!”

So, I took the opportunity to tell Carter what little I knew about food production from the farm to the table. A farmer cultivates a field, plants a seed, waters it, and after it grows the farmer harvests the crops before it is packaged and sent off to the grocery store. I’m sure I missed a few steps along the way, but my goal was to make sure he knew that food didn’t just magically appear on the shelves at Kroger.

I don’t think that my explanation changed the way that food tastes for Carter, but I was hoping that he would be a bit more informed and maybe a little more appreciative for the hard work that others had put into his meal. I love this story for many reasons, and I will treasure it for years to come. I also think it is a helpful illustration of the way that we often approach the Bible.

In the 21st century western world, we can just go to a bookstore, or Amazon, or a website, or just download an app and we immediately have access to countless translations of the Bible in English. You can get Bibles for children, teens, men, women, first responders, and the list goes on. It is really easy to look at a Bible that is bound in leather with maps and explanatory notes and forget that there was a process for how Holy Scripture was written, collected, and transmitted over the last 2,500 years. I doubt that anyone really believes that the Bible simply fell out of the sky, but sometimes we treat it as such.

I mentioned a moment ago that learning about food production did not ultimately change the way food tasted for Carter, but I don’t think the same is true when it comes to our understanding of the anatomy of Scripture. I believe that when we discover how and why the Bible came into being, it not only increases our appreciation for those who have made it possible to read the Bible in our own language today, but it also enhances our understanding of the biblical text and the experiences we have when we read it.

Over the next few weeks, I'm going to be doing a series entitled, "The B.I.B.L.E.," to help us better understand how and why we have the Bible. But don't worry, I won't be giving academic lectures with lots of dates and names for you to remember with a detailed explanation of how the Bible was produced. Instead, I want to approach the subject more practically, with the hope that we might learn to engage Scripture with confidence on a deeper level.

What is the Bible?

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We place our hand on it and take oaths in court rooms. We find Bibles on coffee tables, and we aren't supposed to use them as coasters or set them on the ground. We even find Bibles in the nightstand at Holiday Inn.

Unfortunately, in our culture, the Bible has largely been relegated to a sacred symbol rather than a read text. A religious object. An icon. According to a recent study, many Protestant Christians in American are essentially biblically illiterate.¹

We might turn to Scripture when we are experiencing times of crisis. I know I have. I have opened my Bible, closed my eyes, and pointed to the pages of the Bible hoping that God had a specific word for me.

There seem to be quite a few people who have tried this method over the years. In fact, there is a story about a man who tried this technique, but upon his first try he pointed to the passage that said, "Then Judas went out and hanged himself." Confident that that was not what he needed to hear he closed his Bible, opened it again, and pointed his finger to a different passage a second time. However, to his displeasure, his finger was pressed upon a verse that read, "Now go and do likewise."

We can treat the Bible like a fortunate cookie. A magic 8 ball. A crystal ball that predicts the future. Some Christians also think of the Bible as something like a roadmap or a manual that tells us everything we need to know on this side of heaven.

Whatever else the Bible might be, I want to tell you today that the Bible is a story. It is *our* story. And it is supposed to be the story that becomes the fabric of our lives.

The Power of Stories

Someone once said, "Humans are narrative creatures." In other words, we only know how to process life by telling stories about our experiences.

In fact, if I invited you to get coffee so that we could get to know each other better, we would undoubtedly exchange our stories. Without consciously thinking about it, we would unpack a plot with major turning points, conflict, and hopefully some resolution. Most of us would begin with our childhood and then work our way to the present.

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/what-americans-know-about-religion/>

And here is what I'm learning about stories: conflict is usually what defines us the most. Imagine a movie or a book that didn't have conflict. It would be terrible. It doesn't matter whether it is *Gone with the Wind*, *Indiana Jones*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *SpongeBob Square pants*, conflict is an essential element of any good story.

And all the other parts of the story are usually structured around conflict. Everything leads up to the crisis, and then most stories end by resolving the crisis so that the main characters can live happily ever after. The same is true for us and the way we tell our stories.

The death of a loved one, personal illness, stories about abuse, the termination of an important relationship, dropping out of medical school—all of these not only have the power to change our story, but they also shape the way we project into the future. Crises becomes the lens through which we interpret the past and project into the future.

I'm convinced that crisis becomes a central part of our story because we feel the need to make sense of our suffering. We want there to be some kind of purpose in our pain. The same is true for the people of God.

I know I used an illustration from *Forrest Gump* a few weeks ago, but once again I see an opportunity I can't miss. If you watch the film, it starts with the main character sitting on a park bench at a bus stop. A woman sits down, and even though she expresses little interest in conversation, Forrest begins telling his story.

He tells his story retrospectively, starting with when he was a little boy wearing braces on his legs. He shares about all of his relationships, experiences, conflicts, and triumphs, but the point that we should not miss is that his story thus far has led him to that very moment when he is sitting on the park bench. As the old saying goes, "This is the moment we've all been waiting for."

After catching us up on everything that has happened in his life up to that moment, Forrest gets up and goes to the home of Jenny, the love of his life, and there she introduces Forrest to his son, Forrest jr. Shortly thereafter Jenny dies, and Forrest is left to raise his son alone.

