

The Stories that Unbind Us  
Sunday, November 1, 2015  
Revelation 21.1-6a  
All Saints Day  
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In the middle drawer to the right side of my desk, I keep notes. Some are emails I have printed to save, others are postcards; some are hand-written paragraphs, others quickly scrawled lines. Each one is a word of love, a word of encouragement, a word of belief that the Divine Spirit is mysteriously at work in our midst and that my calling, surely a miracle and mystery to me, is wrapped up in a new thing God is doing here. I keep these notes, mostly written by loving ones in our congregation and supportive ones who are delighted we found each other, for the days when I don't carry much hope. For the days when I've forgotten what is true and good. For the days when nothing feels like mystery and nothing feels like calling. On those days, I know I have that drawer full of hope—the hope that you and I sometimes tread on holy ground when we are together. Those words remind me who I am when I somehow forget.

I also have a file folder in another drawer. Thankfully, it's very thin. I pray I never need more than the one folder. That's where the strange words go, the less than encouraging words, the ones from folks who don't believe my work here is wrapped up in God's work in the world. Thankfully, no one in this place has contributed to that file folder; only strangers who came across my name on the internet. For whatever reason, there are a few I feel are worth saving, and recently, I added to that file. A man wrote to say he was new to town and looking for a church. Would I answer a few of his questions? The highlighted paragraphs from our church web site served as a big red flag that this was going to be one for the file.

Do you know that you're outside of God's will by serving as a pastor and that your power should come from staying home and being a helpmeet to your husband? How can you call yourself Christian when your web site says *this* and *this* and *this* about what you all believe.

Oh, he went on and on, though it's not worth noting. It's a game far too many people play in our country. It's sad enough when it's people running for public office, but downright heartbreaking when people claim to know the mind of God so confidently that they seek out strangers to condemn in their "God's" name. I didn't answer his questions, but I did reply, as graciously as possible, to say I didn't think St. Charles would be a congregation where he would feel at home and suggested another Baptist church in town with a pastor who has a reputation for being kind and gracious. "Blessings on your journey," I signed off. And he wrote back, "Blessings on *your* journey. It's going to be a hot one."

Oh, my.

We're at a crossroads in our culture.

Several times in recent weeks I have heard myself say, "I don't walk around thinking of myself as a particularly religious person." It sounds surprising as though I'm confessing my lack of faith in our tradition. How is a pastor *not* a particularly religious person? By definition, a pastor is even a *peculiarly* religious person.

What I mean when I say I don't think of myself as religious is, "Well, I'm not THAT."

Not...a hell condemner.

Not...a snake handler.

Not...a holy roller.

Not...a bumper sticker theologian.

Not...someone who is terrified when my conclusions are different than another person's conclusions.

Not...someone who seeks out folks of differing opinion just to rip them to shreds online in hopes of helping them see the light.

Yet somehow it stings to be judged for my journey and asked, "How can you believe all that"—all men and women are made equally in the image of God, all people can be called and used by God, the Bible absolutely must be studied with an historical-critical lens, all kinds of folks are being swept up into God's love and God's story—"How can you believe all that and still call yourself a Christian?"

In reality, I might say of myself “ I identify as Christian” or “I am Christian” the way one might say “I am Buddhist” or “I am Jewish.” But rarely if ever will I say, “I am a Christian.” Because I think for twenty years I have known that tiny article pointed toward the thin folder of certainty and anger and proof-texting and tribalism. It pointed toward a people who surely don’t include me in their number. No, I want to be in the number of that group who fills up their own drawer with grace and kindness and love and gratitude and hope and tears and promise of friendship and support. I want to be in the number of those who share their stories with me and remind me of my own story in the telling.

