

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z22
Easter 4 (Year C) 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 21 April 2019 Mother's Day and Good Shepherd Sunday

Acts 9: 36-43
Psalm 23
Revelations 7:9-17
John 10: 22-30

Tell Us Plainly

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want" (Psalm 23).

"Stories surround us like air; we breathe them in, we breathe them out. The art of being fully conscious in our personal life means seeing the stories and becoming their teller, rather than letting them be the unseen forces that tell [us] what to do."¹ Rebecca Solnit said this in a commencement speech at Berkeley. Although she may be over-optimistic about our ability to transcend unconscious forces she makes a good point. We need to pay greater attention to the stories that guide our lives and form our picture of reality.

The first Mother's Day was celebrated in 1908 at a Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. They honored Anne Reeves Jarvis a peace activist during the Civil War who cared for wounded soldiers on both sides. Her daughter campaigned to make this a national holiday.² We have holidays for great individuals and occasions. Today we honor one of the most intimate relationships human beings can experience.

In this place you will find such an extraordinary variety of relationships that people have with their mothers. Our mothers are nurturing, nagging, inspiring, indifferent, self-sacrificing, punishing, wise, fragile, resolute, faithful, dissatisfied, forgiving, controlling, heroic and loving. Some of us feel such a profound sense of gratitude, we miss our mothers so much that it feels like a kind of deep pain. Others may have a hard time forgiving our mothers for the grief that they couldn't help but pass on to us.

We are responsible for these stories and all the stories we tell ourselves. The Bible helps us to make sense of our most important stories. The Holy Spirit works through Scripture and changes who we are. My sermon has three parts: 1. a longer section on what Jesus teaches us, 2. an observation about modern life and 3. a spiritual practice.

1. Time and place always matter. Every moment in time is unique, even singular, and yet also in an almost mystical way connected to other particular moments. Each place also has a presence and symbolic power that we often don't fully appreciate. We know what a place evokes. Think of Rodeo Drive, the Lincoln Memorial, the Magnificent Mile in Chicago, Boston's Old North Church, Times Square, the Las Vegas Strip, and Castro Street here closer to home.

During the Festival of Dedication, which we call Hannukah, Jesus walks in the Portico of Solomon – both this time and place have enormous symbolic meaning for first century Jews. Both this time and place have a central importance for what the word "messiah" means.

After Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) conquered the region a severe conflict emerged between cosmopolitan Greek culture and the local practices of Jewish people. During the second century before Christ, King Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria continued to brutally suppress Judaism. In 167 BCE he built an altar to Zeus in the Jewish Temple (Dan. 11-12) and mandated sacrifice to Greek gods in every city. When soldiers tried to enforce this edict in the village of Modein a priest named Mattathias killed the royal official presiding at the ceremony.³

This led to a massive revolt and a guerilla war launched by Mattathias' five sons from the Judean Hills. Against all odds his son Judas Maccabeus ("the Hammer") succeeded. In 164 he rededicated the Temple. This is the event that Hannukah celebrates.

The place is significant too. Solomon's Portico was constructed by the last leader with a family connection to the Maccabees. Herod the Great married the last of the Maccabees and ultimately killed her and his own sons. Of course history doesn't end there. The first readers of John would know that during the Jewish uprisings in the year 70 CE, the Romans completely destroyed the rest of the Temple.

Hannukah at the Portico of Solomon, this time and place symbolically stand for desperate hopes that end in disappointment. In the face of our human tendency to put ultimate faith in armed struggle, Jesus changes the story. He moves us beyond the military hero that the people have in mind to a different picture of what it means to be the messiah.

In the Gospel of John people disagree about who Jesus is. For some he is a demon-possessed fraud and to others he is the savior of the world. This conflict builds as Jesus welcomes sinners, teaches and heals the sick. The leaders come to Jesus and say, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly" (Jn. 10).⁴

Why do the opponents of Jesus then and today fail to see who he is? Is there some idea, concept or perspective that would help? What argument would convince them to believe?⁵ This is Jesus' point. There is already plenty of evidence available on both sides. Signs can always be doubted. Arguments have counter-arguments. Believing is not simply a matter of accepting certain intellectual propositions. The faith Jesus speaks about is not an argument but a relationship.

Instead of a Warrior Messiah Jesus gives us the image of the Good Shepherd. He says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (Jn. 10). Jesus teaches that we can have the most intimate relationship with God. We can find meaning serving other people. With this, we are drawn to him both by his willingness to die for our sake and our experience of his resurrected presence.