The movie ends with Forrest waiting at a school bus stop with his son. His little boy gets on the bus, and the story ends. But we get what is happening, don't we? Although Forrest has experienced a lot of heartache and loss, the movie ends with a sense of hope and new beginning.

Digging Deeper

The story of the Hebrew Bible is structured in a similar way as *Forrest Gump*. The people of God are telling their story retrospectively, from their figurative "park bench." Except their park benches are the banks of the rivers of Babylon (e.g., the Tigris and Euphrates).

In the 6th century B.C.E., the people of Judah are living in Babylon because the Babylonians came into their land, destroyed their homes, destroyed their Temple, and took survivors captive. Although the people of Israel have been passing their story down orally for centuries from one generation to the next, it is in Babylon that they finally write it down in a “fixed form.”

The people of Judah needed to make sense of their suffering. They needed to explain how they had gotten where they were and how they were going to get back home. So, they continued telling the stories that had been passed down for centuries, but they began to shape the details of the stories in light of their own experiences. That is why we don't categorize the Bible as “history” as we understand it in the modern sense. Instead, as one biblical scholar explains, the Bible is “history reimagined.”²

We hear their sense of agony and loss in our Scripture lesson today. In fact, Psalm 137 is one of the most difficult and disturbing passages in all of Scripture. It is called an “Imprecatory Psalm” and it is full of anger and hope for vengeance. The last verse is the most troubling, with the idea that whoever evens with the score with the Babylonians will find great joy in dashing their children against the rocks. Obviously, they are in a dark place and need relief from their hopelessness and despair. They need and want to believe that this is not how their story is going to end.

So, to put things into perspective, it is from this place that they tell the story of creation, Adam and Eve, the story of Abraham and the patriarchs, the story of Moses and the Exodus, the forty years of wandering, the conquest of Canaan, the judges, the stories of the Davidic Monarchy, the stories of their civil war that separate the north and the south, and ultimately, the story of how they were taken into captivity. In other words, they interpret their entire story (hundreds and hundreds of years) in light of why they have been exiled.

All of the Old Testament prophetic books revolve around this event. Some of the prophets predict that the people of God will be taken from the land because they practice idolatry and have forsaken the law. And some prophets write during the exile to give the people comfort and hope for the future.

It was actually during the exile that the concept of resurrection surfaced for the first time in the life of Israel. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet of God talks about a vision where God's Spirit moves over a valley of dry bones and brings them back to life. He says, “I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord” (Ezekiel 37:6 NRSV).

Ezekiel uses this metaphorical language to describe how God is going to restore their nation, which is essentially dead, and lead them back to a new life in their beloved land.

² W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 9

Therefore, this defining event is not only how they interpret the past, but it is also the lens through which they see the future.

The people of God are able to envision a future of hope because as they reflect upon the past they remember the story of the Exodus. They trust that if God can liberate the descendants of Abraham from Pharaoh, that God can liberate the descendants of Abraham once again from the oppression of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon.

Theological Reflection

This is how hope works. When we find ourselves in crisis it is easy to lose perspective. Therefore, we look to the past to remember the faithfulness of God in order to trust that God is going to bring deliverance again in the future. Our story become our anchor. We hold on to it, live out of it, and allow the faithfulness of those from the past to become our example of faithfulness for the present and the future.

Over the years I have had many conversations with people who say, “You should talk with so-and-so...they know a lot about the Bible.” I know that there are some who read through the Bible every year, and I’m sure that there is good that can come out of it. However, as your pastor, I want you to know that I don’t expect you to be Bible scholars. In fact, I’m not sure how much virtue there is in such a pursuit; but I do want you to know our story.

Our story is what Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, called “the gospel.” The gospel is the overarching message of redemption and reconciliation from Genesis to Revelation. In fact, I think this is what Luther meant when he talked about the Bible being the “word of God.” He wasn’t talking about the individual words on a page, but the collective witness of what God has done in the world along with the hope of what God is going to do in the future.

We recite our story each week when we read through our liturgy. We remember the story of the Exodus and we announce that God raised Jesus back to life. It is because of our hope and trust in the character of God that we can say, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ *will* come again.” We may not fully understand it. Some concepts might seem foreign to us in the modern world, but we place our trust in the God who was able to resurrect an entire nation back to life—a God who raised Jesus—a God who will somehow take the broken pieces of our world and put it back together again.

This is our story. We live out of it. It becomes our hope. It becomes our anchor. If there has ever been a time that we’ve needed to know our story it is now. Our nation has experienced the most division in the last 18 months since the Civil War. We are experiencing the ups and downs of a global pandemic. The economy is shaken. Major institutions in our world are unsure about the future. There is growing conflict in the Middle East. We are in crisis.

It is easy to give up hope. It is easy to give in to despair. Instead, may we learn our story and live faithfully as we give witness to the God of life and resurrection.

I want to urge you to pick up a Bible and read it. More importantly, I hope you will be a part of a group that reads and discusses the Bible together so that we can collectively be shaped by the power of our story.

Reference Tools

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your all-time favorite story? (Book, movie, legend, etc). Why do you like it?
2. What is your story? Where do you see conflict/crisis along the way? Where do you see hope?
3. What are your impressions about the Israelites and how they tell their story from a place of suffering? How does this perspective impact your understanding of the B.I.B.L.E.?
4. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?
5. How can we pray for you?