

The Story We Find Ourselves In
Luke 4:16 – 30; 2 Timothy 3:10 – 17
Sunday, July 17, 2016

I want to start by asking you a question. What are some of your favorite *stories*? Books, movies, television, whatever. What are your favorite stories? (*You can hear the congregation's responses in the audio version of this sermon.*) For me, that's not just a *fun* question to ask, to gauge your interests. I think it can actually be an *important* question to ask. I remember asking the Pastor Nominating Committee that during one of our interviews. When we were interviewing candidates for our Church Administrator position, I asked it. I ask it in a lot of different situations because I think it's very *telling*; it can really help you get to *know* someone. Because the stories that we identify with and connect with can tell something about us. They can speak to something deeper inside of us. They are often an expression of some longing or hope or passion within us. That's one of the things that makes us human: we express ourselves through *stories*.

I've told you before how, ever since I was little, I have *loved* television, books, and movies. They have always been a passion of mine. I don't care how bad the *writing* is, or how bad the *acting* is, if you can tell me a good story and give me characters that I care about and trigger something in my imagination, then you've got me. And what I've found is that the stories that really connect with me, I want to *live* in the world that they have created. (Not *literally*, of course. I'm pretty grounded in reality.) I can imagine myself in that world. I find myself thinking, "What would *I* do if *I* lived in this world; if *I* was a character in this story? How would *I* respond to this situation? What would happen *next*? What happens *after* the credits roll or the book ends? I want it to *keep going*."

The stories that really connect with us don't *end* when the *story* ends. They keep working and living *in us* as we imagine ourselves living *in them*.

And the Bible is no different. Scripture is not a collection of *doctrine* or *dogma*. It's not a *rule book* or even an *instruction manual*. At its heart, scripture is a *story* – the story of *life*, the story of *God*, the story of humanity and our *relationship* with God, our *pursuit* of God and God's pursuit of *us*. It is the story that *defines* us and *guides* us; the story that gives our lives *meaning* in a way that other stories *can't*.

So as we're talking this morning about reading scripture as a part of worship – *what* we do, *why* we do it, and *how* we live it out – the *what* is pretty self-explanatory. We read selected stories or passages from the Bible each week. Sometimes those readings are chosen by *me*, as I see them speaking to a certain topic or theme or event that we are dealing with. Sometimes the readings are a part of the *lectionary*, a pre-determined calendar of assigned scripture readings for each Sunday that many churches follow, so that *we* are reading the same passages that *other* churches are reading here in Devon or in Pittsburgh or in California or in Africa.

Regardless of the details of *what* we are doing, the *goal* is the same as with *any* good story – that it keeps *working* and *living* in us as we imagine ourselves living in it. That we *find ourselves* in this story. Pastor and author Eugene Peterson says, “When we submit our lives to what we read in scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories, but our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.” We read scripture so that we might find our place in God's story. So that we might *know God*, and in knowing God, truly know *ourselves*.

In the stories of scripture, we learn of God's love, God's forgiveness, God's desire for justice and peace, harmony and wholeness, and we ask, "How can we live into *that* story?" We hear stories about how to treat the poor and the oppressed, how to treat immigrants and foreigners, how to treat our enemies, and we ask, "Where do we see that playing out in the world today?" We hear stories about people who are hurting and suffering and lost and how they keep going, keep holding on to God in the midst of it all, and we ask, "Where is *that* story playing out in the world and in our lives?" We hear stories about healing and transformation and resurrection and ask, "How do we *need* to be a part of that story?" We hear about God's desire for our lives, what God wants for us, how God created us to be, and we ask, "How can *that* shape *my* story?"

Scripture is the story of God's people striving (and sometimes struggling) to live out their faith in God. And as we read these stories that are thousands of years old, we can learn from them how to live out *our* faith in God.

Paul writes to Timothy and says, "You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering, the things that happened to me." And in reading the stories about Paul in the book of Acts and the letters that Paul wrote, *we* become *Timothy*, observing all these things about him, so that *we* might follow his example and continue in what we have learned from him and be instructed for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and live a godly life.

What Paul says here, the *reason* that we read scripture is to be *taught*, to be *corrected* where we are in err, to be *trained in righteousness*, so that we might be *equipped for every good work*. *That's* what it comes down to for Paul: the point of reading scripture is to equip us to do good

works; to *live out* our faith and serve God in the world. To *keep this story going* through our stories, *our* lives.

