

“A Ransom for Many”
Gordon Wiersma 1021/12

There’s been a group of Hope Church folks doing a study on Wednesday evenings in October – using the book *The Good and Beautiful God* – it’s been a good book, a great group and discussion. There are things in the book to resonate with and some to critique, but the basic premise of the book I really appreciate – which is that our lives are fundamentally formed by stories, by narratives. The stories we know and trust, influence us strongly:

We are shaped by stories. In fact, our stories, once in place, determine much of our behavior without regard to their accuracy or helpfulness. Once these stories are stored in our minds, they stay there largely unchallenged until we die. And here is the main point: these narratives are running (and often ruining) our lives. That is why it is crucial to get the right narratives.

We have certain stories ingrained into us about who we are, about what life is about. Of course there are particular events that are formative moments for better or worse – but this is more the idea of ‘story’ as a foundational understanding of life. Simple, profound stories like this: I am loved; the world is scary; people cannot be trusted; I have a meaningful purpose; I am good; I am bad; life is a gift; life is an accident. I expect you can clearly see that depending on which of those stories you believe – what narratives have been told to you and that you tell to yourself and to others – it makes a big difference in how you look at yourself and the world, and in the choices you make for yourself and as you interact with others and this world. And the point of the book is that there are false narratives and true narratives, and it’s vital to discern the difference. You could summarize it something like: ‘the basic stories we believe determine how we respond to the stories of our lives.’

I think it’s an important and compelling idea – lots of ways we could reflect on what those formative stories are for us...but I want to keep us moving into this idea by asking this: what are our stories about God? What are the formative and foundational narratives that we have been told and have been imbued into us about God? Here are a few I’ve heard: God is love; God is angry; God is good; God is dead; God will send you to heaven; God will send you to hell; God will punish you; God will help you; ‘...you cannot hide from God – God’s eyes are fixed on you –

whatever you say, whatever you do...’ that’s a story some of you have heard as a child. Those basic stories make a big difference in who we believe God is, and how we believe we are to live as children of God.

So here’s a story – Jesus said: “the Son of Man (*that’s Jesus*) came to give his life a ransom for many.” That’s what we hear in the gospel of Mark: it’s a way of Jesus summarizing the essence of who he is and what his life is about. And I want to ask with you today, ‘what does that story mean?’ Because it’s a central story for us to know as Christians: of our relationship with God, and what’s broken about it, and what fixes it. And just for full disclosure here, I have some ideas about what is typically seen as the meaning of that story Jesus tells – “the Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many”, a meaning I don’t find very helpful. AND I have some ideas to share with you about a meaning present there that I think is much more fruitful. But the main point is simply to be able to hear together the story, the narrative, that is meant to be life-giving for us.

So, when Jesus tells this story: “the Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many”, this is what I think a lot of people hear as the story in a bit more expanded form: ‘people are sinners – sin is against God – God is not happy about it, in fact God is angry – sin has to be punished, and turns out it’s a death penalty – because God is just, God has to take our lives for our sin! – except, lucky us, God punishes Jesus for our sins instead – Jesus sacrifices his life to take our punishment – God is appeased – so now God can let us go to heaven.’ Have you heard that one before? That storyline? It is a theory of the atonement, is what we would call it in theological circles. It’s the theory of how humanity and God are reconciled – as I say with my GIFT Class, atonement has the meaning right there in the word: at-one-ment...brought back together as one. So the way the ransom idea fits in this storyline can go a couple of ways – either the idea of humanity captive to sin (that is, the devil) and God making payment through Jesus’ death; or the idea of ransom simply as a payment from us to God – thru Jesus’ death – to let us go from our death sentence. In either case, it is a transaction – sin is the debt, death is the penalty, the cross is the payment...and God’s justice is satisfied. That’s the story – and I think it says a lot

about God and us that doesn't seem right... Perhaps you hear that story, and say, 'OK, sinner/justice/sacrifice/saved - that works'. Perhaps you hear it and say – 'that doesn't resonate with me...but it's the Bible story I've been told...so I better keep quiet.' Well, with either of those – or if you haven't really thought about it and aren't so sure it matters – I'd like to offer a different telling of the story, and why it could matter to all of us.

