

In the Beginning

Rev. Joe Connolly

“Here begins the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, the Christ, the Child of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:...” — Mark 1:1-2a.

I believe we, all of us, have a story to tell. And I, indeed, have from this pulpit, over time, offered bits and pieces of my own personal story.

Hence, I think most of you have heard what I am about to say. But let me offer the brief version of what I say as a refresher.

How old am I? I was born during President Harry Truman’s first presidential administration. I know, some parishioners were born during FDR’s administrations and very few will say which administration. It’s O.K.

But I do talk about growing up in New York City and what that was like, certainly very different than growing up in Chenango County. I have talked about being a Vietnam Veteran, about working in computer operations when computers took up a space the size of the Founder’s Room, working as a tour guide at South Street Seaport Museum, working on Wall Street, working as a writer in professional theater.

I have talked about family, my grandparents, my parents, my siblings, about how I relate to all my relatives. I, therefore, also talk some about the craziness of family life. Since it’s likely each of us has some craziness in family life I certainly want to address that reality.

And, oh yes, I talk about my life in the church over the course of time, how I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition and why I am where I am today. And, of course, what this church talk is really about is how I understand and relate to God.

Therefore, I address how at age 44 I, somehow, decided to enter Seminary. And *that is...* crazy. (Slight pause.)

I hope, as I tell my story, I am clear about what I’m trying to do. I am not trying to overwhelm those who listen to that story with my story.

I am trying to illustrate three things. First, I hope it illustrates there are many ways to tell a story. Second, I hope it illustrates there are many facets to anyone’s story. Third, I hope it illustrates we all have a story.

You see, when I say we all have a story what I am also saying is we all have roots, come from someplace. I think we need to tell *our own* story, learn *how* to tell our own story. I think this might help us come to a full self realization of who we are, a full self realization where we are at now, a full self realization where we might be willing to go, where a relationship with God might take us.

Indeed I think we, all of us, need to both tell other people our own story and to listen to ourselves as we tell that story. And I hope you *do* know that telling *your* own story is helpful to those around you.

Those who encounter you and your story, because you tell that story, will come to know you better, understand you in an intimate way. Last, I hope you take the time to listen to the stories others tell. Then you will get to know them better. (Slight pause.)

So what is your story? How do you tell it? Have you recently shared your story with someone? (Slight pause.)

These are words with which the writer of the Gospel we know as Mark begins to tell a story about Jesus, Who we claim is the Christ, the Messiah sent to the Jewish people. “Here begins the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, the Christ, the Child of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:...” (Slight pause.)

Let me offer a couple of basic facts about the Christian Scriptures, the so called New Testament. I can guarantee you have heard most of what I am about to say since I have from this pulpit, over time, offered bits and pieces of this information. (Slight pause.)

The earliest writings in the New Testament are the true Letters of Paul. 13 letters are attributed to the Apostle. Paul actually wrote 7 of those. It’s unlikely Paul wrote the others.

Scholars tell us the true letters were written between the years 52 of the Common Era and 64 or 65 of the Common Era. Scholars are fairly sure Paul died around that time. And it seems unlikely Paul wrote any letters after being dead!

Equally, scholars agree Mark is the earliest Gospel. Most scholars put the writing of this work at the year 70 or slightly later. Hence it was written after Paul was gone.

Now, the true Pauline letters have nearly no story about Jesus in them at all. However, all the Gospels tell a story. And Mark is the earliest, thereby, the first story told about Jesus in the Christian Scriptures, in the so called New Testament.

So, where does the story in Mark, the earliest Gospel, start? Does it start with the birth of Jesus? No. Does it start with the ministry of Jesus? No.

First, the writer starts where any good writer might by stating what the story will address. (Quote:) “Here begins the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, the Christ, the Child of God.”— the *good news* of Jesus— interesting.

Then the story starts. And, when the story starts, where does it start? (Quote:) “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:...” (Slight pause.)

