

Guiding Story
Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12
with Genesis 2.18-24 and Psalm 8
Sunday, June 3, 2018
Pentecost +2B
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I found myself on an unexpected, long walk with a friend last week who specifically wanted to ask me about being a pastor. I've known this person for a few years, knew that he wanted to have a conversation, but had no idea what the agenda was. Pretty quickly he said, "You're a smart person. I have to ask, do you actually believe any of the stuff you talk about? I mean a God of the universe who knows you and cares about you and calls to you? You don't actually believe any of that stuff, right?" Suddenly, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of defending not Christianity, in particular, but theism, in general. Not my scene.

And as I waxed poetic about the language of "God" being an obstacle for some people because the name has been so exploited and co-opted, as I rambled on about Eternal Mystery and Source and Creator and the universe's heartbeat of love, as I quoted Krista Tippett saying that spirituality is water and religion is the container that holds the water, he just rolled his eyes and said, "All of that sounds like a lot of words to convince yourself that something is true." And I was crushed. Not because I couldn't nudge my friend into mysticism but because I felt like I'd utterly failed to meaningfully communicate the stories that guide me.

In fact, I think the question of belief vs. unbelief isn't the helpful one to be asking in the first place because I don't think "true" and "untrue" are even fair categories when we are talking about spiritual path. Richard Rohr would warn us against this dualistic thinking. When we're talking about motion and movement, wind and fire, consciousness and waking up, that's not the language of provable science; that's the language of metaphor. It's words that point to something which cannot be explained when encountered and experienced.

If I say to you: the sand was white, the Gulf waters were aquamarine, the adirondack chairs were worn with age and wind and rain, the sun set was rose and orange and yellow, the breeze was just enough but not too much, the kids were settling down to enjoy the moment, my love was beside me holding my hand. These are details and facts that describe a moment. But you know good and well that what begins to come up for you is between those details. The way the breeze settles your heartbeat. The

way the setting sun calms your mind. The feel of your lover's hand and the sound of your children's laughter washes over you like a baptism. When a moment like that happens in a place like that with your people like that, there are details and then there is what is really going on between words and just hovering there in the breathing. This is holy mystery, and we have been trying to grab it and pin it down to describe it for thousands of years.

As we step into a summer study on the book of Hebrews, I wonder if some of the opening images might help us craft a better response about what it is we believe and what it is we in here are trying to point to with our lives. Eugene Peterson paraphrases the opening words of Hebrews like this:

"Going through a long line of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently, he spoke to us directly through his Son...This son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature."¹

The writer of Hebrews invites us into a story about the evolving and expanding ways God moves and speaks. "God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries," the preacher begins. Through prophets and angels (he adds in chapter 2) and Jesus the Christ.

Across time and across culture, we have stories. The stories shape the people who tell them and receive them and embody them. And if you think you are outside of a narrative, think again. Everyone lives by a guiding story of how we think the world works and how we think our lives fit into that world. Some stories tell to love the whole world as neighbor and other stories tell us we are the whole world and everything around us is scenery and supporting cast. Our guiding story, whatever it may be, influences the way we lean—we lean into defensive, raised hackles or we lean into loving invitation.

The writer of Hebrews seems to be a preacher, and you don't necessarily have to be a Greek scholar to hear in its reading that this was a sermon passed around among the early church. The words were meant to be shared and read aloud. It's significant that this word was meant to be shared aloud, corporately, rather than studied devotionally, individually, because of its intended goal for hearers. Walter Ong studies the differences between privately studying a written word (even those of you who look down at a copy of the sermon manuscript in worship as opposed to receiving that same word by ear) and "observes that 'the spoken word forms human beings into

¹ Hebrews 1.1-2, *The Message*, p. 541

close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker."² This thing that we're doing right now is as much about the formation of a people as it is about the transformation of individual lives.

The preacher behind the Hebrews sermon wants that unity. In sharing this word among early churches, the hope is that listeners both hear a better story for their individual paths AND find themselves knit together by a common theme; a story that God has been telling for a long time in all kind of ways through all sorts of people; a story the listeners will continue telling through their lives.

And then the preacher points back to Genesis chapter 2 reminding us from our own stories of creation that it was never good for humans to live in isolation. From the very beginning of all things, God gave us each other for community, partnership, stewardship. The writer reminds us that we belong to each other, and our stories are intertwined. The writer then moves to Psalm 8 and the poetry of God's invitation for humans to partner with the divine in the care of all the world.

This old sermon is weaving well-worn passages of scripture together to make a point: you have this old story you keep holding onto as the guide to your life. And yet there's a better one—a story of relationship, loving partnership with the divine, transcendent awareness and possibility. Christ will carry you to the Heights! Why aren't you living into this better Way?

This question applies to the Church at large and not just us individual believers. Remember that this sermon was, by design, read aloud to multiple faith communities. One of the challenges to them is that they were giving up too quickly on the Jesus Way and returning to what they had known of faith, culture, and spirituality in the 1st century. So we ask, have we given up too soon, too? What old story are we holding onto as the Church? How do we let go of that one and welcome this better story of higher partnership with God?

"The reader does not come to the end of Hebrews exclaiming, '...that proves it!'" writes Thomas Long, "but rather, 'Amen! I hear this, I see this in the eye of faith, I believe this, I will live this!' When faith sounds in the ear, then it reverberates in the heart."³

² Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, p. 6

³ Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, pp. 6-7

We will live this! And, at times, we will fail. And the preacher of Hebrews knows this. He points back to our originating stories from Genesis and whispers to us from the poetry of the Psalter. He reminds us to keep looking at Jesus. Remember the story that you want to guide you.

We will get this Way wrong sometimes, and we'll forget and start living in other ways at other times. But that isn't a statement on the un-true-ness of the thing. It's a confession of the fullness of our humanity. We get it wrong. We fall short. And this guiding story gives us some language for what happens next. We stand up, we dust ourselves off or (better yet) let our friends help dust us off, we say I'm sorry, and we set our feet right back on the path. There will be weeks when we try to express our pain and our grief and just end up yelling at the very people who awkwardly but sincerely want to love us and support us. There will be weeks when we try to make things right, but words fumble and we fail and only make things worse. We will disappoint each other. We will let each other down. We will not live up to the standards of the kingdom of heaven. Will will not live as people who know the story of Jesus.

And then a miracle happens. A new week will begin. And we will apologize. And we will straighten out our words and confess our sins. We will look each other in the eye and whisper words of great affection. We will remind each other of the story that guides us. We will remember we are on this Way together, and we will make amends. We will return to grace and lovingkindness. We will expand in our awareness and in our gentleness. We will look at what isn't working for so many in this world of ours, and we will really see our role in the both the oppression and the healing. We will rise up and take our guiding story into the streets and the voting booth and the legislative houses and the offices of power to push and change for justice. We will do all these things. We will live as sons and daughters, full partners in all things, of Jesus the Christ. Because we have this story guiding us. Amen.