

The Christian Story

Palm Sunday

March 25, 2018

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What do we need the Christian story to be about? That might sound like an odd question, or even a cynical one if it means: “how do we invent a story to match our needs?” But maybe it could be a surprising or challenging question – one to make you really think about: what IS the Christian story about? and does it speak to what I really need? Because it occurred to me sometime in this life of mine that there has come to be a summary of the Christian story that goes like this: “Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins” – it’s a conveniently condensed story known in church and in culture – everybody knows that’s the story, whether they want to be a part of it or not – “Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins.” That’s the story I knew for a long time too.

But then some other things occurred to me in this life of mine – with some help – 3 things:

- It occurred to me that if that little summary is the whole story, then the main thing God is concerned about is the bad things people do and needing to punish them for it. And when that is the case, then that’s what church and faith is mainly about – a place concerned about the bad things we do and making things right with God. An in fact, I think that’s the reputation the church often has.

- It occurred to me that there were actually Christians and churches concerned with much more than sin and punishment – there were people and communities of faith that cared about compassion, justice, generosity, kindness and joy; about peace, hope, love, mercy and inclusion; about blessing and gentleness and passion and wisdom and creation and blessing and commitment and healing and courage...just to name a few ☺ Hope Church helped to teach me that. And then I realized that all of those things together sounded a lot like the life of Jesus, like the heart of God.

- And then it occurred to me that maybe that WAS the story – that all of those things of true life are not only what God cares about in this world but are what God brings to, gives to, makes possible in a world where there is so much that is not at all about those things, that is deadly. Perhaps “Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins” is too small a story – and the cross is a part of a story of life and death and resurrection that reveals a God who brings “saving” to ALL that is broken. And what if that’s the story that scripture and Spirit are telling to us – a Christian story that sounds something like this:

This is a story about being a Christian. A “Christian” is someone who knows God’s love through the story of Jesus Christ. For Christians, this is a story so big that it goes way back to the beginning...

- In the beginning, God created the whole world, a good world.
(place a large green circle for creation – place some rivers and animals)
- When God created the world, people were a part of God’s creation.
(place human figures along the middle line of the circle, in 3 groups of 4 people)

God created people to help each other, and to feel love and joy, and to live as God’s children

- In God’s world:
 - people did things to help one another
(touch the head of some of the figures);

but people also did things to harm each other
(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles);

I’ve done both of those things – sometimes I help, and sometimes I harm;
(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)

in God’s world, the harm became stronger.
(put up part of a wall in between that says HARM)

- In God’s world, people felt love and joy
(touch the head of some of the figures);

but sometimes things were painful – the kind of pain that won’t go away, pain which we call suffering
(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles);

I’ve felt both of those: I feel love and joy, but sometimes I feel pain and suffering;

(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)

in God's world the suffering became strong.

(put up part of wall in between that says SUFFERING)

- In God's world, sometimes people remembered that God created them as God's children
(touch the head of some of the figures);

but sometimes people seemed to forget about God, they felt alone.

(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)

I've felt both of those things: I've remembered I am a child of God, and I've forgotten about God, felt alone;

(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)

in God's world people forgot about God – people felt alone.

(put up part of a wall in between that says ALONE)

- Look what has happened - it looks like a wall in God's world:
 People were created to help, but instead harm was strong;
 People were created to feel love and joy, but instead suffering was strong;
 People were created to know God, but instead they forgot and felt alone.

I wonder if the people can even see, can even remember, the way God created the world?

It's like everyone is separated from one another and from God...and there's no way for the people to make it better by themselves.

- God looked at the world: God saw the harm, and the suffering, and the forgetting - God saw the wall. God felt sad - it was not how God created people to live.
 God loved the whole world God had made. God loved the people God had made. So God did something: God came to the world as Jesus, God with us.
 (lift Jesus up over the world)

- *(place Jesus among by the HARM group of people)*

Jesus lived among the people, showing God's way of life.

(lay down HARM section of wall)

Jesus did the most amazing things and said the most wonderful things.

