

Homily at St. John in the Wilderness, Flat Rock
Sunday, May 7, 2023
1 Kings 3:5-12, Psalm 119:129-136, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
The Rev. Patricia Tanzer Askew

“Who will separate us from the love of God?”

The little Easter eggs were beautifully dyed with a multitude of colors and they were carefully hidden in the backyard. At the signal, our small children with baskets over their arms ran out to find these Easter treasures. What a great hunt it was! We discovered later, however, when it was time to make the deviled eggs, that those eggs were not quite hard boiled, but, in fact were very, very runny. So back into the pot they went for a few minutes and a story was created that would surface every time we gathered with my sister, Sue.

And what about the story of Thanksgivings when I lived in Chicago and went over to Aunt Grace’s home for a sumptuous supper each year. There were about 30 family members who attended and my aunt worked for weeks to prepare. The meal was wonderful, except that my aunt was so tired by the time the turkey and cheese brumbles hit the serving table, that she had to lie down and slept through the whole event. Another story was produced.

And how could I forget the story of Stephen, on the Camino de Santiago, taping up my sprained ankle with duct tape - watching a video on his phone to see exactly how to do it - so that I could walk the next day. We have photos to accompany this story!

We all have stories. One commentator suggests that to be human is to have a story. And to tell these stories gives our families and communities a history; a way to know who we are and how we belong.

The story we heard this morning about Solomon was actually written down over 350 years after he served as Israel's king - during the time of the exile in Babylon. The exile was when many of the Israelites were captured and forced marched about 500 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon. And now they were without the land God had promised to them, without a place to worship - the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, and under the rule of a foreign king. Psalm 137 recalls this time, "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion."

I read that, "When a culture perceives its identity to be collapsing under the weight of external threat or inner disintegration, an urgent search for a sustainable narrative begins." It was during the Babylonian exile that many of the stories of the Hebrew people were written. And they were written to help the people remember better times and to give them hope in a rather hopeless situation - and to be reminded that God had not forgotten them.

The picture that we get from the small slice of the story of Solomon read today is that Solomon was a pious, God fearing king who was given wisdom by God in order to rule effectively his people. He was given the ability to discern between right and wrong and had the favor of God for his kingship. We do read much on how he built the temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem, but we don't hear as much about who built it - worshippers of other gods. Nor do we hear much about Solomon's worship of these gods at the "high places".

We do hear of Solomon's wisdom, but don't hear too much about his conscription of foreigners and even Israelites to work on his many expansive and expensive building programs or how much taxes were raised to be able to afford all these projects. And all this drove a huge wedge between the king and his people.

In reality, Solomon's reign was a balancing act between faith and culture and between Yahweh and other gods.

But, as I said, the story of Solomon, written when his people were in Babylonian exile was written with a purpose - to bring hope to these unfortunate people in bondage. It was a story redacted, or changed slightly to remove sensitive parts that might not have increased the people's hope, which was the intention. We call this today revisionist history. And some of our own collective stories today are more about emphasizing a particular viewpoint than actually laying out the facts.

For instance, I have heard from some that the Holocaust never happened. Having just visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC a week or so ago, my opinion is that it did occur. Documents and photographs back up the hundreds of stories told by survivors of that shocking period of our history.

I also lived in West Germany about 30 years after the war ended and have heard stories from some of the German people themselves about events that took place there in the early 1940's. I also had a neighbor who showed me the ID number tattooed on her arm at Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where she was imprisoned as a child.

I have read about people of the Jewish faith who traveled on ships to relocate to the United States as it became clear that their lives were in danger in Europe - only to be denied access to our own country and sent back to Germany, where I am sure many of them perished. The Holocaust was not an event we want to think much about or talk about, but it did happen. And, I think, it would be wrong of us to dismiss a story - even a tragic story - from our history. How else will we hope to learn from our mistakes.

I have also heard unusual twists to the story of slavery in our own country - stories some of which are printed in school books for our own children to read ... and believe. One of the stories is how the black Africans were actually immigrants to this country - not unlike the Europeans who sailed over to America - coming here of their own free will.

In this version of history, how can we explain the breaking up of captured African families, of people being sold much like livestock, of beatings and forced illiteracy and no human rights. How do we square this story with the story of Harriet Tubman, who, at great risk to herself, personally guided 300 enslaved people on 19 different trips from plantations in the south to freedom further north?

Earlier this summer Stephen and I took a trip down to Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi with the intent of learning more about the antebellum south and, more specifically, slavery. We visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (sometimes referred to as the lynching memorial) in Montgomery, Alabama.

There the names of over 4700 people lynched in this country between 1882 and 1968 are carved into large metal memorials - 800 in all. Standing in the midst of

all these names of people who were lynched - a cruel and violent act of terrorism - lynched to death - in my country not that long ago as time goes - was sobering.

When I hear about making America great again, I wonder - does that include everyone?

Jesus was born into an unjust society. His people were ruled by Romans, who could be quite cruel, and with whom relations deteriorated over the years - until, shortly after the death of Jesus, the Romans destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem - slaughtering thousands of Jews in the process.

The good news that Jesus shared during his ministry was not to help his Jewish followers adjust to the unjust society that then existed, but to identify and root out evil and help those most oppressed by it. Why? So that his fellow Jews could worship Yahweh without fear and to be a light to the nations - the charge they were given by God in the time of Abraham. Jesus was helping his people write a new story - not erasing the old one - but creating a new one, a better one, a more Godly one, going forward.

The good news is not to live with evil, nor is it to change our collective stories and erase the evil from them. What we have done, we have done - let it be. God knows all our stories and the truth that is or is not in them. And, here is the surprising and miraculous and wonderful part - God still loves us despite all.

Romans 8 says, "If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor

rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And, with this assurance of the love of God, we can claim the courage in the name of Jesus the Christ and the power coming from the Holy Spirit to cast aside our own fears, call evil - evil wherever we find it, and help write a better story for the future of all humankind and of all creation. God, give us the strength. Amen.