And I'd like to do so by delving right into a passage that would seem actually to really reinforce the punishment/transaction idea – that passage from Hebrews (Hebrews 5:1-10). It's a passage filled with mention of sin and sacrifice, of the high priest making sacrifice – and it does this while connecting the life and person of Jesus to these sacrifice and priestly stories from the Old Testament. The book of Hebrews does this in persistent and sometimes intricate language – sacrifice and blood and priest – it's both quite foreign to us and also just seems to tell that same old story of sin and punishment, so we just kind of skim over it while our theological eyes glaze over – 'heard that one before'.

But let's take a closer look – it's really quite fascinating I think, even enjoyable! – if you want to look through the passage with me. Verse 1 says a high priest is chosen to offer sacrifices for sins...no wait, it says to offer GIFTS and sacrifices for sins – well, that could just sound like more payment, but actually it reminds us that the Old Testament sacrifices were also about thanksgiving, gratitude, reconciliation and celebration. Next, it describes the high priest as...gentle! – dealing gently with ignorant and wayward...a description of the atmosphere not being about fear or punishment but of care – AND dealing not just with sin, but with guidance for seekers. It says the person called to be the priest receives it as an honor from God, to act on behalf of God. We're up to verse 5 – so now Jesus Christ has this honor from God, called to be a new high priest, and fulfills the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is this mysterious and intriguing figure from the Old Testament – Abraham & he cross paths in the wilderness – Melchizedek is a high priest of God; he blesses Abraham. They move on. Where did Melchizedek come from? Well – don't know...but his name means King of Righteousness – he is from Salem, the city of

peace – and he blesses Abraham. THIS is the high priest to whom Christ is connected: righteousness – blessing – peace.

Alright, then to v. 7 – it describes Jesus as he faces his death, which is a carrying out of his priestly role, reaching out to God with prayer, cries, tears, to God who could save him from death...so there is this intimate relationship with God – yet Jesus remains obedient to the way of the cross, to death...and in choosing this suffering he becomes the source of salvation for those who obey him – the way of the high priest in the order of Melchizedek – the priest of righteousness and peace.

Alright, this is probably way too interesting to me, and I hope somehow I have not lost you. But let me stop and say that all this in Hebrews demands that we try another take on the story – “the Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many”...means...GOD gives of God’s self to give life to us. Have you heard this story? – ‘God creates the world in love; humanity does not trust God; the world is broken; God will not give up on the world – God reaches out to give ways of life; death and violence continue to reign; God comes to us in Christ to embody God’s way of life, even when it leads to death; and in the resurrection, life, not death/sin/violence, is revealed as the final word.’

HAVE we heard that story? How does it sound? What does it say about who God is and who we are? It’s not always the story we tell ourselves from Scripture, but it is there. And in fact it’s the only way to make sense of the gospel story from Mark. I’ve emphasized how that passage ends with “the Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many” – but did you notice that actually the passage says nothing at all about sin, or judgment, or punishment...or all of those familiar parts of the story we put with Jesus giving his life and ‘ransom’?

Instead this is a passage about two disciples bargaining for being Jesus’ eternal favorites; Jesus telling them that following him is a path of giving, not glory; then the rest of the disciples get mad at the first two; then Jesus makes the giving point again: ‘the way of the world is to use power over others; my way is the greatness of service, for “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”’ THAT’s the setting for ‘giving life as a

ransom' – it's the story of the way of the world being turned on its head by the way of Jesus: the way of "power-over" turned to "power-for"; the ways of death overcome by the way of life. It is the way of a God who reaches out in God's self to claim this world not for division and death, but righteousness and peace – and God will not let it, or us, go...it's a very different narrative of at-one-ment.

So, today, I just want us to have a story, dare I say a truth, settle into us, as our story. It's a story of ransom and priest and sacrifice and sin and death and life – a story not of God demanding a death penalty, but of a God giving life to overcome death; a story not of a transaction that puts us right with God, but of an incarnation that claims us for the ways of God; a story not to save us from God's punishment, but a story to free us to give our lives to righteousness and peace, as God has given of God's self to us. It's a story for sinners and sufferers, for powerful and oppressed, for disciples and seekers, for rich and poor, and for all creation. "The Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many" – the story of God reaching out to free us for life. Thanks be to God.
AMEN.