The life of Jesus showed the people that helping was stronger than harming –

that to help was the best way of life

(take the HELP section, show it, and place it over the HARM piece)

- **(move Jesus to the SUFFERING group of people)*

Jesus saw and cared about the suffering in God's world.

(lay down SUFFERING section of wall)

Jesus healed many who were sick and welcomed many who had been left out.

But as Jesus helped and healed, something terrible happened: all of the harm that was in the world tried to stop Jesus from telling the stories of God by killing Jesus. Jesus was crucified on the cross and he died.

(lay Jesus down)

But even then, Jesus was showing God's love: Jesus did not give up on God's ways of help and healing;

Jesus trusted that God was with him even on the cross, even in death.

(take the LOVE section, show it, and place over it the SUFFERING section)

And then, Jesus Christ lived again!

(stand Jesus up and move Jesus to last group of people)

THIS was a surprise!

(lay down ALONE section of wall)

As amazing as Jesus' life of helping was, people were sure that Jesus' death on the cross was the end. But then Jesus was alive again! – God's love was stronger even than death. And Jesus said: "I AM Life - life and love are the strongest things of all, because God is life and love."

(take the LIFE section, show it, and place over it the ALONE section)

When you know the story of Jesus living and dying and being alive again, you know something that is true about God's world:

- Harm is not the strongest; it is still there
(show the HARM section of wall under HELP)

but Jesus teaches us to be a part of help in God's creation.

(move Jesus to onto the HELP section, and move some people together onto HELP)

- Suffering is not the strongest; it is still there,
(show the SUFFERING section of wall under LOVE)

but in Jesus we see that God's love is always stronger.

(move Jesus onto the LOVE wall section, and move some people together onto LOVE)

- Forgetting about God and being alone are not the strongest; those things are still there *(show the ALONE section of the wall under LIFE)*

but in the Risen Jesus, God's ways of life and love,

God's gifts and blessing, are with us now and always.

(move Jesus to the LIFE wall section, and move people together onto LIFE)

This is good news! – good news about God, and about people, and about God’s world.

Remember that word “Christian”? – being a Christian is being part of this good news:

the story of Jesus, the saving power of God for the whole world.

The Spirit of the Living Jesus is with us to make us a part of that story:

to make us strong in God’s ways of HELP and LOVE and LIFE.

And that is living just like God created the world to be.

What do we need the Christian story to be about? On this Palm Sunday as we journey through Holy Week, it is a crucial juncture in the Christian story. But if it is a story only about sin and punishment – which is really more of a transaction than a story – then I fear it will be a story that just stays here and does not travel with us into our lives, does not touch on all that we struggle with and care about and seek in our lives – a story that will be left behind as too small by many who see the expanse of both brokenness and beauty in life. But it turns out that in Jesus Christ living and dying and living again we have a story of God bursting into this broken world with a saving power that touches our whole lives: a story for our young people that says faith is about hope and creativity and gifts, as well as all the challenges they wrestle with; a story for those who are downtrodden that speaks to their suffering as well as to their courage and passion for justice; a story for those on the margins which not only includes but also celebrates; a story for each of us that touches what needs saving in our lives – certainly forgiveness for our failures, but also healing for our brokenness, wisdom for our seeking, courage and creativity to bring to our convictions; not just saved from, but saved to a life of purpose

and fruitfulness, goodness and joy, community and creativity, as God created us to be.

That is the story that God has created us to recognize as our own; that is the story that resonates in our hearts as we embody it in our lives and as a community of faith; that is the story we meet in others as the Spirit of God is at work in life-giving ways in our world.

What do we need the Christian story to be about? – about Jesus, the saving power of God for the whole world: a story that touches the whole of our lives with God's blessing and that frees our lives to be a blessing of help and love and life with all God's children. Hear that story in the whole life of Jesus that has brought us to this Palm Sunday – hear it in the journey to the suffering cross this week – hear it in the rising dawn of next Sunday; that God's life and love may run deep in our lives and be given abundantly through our lives, as followers of Jesus Christ – the saving power of God for the whole world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.