Amazingly, that’s where we find ourselves in our third scripture reading today. What we call “The Book of Revelation” is actually one of those letters that I keep in my drawer. Parts of it read like something that should go in that thin file folder instead, but that’s because this letter wasn’t written to us and we don’t quite know how to hear it. John wrote this letter, dripping in coded language and violent scenes, to seven churches in modern-day Turkey. These early churches knew crisis and political turmoil. They knew violence and discrimination because of the hostile culture and hostile times in which they lived. Professor Eugene Boring describes the cultural context as one that “forced the question on them: ‘Who are we?’”<sup>1</sup>

Our own cultural disconnect is not nearly so hostile, and yet we find ourselves at a similar threshold of transformation in the 21st-century Church in the United States. The seven 1st-century churches in Asia were moving from a Jewish identity to a Jewish-Christian identity toward a separate and distinct Christian identity. “Who are we” was surely not just a question on their own lips but a question being asked from the outside. Just as I have been asked by conservative evangelicals, “How can you still call yourself a *Christian*?” I have been asked by the Nones and the Dones beyond the circle of the Church, “How can you *still* call yourself a Christian?”

These seven churches were being asked, perhaps curiously, “Who are you?” and certainly deridingly, “Who do you think you are?” And beneath the question of identity is a question of who is closest to Truth—who is Right—and, most dangerously, who is most pleasing to God.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Interpretation: Revelation* (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1989)

The letter of revelation to the seven churches in Asia is an attempt to answer all of the swirling questions around these communities in crisis with particular attention to the bigger questions of “Who are the people of God?” He then begins to weave a vision that is curious, frightening, inspiring, and filled with metaphor.

And we pick up this morning with the conclusion of his letter promising that everything his readers are experiencing is moving toward a certain and specific future that God is anticipating. God’s activity in the world is not fixed in time but is steadily drawing us forward. In this future, the pain and sadness of this world are gone. In this future, the separation humanity feels from the Divine is gone. In John’s vision, “the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’...then he said...‘It is done!’” So confident. So definitive. Done! I am making all things new. It is done.

Eugene Boring notes the language John uses. It’s a bit technical but helpful in fully hearing this complex letter: “[John’s] language throughout this vision is indicative: ‘This is how it will be.’ And yet as always the indicatives of biblical theology contain an implicit imperative, the gift becomes an assignment. If this is where the world, under the sovereign grace of God, is finally going, then every thought, move, deed in some other direction is out of step with reality and is finally wasted. The picture does not attempt to answer speculative questions about the future; it is offered as an orientation for life in the present.”<sup>2</sup>

John is telling us that belief in a God who will make all things new some day, belief in a God who says, “Let everyone who hears and everyone who is thirsty and anyone who wishes to take the water of life as a gift come [to me]” (Rev. 22.17) must shape the life we are living now. These words of scripture are our guiding stories for life. What kind of life do you want to live? Who are you? Who are God’s people? Who are we? The answers lie in the stories.

What do we hear in our guiding stories this morning? A dead man is called back to life and unbound from his burial cloths. A prophet man has a vision that all of heaven and all of earth are remade by God for the sake of all people. This is not the stuff of limited thinking and literal understanding. This is the stuff that inspires us to

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<sup>2</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Interpretation: Revelation*, p. 224 (see also pp. 1-62, Introduction)

believe that, at any point, we can be made new, too. These are the stories that unbind us and free us right now for living in an abundant present.

What questions do you carry? It seems we've walked up to this line often over the past few Sundays. What will you make of your wild and precious life?<sup>3</sup> What is the central story that leads you every day? Who are you? Sometimes we're inspired to consider these questions of awakening and transformation but often we are afraid to fully receive their consequences.

Are you so paralyzed by fear or routine or old habits that it's as though your arms and legs are tied together and you fear it is impossible to take a step forward and you have all but stopped living? Does it seem the world is against you and it is easier to give in than to make a way forward? We have different kinds of guiding stories. There are the ones in that thin little folder of people who want to frighten and threaten. And then there are the stories that whisper to us of who we really are and what we have forgotten: See, I am making all things new. It is done!

We are four weeks away from a new Church year, six weeks away from presenting a new budget for the 2016 fiscal year, two weeks away from beginning an ordination council process for Stephanie Coyne, nine weeks away from a new calendar year, and in every moment we are but one second away from a new awareness, a new understanding, a new beginning. These guiding stories we tell each week are opportunities for beginning again. You want to be made new? You want to help make heaven and earth new? You want to start fresh right now? It is done!

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<sup>3</sup> see October 25, 2015 sermon for Mary Oliver quote