But here's the catch: we actually have to *read* it. More than just once a week, here on a Sunday morning, we have to *read* these stories, we have to *know* them, we have to *marinate* in them. And that's often the hardest part – finding time to *read* scripture during the week. Or being *consistent* about it. Or even if we *do* find time to read consistently, we often struggle to *understand* it.

I know that this is something that *I* struggle with. I often get so focused on reading the scripture that I'm *preaching* on that I forget to read it for *myself*. And when I *do*, there are *plenty* of times when I sit there thinking, "I have no idea what I just read." So if that's something that you struggle with, there are all kinds of reading plans or devotions that will guide your reading. There are apps that you can download on your phone that will help you with it. You can find all kinds of resources online. And if you have trouble *understanding* what you read, there are commentaries that can help you. One of my favorites is *The People's New Testament Commentary* by Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock. It gives you history and context and breaks down the New Testament verse by verse in a way that is accessible and illuminating.

But we have to *read* these stories. We have to carve out time, even just five minutes a day (you can read a whole *chapter* in five minutes). And more than just *reading* them, we have to let them *work* in us, *transform* us. You can *read* scripture every day and *know* the stories but still not let them *change* you, change the way you live and speak and act. We can read the story of the Prodigal Son and *know* it by heart, and still place *conditions* on our love and forgiveness. We can read the story of God providing manna in the wilderness and still think that we have to store

up more and more for ourselves because there might not be enough. We can read stories of Jesus calming storms and still not trust God to bring peace into our lives.

We have to *listen* to these stories so that they can *speak* to us and *affect* us. It's like the old quote goes, we have to let scripture comfort us where we are afflicted and afflict us where we are comfortable. When we are struggling, we read that "The Lord is my shepherd," or that, "God is near to the brokenhearted and God saves those who are crushed in spirit," or that, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us," because, "all things work together for good for those who love God." We have to let God speak to us through those words and give us peace, comfort, hope.

But we also have to let scripture afflict us, disturb us, and challenge us. That's what we see in this story from Luke's gospel. Jesus stands up in his hometown synagogue and reads from the book of Isaiah, a passage that has been very comforting for the people of Israel and a source of *hope* for centuries. But then Jesus uses *other* stories from scripture – the stories of Elijah and Elisha – as a way of saying, "Actually, this comfort? It's not for *you*. It's for the *rest* of the world." And they get *so mad* that they drive him out of town and try to throw him off a cliff! When was the last time you got so upset about something you read in the Bible that you tried to *kill* someone?! But that's what happens here.

It reminds me of when Harper Lee's novel *Go Set a Watchman*, the sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird* came out last summer. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is this beloved novel with beloved characters, and this new book *challenged* the way that we view and understand those characters. It took this person who we all thought was noble and upright and said, "There's actually some other stuff going on there that's *not* so noble and upright." And people couldn't *deal* with that.

A lot of people got *so upset* by it. We had understood this story and this character in a certain way for so long, and now this *new* story was making us look at it all in a different way. And that was *uncomfortable* for a lot of people. But what it did was give us a *more complete picture* of this character.

That's what Jesus does here in this story from Luke. He challenges them where they are comfortable to try to help them to see a more complete picture. And that's what can happen all throughout scripture. When we get too comfortable in our lives and our faith and our habits and practices, God speaks through these stories to help us see them in a new way and see a more complete picture of God and faith and life.

We get stories like the rich young man who has life and faith all figured out, until Jesus tells him to sell all that he owns and give the money to the poor. That story is meant to *afflict* us where we are *comfortable*. We get stories like the Good Samaritan, which is a nice, feel-good story about helping someone in distress, until Jesus tells us that our *neighbor*, the person we are supposed to help and show mercy and kindness and love to, is the person that we *hate*. That is not supposed to *reinforce* our comfort. It is supposed to shake us *out* of our comfort into a new way of living and being.

We have to read these stories and let God speak to us through them and open ourselves to the possibility of being *transformed* by them. We have to let them lead us to *live differently*.

Jesus says something in this story from Luke. He reads these words from the book of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the

oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He's saying, "I am the *embodiment* of that. I am *here* to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to heal the blind, and to set the oppressed free. These things that you have read about in scripture, you will see them *living* in me."

And that's how *we* are called to live this out, too. Not just to *read* these stories or to be comforted or afflicted or transformed by them, but to *embody* them. To go out and live in a way that says to the world, "These things that we read in scripture, you will see them *living* in me. Forgiveness, love, faithfulness, generosity, justice, peace, mercy. *That* is what the story of scripture is about, and I want to live in that story."

How will the words of scripture be fulfilled in *your* life?