

How to Rewrite Your Own Story (Neh. 8:1-3, 8-10)

Each one of us has a story inside us that we tell ourselves. Certain things happened; others didn't. Certain choices were made; others were not. "Good" was done; "sins" were committed. Traumas occurred. Miracles also. Love was given, or not; received, or not. An era was lived in with certain hopes, dramas and hard times. And inside that story is another story: how on the inside we have experienced our outside stories. The inside story is told in affection and gratitude, fear and anger, appreciation and hope, regret and despair. The inside story is about who you think you are. In the end, it is about who you are with God.

This is a sermon about rewriting your inside story. For that, I believe, is why we are here in one form or another. We each bring one story to church, a story about our life and our times, and we pray to leave with another story, a story as Nehemiah puts it in this morning's text, that tells us "not to be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is our strength." If we come with an open heart and mind, something shifts inside us and we begin, like the people of Jerusalem in the text, to "understand" the invitation to live our *real* story. Just so, for the people in the text have just returned from seventy years of exile in Babylon to a Jerusalem long since and utterly destroyed. Today they hear that God is not done with them yet, that the story of Israel is not finished. They begin to realize that God's "steadfast love" has never deserted them despite what they may have thought. The story of punishment and abandonment they have told themselves is gone. With God in their hearts, they rebuild the walls of their city with their own hands. And so begins the miracle of a new story. And so also might ours begin.

Never underestimate the power of a story rewritten with God. I heard on National Public Radio the other day a Skype interview with a business man in Haiti. His computer running on a generator using scarce gasoline he had stood in line for eight hours to buy, he told the story of the devastation he saw around him. His tone was dignified and flat. He said he was in shock. He said everyone he knew was in shock. The reporter at NPR asked him gently how he thought the people of Haiti might respond to this latest in a long history of catastrophes. It was an understandable question given Haiti's past history, but it was also a question that implied some judgment about Haiti's future, a question that (perhaps) anticipated the businessman would reply with guilt or fear or despair. He didn't respond that way. He thanked God for the people of Haiti and their courage and resourcefulness and said that, with help, they will rise above the devastation, for their story is not finished yet. His voice became thick with feeling. And so the story gets rewritten and the miracle begins.

I'm glad to have these stories, one from the bible and one a witness from our times, but I urge you not to be any more impressed with these stories than with your own. There is hard work to be done in our world today – politics to be handled, injustice to be addressed, catastrophes to be alleviated, wars to be finished, a perilous economy to be righted – but the real work begins on the inside. None of what we hope or wish might change *will be possible as long as we continue to tell ourselves stories of blame and anger and fear*. None of what we pray for can happen until each of us knows we are worthy of total forgiveness – the kind that washes clean the past.

So if we would change *the* story we must begin to change *our* story. For the whole is the sum of all our stories. We must change our minds about our stories and begin to tell not of guilt and anger but of miracles – not of supernatural events, but of human choices. God, you see, has a different story to tell us – has

always had – a different story to tell us than we tell ourselves. Jesus himself is God's way of *showing us how we can be*. What a miracle it would be if we could believe God in this! And then what so-called miracle would we not be capable of in the world?

I would like to invite you to use your imagination for a moment. Imagine you are sitting in a movie theatre about to watch a great epic movie. As you're getting comfortable in your seat, starting in on your popcorn, you make an interesting discovery: *that you're in this movie!* In fact, you quickly realize that this movie is about *your life*. So you get a little uncomfortable as you watch some scenes from your distant past – like the time I jealously once took my younger brother's special collection of unblemished World War 2 steel pennies and poured acid on them so that they no longer looked unblemished. (OK, tell me *you've* never done anything *mean!*) Or the time that same brother told a school bully that I had bragged at home how I could beat that bully up! Oh, man, *brothers!*

So, you're watching this movie and you're not quite sure where the story is headed and you start to squirm and look around and wonder where the nearest exit is. All of a sudden, at the back of the theatre there's a commotion in the projection booth. You turn around and look back and you see that Jesus himself has arrived in the theatre and he has taken control of the projector and the movie starts to re-spool. You turn back to the screen and you make an *amazing* discovery. The movie's running again and it's still your life, but now the story is told differently! All of a sudden, it's not all about you *and* you're not such a terrible character after all. In fact, in spite of your own shenanigans, you see a person who distinctly interesting and enjoyable. YOU! Pretty soon, you know that whatever the plot-line, however dastardly the deeds, in the end you are OK. And you are not even done yet. There is more of your story to come!

Suppose we were to begin to retell *the* story – *our* story – as seen through the eyes of Jesus. Where would we begin?

We would begin, I think, hearing what the people heard as they stood in the rubble of Jerusalem. This is what they hear. Stand with them for a moment. Listen. They hear that *the past is gone*. Do not mourn or weep. Do not grieve the past. Go your way, for the *present* day is holy. No guilt, no nostalgia, no regret, no debt apply to the work you are about to begin. Even the pain of seventy years of exile is wiped clean. You begin *free*.

After *the past is gone*, they hear *do not fear*. Especially do not fear *the future*. You have a capable God who will watch over you. No walls are rebuilt by those who take up spears and shields instead of spades and shovels. Don't just defend! Build! Let the work begin without fear.

Lastly, the people are told to *rejoice*. God does not need perfect people or accomplished people or even righteous people. All God needs is *willing* people, people who rejoice in the glory of God and make themselves available for the work that is to be done. People who will rise and work in the heat of the day to rebuild walls, and then “eat well and drink sweet drink” and make sure that no one goes without rejoicing in the cool of the evening. God needs them *now* – in this present moment.

There is a beautiful passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul's story, you remember, got completely rewritten by his encounter with Jesus on a lonely desert road. It took years for the new story to sink in, but Paul finally understood that in some mysterious way his past – the good and the bad! – was gone. He

understood that he had no reason to fear what was to come. He came to believe that as he rejoices in God, he needs little more to live on. Along the journey, Paul receives a letter from some people who love him and are worried about him and about their own “issues.” His response to them? *Rejoice*, he says. *Rejoice in the Lord always....the Lord is near.* A few verses later he says, *I rejoice in the Lord greatly....for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:1,10, 11b-13).*

I invite you to hear this morning how *your rejoicing blesses the world!* When you are free – free of blame – free of fear – free to rejoice – free to build and not to defend – then you free the world of your anger and fear. You are strengthened for *all things*. That is who you are with God. Believe this and your story will change instantly. And that is when miracles begin.

Amen