On this Mother's Day imagine a child with ideal loving parents. In everything this child has a sense for their love. She is not objectively weighing the evidence. She does not need some form of the scientific method to understand this relationship. Her experience of their love is not even a matter of a verbal description she can offer. It rests on her experience. She knows that her parents care about her and want the best for her. She feels it in all her interactions with them.⁶

Jesus says that faith is like this. It is a trusting relationship with the God who created us and continues to care for us even when we are oblivious to this fact. This unity and intimacy with God and our neighbors is what it means to have "life abundantly" or the peace "which passes all understanding."

2. We need God's peace more today than ever. Last week at the Conference of North American Deans we heard an extraordinary lecture on the Seven Deadly Sins. The list includes: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Lust. It originated in fourth century desert monasticism. Instead of thinking of these as discrete actions (like cheating on your taxes) it is more helpful to see them as a way of recognizing that humans going wrong in predictable ways, according to reliable patterns. They are tendencies that lead to sin.⁷

Our speaker Thomas Williams pointed out that these days our whole society has a particular problem with wrath, that indignation has become normal for us. We are encouraged to be angry all the time (If you aren't angry you aren't paying attention). He asked if anger is ever justified and pointed out how easy it is for us to slip from feeling angry about social injustice to being furious over slights to our own ego. Although being envious is miserable, anger just feels so good. The problem is that it blinds us to our own faults and to others merits.

3. We can move closer to a personal experience of God but it is hard because of deeply ingrained habits. So what are we to do? How can we do more to invite holiness into our life? For homework this week I recommend that we memorize Psalm 23. In this

abundant time of exaggerated scarcity we need to be reminded that, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" (Ps. 23).

The Psalm begins by referring to God in the third person. "He revives my soul and guides me." Then as we, "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," it begins to refer to God in the second person. "You are with me... You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me..." Over many years Psalm 23 has helped my relationship with God become more personal. It has increased my desire to "dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

Before closing I want to tell you a brief story from Trevor Noah's autobiography *Born a Crime*. Although his parents loved each other their relationship as a black woman and a white European in Apartheid-era South Africa was illegal. Trevor grew up being forbidden by the state to even acknowledge his parents in public places. As a young child he went to his Swiss father's house every weekend. Then during his teenaged years his father moved from Johannesburg to distant Cape Town.

Noah writes, "When a parent is absent, you're left in the lurch of not knowing, and it's easy to fill that space with negative thoughts [like] 'They don't care.' 'They're selfish.'" Because his mother always spoke in such positive terms about his father he writes, "I knew [my father's] absence was because of circumstance and not lack of love."⁸

By the time he turned 24 he began to have some success as a comedian, radio DJ and children's television personality. His mom insisted that he become reacquainted with his father. Noah did not have his father's address and it took some time to find him. Not knowing what to expect or if he'd even recognize his own father he went to visit. His father cooked the food that was his favorite as a thirteen year old. As he ate his dad got out an oversized photo album. It was a scrapbook of everything Noah had ever done from the most minor club dates all the way through to that week.

Noah writes, "For years I'd had so many questions. Is he thinking about me? Does he know what I'm doing? Is he proud of me?" And in that instant Noah knew. He says, "Being chosen is the greatest gift you can give another human being."

Stories surround us like air. What will the story of you and God be? In this time of wrath and indignation are we so busy searching for a good argument that we can't hear the Good Shepherd?

¹ Rebecca Solnit, "Break the Story," in *Call Them By Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2018) 157.

² She also bitterly resisted the commercialization of Mother's Day. Theologian's Almanac for the Week of May 12, 2019, SALT, 7 May 2019. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/5/7/wjx6b4l32tpx06yt0a4o8ka04m1ewy>

³ These four paragraphs are influenced by 4 Easter (4-29-07) C.

⁴ Jesus seems to be saying that actions mean more than just words. "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me: but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep" (John 10).

⁵ Matt and Liz Boulton, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 4," SALT, 7 May 2019 <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/5/7/szzwsi6kvgfyedq0mg23rkw8qbv0ba>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Seven Capital Vices began to come into being with Evagrius Ponticus (345-399 CE). John Cassian developed the list and Gregory the Great (540-604 CE) made it more widespread in the Middle Ages. Thomas Williams (University of South Florida), "The Seven Capital Vices," The Conference of North American Deans, 3 May 2019.

⁸ Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* (NY: Random House, 2016) 108-10.