

Sermon: Staying Inside the Story

Year C, Proper 17

[Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

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My beloved niece grew up outside the U.S. She goes to college in upstate New York but she's going somewhere else for her junior year. I wasn't sure if she knew how to get an absentee ballot, and it can be complicated if you didn't grow up in the U.S. to figure out what you should do. So I looked into it for her. At this point, all I can say is that I'm glad I vote in Massachusetts because New York is completely confusing. But I figured it out. And I sent her an email, with links to all the right forms and dates she needs to stay on top of. And then I send her a text message saying, literally, "I sent you an email." Because if I want to stay inside of a 19 year-old's story, I need to send her a text.

I have a dear friend, Laura, who gave the charge to the congregation at my installation here. She loves the Red Sox. But she was bemoaning how much time each game takes and how many of them there are, even if she has housework or other things to do while they're on the radio. I agreed, saying that the Patriots are certainly a complication in my life during the season, although admittedly that's only 16 games compared to 162. "Yeah," she said, "but watching the playoffs without the regular season is pointless." For her, if you want to be inside the story during the playoffs, you had to be there during the regular season.

I work in Cambridge at my other job on Mondays and Tuesdays. I won't ask who among you knows that *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* air on Monday night. I know nothing about those shows. I don't watch them. But everybody else I work with does. So on Tuesday, whether I want to or not, I am inside the story of *The Bachelorette*. Did you know there are brackets for that show? I'm familiar with brackets for the NCAA playoffs, so I had find out how it works if you guess wrong early one and your candidate gets eliminated (apparently you re-do your *Bachelorette* bracket every week, which isn't a bracket as far as I'm concerned). So here I am inside a story I have absolutely no interest in. But there's no way to escape it in my office.

We are inside of big stories: climate change, deteriorating race relations, increasing income inequality. We can choose to be more or less active in them, more or less engaged, but we are inside them. Think of the families in Louisiana. They may never have spent two seconds thinking about climate change or doing anything deliberately to increase or diminish it. But they are inside it, just as we are with our gardens still gasping despite the recent rain.

We're inside the story of our marriages, of our children's lives, of our parents and our siblings. The stories of our families we are inside of whether we want to be or not, for our entire lives. Even if we walk away from our families, the act of walking away and never returning is how we chose to handle a story we are inside of.

There are stories we can choose to be inside of. NASA recently made contact with the Stereo B space probe they thought they had lost years ago. Most of you don't care, but I find that fascinating, so I pay attention to all the news about NASA. For many of you, the pipeline was a story you were involved in, but now that's over. And for others of you, the pipeline story is only in hiatus for now, just waiting until someone tries to do something similar in the future.

If we are gathered here together, we are inside the Christian story. We are inside the story that Jesus Christ told on the lake shores and mountain tops and at Sabbath dinners. Jesus urges us to put others ahead of us, to humble ourselves and exalt others. (Luke 14:11) We invite those who have little to share in our abundance, not because they will pay us back, but because we all have so little compared to the abundance God is offering us, simply by following Jesus' teaching.

We are inside the Christian story which is an extension of the story of the ancient Israelites. It's an extension of the story that the Prophet Jeremiah was so afraid would come to an end with his generation. Jeremiah was watching the gathering armies, watching the overconfidence of the leaders of Israel and he was so afraid. God had given the Israelites so much and they were walking away from it all because they thought could go on without the fountain of living water by drinking out of the cracked cisterns they had dug themselves. (Jeremiah 2:13).

Jeremiah puts his worries into words, "They did not say, "Where is the Lord..." (Jeremiah 2:6). The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord..." (Jeremiah 2:8). They did not say. They did not say. Jeremiah isn't worried about whom they didn't say something to. It doesn't matter if it was to their children or to their non-believing neighbors.¹ Jeremiah is worried that they didn't say something at all. Jeremiah knows that part of staying within God's story is speaking God's words.

The sacred stories need to be told and retold if we are to continue to live inside them. Sometimes they need to be told so we remember: They did not say, 'Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?' (Jeremiah 2:6) Because when we say that, we remember God saying, "I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination." (Jeremiah 2:7)

We have to say the stories out loud to be a part of the reuse of these stories. The process began long before Jeremiah began to worry and it will continue long after we are dead and gone, sleeping with our ancestors is what Jeremiah would have called it. When we do not say, not to anyone, not to change anyone's view of the world, but simply to have the stories in our mouths and in our ears, we forget that we were slaves in Egypt. Because all of us have been slaves to something, at some point in our lives. God is begging to lead us out of slavery. But first we have to realize we are in slavery. When we do not say, we forget.

The sacred stories need to be told and retold if we are to continue to live inside them. Sometimes they need to be told so we recognize new meaning in them: The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.' (Jeremiah 2:8) We need prophets, true prophets, to say how they see the stories we live inside applying to today.

Imagine going to a banquet with the presidential candidate you support. How easy would it be to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind? (Luke 14:13). Because both candidates would gladly have them there to make a point about their beliefs, but both campaigns would want to fill the seats with people more likely to donate or able to influence others. How clever would you have to be to make sure that those people were invited, were fed? Because that is what Jesus is calling you to do.

¹ Walter Brueggemann. "Texts That Linger, Words That Explode." *Theology Today* 54, no. 2 (1997): 181.

Now imagine going to a banquet with the presidential candidate you do not support. How easy would it be to seek out the worst seats, sit with the people the campaigns don't think are worth courting? Already uncomfortable yourself, would you be able to help the others feel exalted? Because that is what Jesus is calling you to do as well.

We need to say. We need to say the words of the ancient stories to live inside them. We need to carry the words in our mouths, so the texts linger, so they don't disappear, so they are available when the prophets come along.²

We need to say. So that when we see a connection, when the ancient stories suddenly appear in our daily lives, we are able to tell those stories as something living, as something that connects us with our ancestors and with the God we follow.

To live inside God's story, we need to say.

² Brueggemann, 198.