Wow! The beginning of first Gospel written, the earliest attempt at telling the story of Jesus, references the Hebrew Scriptures, starts by quoting Isaiah. (Slight pause.)

Here’s the obvious question. What does that tell us? (Slight pause.)

Well, the words from Mark reference Isaiah Chapter 40, Verse 9. (Quote:) “Go up on a high mountain / you who bring good news to Zion!”— there it is again, those words— good news— “You who bring good news to Zion, / you who bring good news to Jerusalem! / Shout without fear, / do not be afraid; / say to the towns of Judah, / ‘Here is your God!’” (Slight pause.)

Again, wow! Just wow. For me, this is quite clear. Mark ties the story of Jesus to the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the story of God in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Let me put that another way. Right off the writer of Mark tell us Jesus is not the beginning of the story. The story does not start with Jesus.

According to Mark, this earliest telling of the story of Jesus, the story starts with the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. So, who is the God of the Hebrew Scriptures?

We heard about God of the Hebrew Scriptures when the story from Genesis about Noah was read. The story of the rainbow is clear: God is the God of covenant.

And I think Mark is quite clear. The story of Jesus simply continues the story of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the God of covenant.

And, in the words of New Testament scholar Nicholas Thomas Wright, Jesus is the climax of the covenant. So, if the story of Jesus is a continuation of the story of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the God of covenant, and Jesus is the climax of that covenant perhaps that *is* the good news. The covenant lives. And the reality of Jesus, the Messiah, lets us know that God is with us, God walks with us. (Slight pause.)

Well all that having been said, let me come back to the letters of Paul for a minute. Why is it that Paul does not tell the story of Jesus? I want to suggest Paul does not tell the story of Jesus because Paul knows the story of the God of covenant.

And I think Paul assumes anyone who receives these Epistles will know the story of the God of covenant. And so the Apostle addresses the theology of the story. And since the theology of the story of God and Jesus is both an important point to make and is about covenant, Paul never bothers to simply tell the story of Jesus.

Mark on the other hand, perhaps because this is written after Paul is gone, I think assumes those who hear the Gospel story will *not* know those connections unless they are told about it. Hence, Mark starts the story of Jesus with the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the God of covenant. Again (quote:) “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:...” (Slight pause.)

So what is *your* story? How do you tell it? Have you recently shared your story with someone? How does your story relate to the story we find in Scripture? How does your story relate to the God of covenant?

You see, this God of covenant, this God of the Hebrew Scriptures, this God of the Christian Scriptures is a God of freedom, justice, joy, peace, hope... a God of love. That is covenant. And I think we, all of us, need to both tell other people our story and listen to ourselves as we tell that story. And I hope you do know and realize that telling your own story is helpful to those around you.

Further, those who encounter you and your story, because you tell it, will come to know you better, come to understand you in an intimate way. And yes, I do hope you take the time to listen to the stories others tell. You will get to know them better.

Why do I say that? I say that because I believe the story of each one of us, the story each one of us has to tell, does connect with the God of covenant. I believe the story of each one of us does connect with the God of freedom, justice, joy, peace, hope... a God of love, this God of covenant. (Slight pause.) And what is *your* story? Amen.

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United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

BENEDICTION: We are children of God, beloved and blessed. Let us be renewed in this season which holds the promise of resurrection at its close. And yes, hear and believe the Good News: God reigns now. Let us

depart in confidence and joy knowing that God is with us and let us carry Christ in our hearts. Amen.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Langston Hughes was an African-American poet, activist, novelist, playwright. He said this: (quote:) ‘I am so tired of waiting, / Aren’t you, / For the world to become good / And beautiful and kind?’ While I will not suggest the world will become good and beautiful and kind if we share our own story and share how our own story relates to the God of covenant, this God of freedom, justice, joy, peace, hope, love I do think being aware of one another’s stories might start us down the path of making the world a better place.”