

“Greatest Story Ever Told”

Genesis (selected verses)

September 6, 2015

Amy Pagliarella

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

In our house, this summer has been the summer of Harry Potter. Some of you may have grown up with Harry Potter. I didn't -- I read it as an adult. Some of you may have had the joy of reading it yourselves or sharing it with your children. If you haven't heard the story of Harry Potter, you have to read it - it is extraordinary! But maybe there is another story that resonates with you. Maybe you grew up reading the Chronicles of Narnia, or watching the Star Wars films or if you go way, way back you grew up on Pilgrim's Progress or The Canterbury Tales! I don't know, but I know that in all times and places people have loved stories.

The Harry Potter story is so extraordinary because it taps into something that resonates with many of us. It taps into this idea that we might look ordinary on the surface but we could turn out to be truly extraordinary. What if we had some extraordinary super power that nobody else could see? And that's what all of these sagas tap into.

Whether it's Star Wars (where the farm boy from Tatooine ends up being the one to restore balance to the Force), or Harry Potter, where an abused and unloved orphan ends up being a wizard and so brave and so good hearted and kind that the entire fate of the world rests on his young shoulders – haven't we all wished that we had some kind of power that made us truly extraordinary despite all appearance to the contrary?

So, even though we know these stories aren't real they reveal to us something that's true about the human condition. They reveal to us powerful truths that help us see and believe in forces that can't be explained; in forces that are larger than ourselves or than any one person or any one community.

So sometimes when I hear the story that we read today, I think, “Isn't that kind of tapping into the same thing?” The idea that we might look ordinary, we might feel just like ordinary people and yet, *we are actually quite extraordinary*. We are extraordinary because we are created in God's image. Not anything else in this amazing world of ours – just us. People, each and every one of us, were created in the divine image. And so we might look ordinary but we are not. We are truly extraordinary.

When I hear the story of Genesis, I think that it taps into something that people, not unlike us, must have been feeling and thinking, thousands of years ago as they, like us, tried to make sense of their world and tried to find something deeper. But I think what separates Genesis from the truly made up stories is that Genesis reveals to us a deep and eternal truth that is more vital than any other story.

I studied Genesis with one of the foremost Genesis scholars, Ted Hiebert, when I was in seminary. Ted used to begin his Genesis class by listing the many reasons why Genesis is so cool. Ted had a long list of reasons, but the one that stuck with me is that Genesis is all about beginnings or origins. That's actually what the word genesis means; it is a Greek word that means beginnings or origins. Genesis answers the questions we are all asking. Who are we? Why are we? Where do we come from? Where does everything around us come from?

As we try to answer those questions by starting with the book of Genesis, we start with this one eternal truth: our world was created for a purpose. There is a Creator who chose to make us – all of us – in the divine image of God. Not only is that incredibly powerful – not only is that one of the core reasons that we're all gathered here today – but I think it's the reason that we decided to spend this whole year, as a congregation, studying the Bible together. Genesis, as much as the story of creation, answers a lot of those questions. At the same time, it also raises a lot of questions: how do we know this? How do we make sense of what we read in the Bible, knowing that it was written thousands of years ago? There are a lot of challenges to trying to understand the stories of the Bible.

A way to make sense of this is to realize that some people are going to view the Bible as 100% real, true, inerrant; that there is nothing in the Bible that can't be understood literally. Then, way on the other end of the spectrum there are people who are going to tell us the Bible is myth. That these are made up stories, just like those the Greeks and the Romans and other cultures made up to explain the world around them.

I think the answer doesn't lie in either one of these extremes. We are here today thousands of years later because our foundation is not built on myth. Because our foundation is built on this eternal truth – the truth of who God is and truths of the people who experienced God. The people who wrote down these stories to share with us were people who experienced God personally and wanted to share the stories with those around them. They wanted to share them with their children and grandchildren and eventually wanted to write those stories down.

But I also think that we need to understand who the Biblical authors were not. They weren't scientists. They weren't trying to explain the ins and outs of how the universe was created. They didn't share our modern understanding of time, they didn't know anything about dinosaurs or big bangs or evolution or any of the other things that modern people know.

Some people might see that as a flaw in the Bible, but I don't. It is helpful to remember that when we are approaching the Bible, we're not approaching a science book or a history text. It's kind of like the difference between approaching a memoir or a non-fiction book for a class. The Bible writers weren't journalists or historians; they weren't trying to just present the facts. We know that they weren't actually present at the time of creation. Genesis doesn't pretend to be an eye witness account of what was happening. If we read it like it's the news feed on CNN headline news, we're going to do ourselves a great disservice. I like to look at this as the beginning of a memoir; a memoir that begins where the author tells the story of how his or her parents met. We know that they weren't there but we know that this is a story that has been told time and time again with great love and care because it was so important. You may have noticed that I have been saying "they" when talking about the biblical writers. That is one of the wonderful gifts of the Bible, that the stories we have were written in so many different times and places, by different people, people speaking to the needs of their communities and people who needed to be reminded of what they were doing and why it was so important. Sometimes they looked around and the world was hostile to what they believed. Sometimes they needed to remind themselves who is this God who we worship. And sometimes they did that in a worship setting – so you can imagine that what we just heard with the children and what you all participated in would be the kind of reading that people could share in worship, chorusing together, reminding themselves of this powerful God who speaks things into being.

But as we continue with Genesis, we're going to get a little bit of a more intimate God. A God who gets down in the dirt and has hands – hands that are rubbed together to make human beings... a God who likes to walk alongside Adam and Eve in the garden. We can imagine that those were the kind of stories that people liked to tell around the campfire. The stories of their own experience with God and thinking of their ancestors who might have even had the privilege of walking with God and hearing God's voice personally.

These different pieces that come together to give us the Bible are rich, powerful and they come out of communities of people struggling together just like we are going to struggle together this year to make sense of the Bible stories we're hearing. Those were the kind of people who were telling these stories, even if they were 2 or 3 thousand years ago...or maybe even more.

I think that it's so important to struggle with this Genesis story because in many ways it will provide the foundation for the other conversations we have this year. There is a humorous piece in your bulletin from Facebook; it is the entire Bible explained in a series of posts. The general gist is that God says, "All right, don't do the things I told you not to do." We can imagine what those things are.....don't be mean, don't gossip about each other, don't use unkind and hurtful words, don't fight, don't neglect the poor, look after widows and children and all vulnerable people who

need extra help. Again and again, the people say, “OK.” And then God comes back and says, “What happened? What did you do?” People say, “We did the things.” And God says, “Guys!”

And then what happens? It happens again! So God says, “You’re my people. Don’t do the things I told you not to do.” And the people say, “We won’t do the things, God.” And then the people say, “God, we did the things.” And God says, “Guys!” And it happens again and again. And this is really the very nature of the whole Bible.

Now this is a light hearted way of looking at it. Walter Brueggemann, a great Old Testament scholar, gives us a more serious way, but what he says is actually quite similar. The Creator God made our world for a purpose and created us to keep this relationship going. God didn’t just turn us loose to do our own thing and God didn’t leave the universe up to chance. Every time we do the things that God told us not to do, God comes back. God continues to call us back to grateful obedience, to respond to God. Yet, even if we don’t, God knows our world is free; we get to make these choices for ourselves. God loves and respects us too much to force us, so we get to choose if or how to respond to God.

Now we often use the word *covenant* to describe that relationship because it’s mutual. The Bible is the whole story of this push and pull. And I think it’s the story that we struggle with today, the push and pull in our own lives. That’s why we’re here; that’s why we’re spending this year reading the Bible. By making us in God’s own image, God is counting on us to try to follow as faithfully as we can. In order to do that, we need to know the stories. We need to follow. We need to know why these stories count.

These stories count because *we are always one generation away from losing the faith*. So, if just one generation of people stops reading the stories, and they don’t think it’s important to share the stories with their children or their grandchildren, the entire Christian faith as we know it can disappear.

I don’t know exactly what that looks like. I certainly don’t think we’re there. I think we have a lot of reasons to be joyful and hopeful because we are here reading these stories together. But if we look around, we aren’t hearing Bible stories told in the world around us. With the exception of the occasional B grade movie that comes out telling us a Bible story, they aren’t part of the popular culture. When I think about what it might look like if we stop telling these stories, it sounds very much like what I shared this day last year when I had just returned from sabbatical.

We had spent the summer in Spain, and one of the things that astonished me was seeing firsthand Christianity in Europe. I had heard that the church was dying in many countries but that Spain was better than most. I was eager to see for myself what the church looked like in the part of Spain where we were staying. Every town had a church, a beautiful church in the center of the town square. But when you went to visit a church, you literally had to turn the light on for yourselves. The churches were dark. We visited many, many churches as tourists; like we would visit museums or any other of the beautiful, old buildings in Spain. We would walk in and turn the lights on. We didn’t see living, breathing, thriving, joyful, loving faith. We saw buildings that were dark, not particularly life giving.

Here, this year, we have the chance to continue all the wonderful things that this congregation is already doing and yet to go deeper for ourselves and for our children and for everyone in this community by sharing these stories, in loving our God and in sharing with our broader community around us.

Sometimes that seems hard, a bit daunting, to look at the whole Bible and think, “How am I going to be able to read this? How am I going to be able to stick with it?” I want us to remember the words that we heard today. When we think about what is the point of the Bible, why does it matter - think of the words we heard this morning from Micah, “God has told you, mortals, what is good; to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”

May today be the beginning of a whole year of us as a congregation as we seek together justice and what justice looks like in our time and place - and to love kindness and the privilege of being kind to one another and to everything

around us - and to remember that we do that not just because those are good and important and wonderful things to do but to remember that we do them because it is the very core of who we are and why we are made - so that we, too, may walk humbly with our God. Amen.