

Text: Daniel 3: 1, 8-30
Title: Telling Stories
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After my mother's funeral, family gathered at her condominium and told stories. Aunts and uncles, cousins, children and grandchildren sat in a circle to remember and recite family lore. My mother kept detailed photo albums with names, dates, and locations affixed to each picture. They triggered stories about family vacations, quirky relatives, loves and losses, and the shared fear of riding in the car while my grandfather was driving.

It was a wonderfully rich few hours.
My mother would have been absolutely delighted.
But, what stood out to me was the defining role of story.

We all have stories that help us make sense of who we are, where we come from, what we value, and how we make our way in this world. We all have stories that define us and defend us. We all have stories....

Therapists, bartenders, and pastors will tell you that most people are not wrestling with abstract ideas but are trying to tell, listen to, and understand their own stories. They are the windows through which we see the world and the mirrors through which we see ourselves. (Jeff Munroe)
As Rebecca Solnit puts it:

Stories can be both prison and the crowbar that breaks open the door of that prison.

What are your stories?
What stories are your windows and what stories are your mirrors?
What stories are your prisons and what stories are your crowbars?

I was recently in Israel; at every historical site ~ that wasn't directly connected to Jesus ~ there were busloads of Israeli children on school trips. Little boys in matching shirts and trousers, girls in uniforms, teachers leading the way, and guards armed with machine guns....

Almost every group had armed guards. There were men and women with side arms and machine guns slung over their shoulders watching over kids in second grade.

They were often visiting places where the Israelites fought against invaders. And if they didn't win the battle they either fought valiantly or committed mass suicide. They would fight to the bitter end to either live free or die. As a BBC correspondent, who has lived the last twenty years in the West Bank, told me:

The defining story for the Israelites was the exodus. The defining story for the Israelites is the holocaust. What they hear every day from birth "is never again...."

There are individual stories and collective stories.
There are stories that shape self and stories that shape communities.
What are your stories?

Our text this morning is a story of identity.
Our text this morning is a story that shaped a community.
Our text this morning is part of our story.

A little historical context....

We left off last week with Jerusalem overrun, the temple destroyed, and the Israelites carried away into exile in Babylon. This morning we pick up with King Nebuchadnezzar plucking out handsome, well educated, young men “without defects,” to be trained in the literature and language of the Babylonians. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego fit that bill. They were the pick of the litter to be of service to the king.

I’ve known the names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for my whole life. As a child my folks would say, “Shadrach, Meshach, and To-Bed-You-Go.” And trust me, to a jaded junior high kid, nothing screams great comedy like biblical-word-play.

What I didn’t know is that they had different names. Their Hebrew birth names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Each name containing some reference to God such as: “God is gracious” in the case of Hananiah, “Who is like God” in the case of Mishael, and “God keeps him” for Azariah.

But, in Babylon they were coerced or co-opted or compromised with new names that referenced Babylonian Gods. For example, Abednego means “servant of the god Nebo.” So, my parents were sending me off to bed under the name of a pagan god? Even less funny....

What’s at issue is the question from last week:
How do we live as strangers in a strange land?
How do we live in exile?

These three young refugees were deep in the murky soup of trying to maintain identity and integrity in complex circumstances. They were on the front lines of the struggle to stay faithful to their religious and cultural identity. How do you seek the common good and resist the empire?

And then Nebuchadnezzar went too far. Rather than simply demand work product he demanded ultimate allegiance. Rather than the fruit of their hands he wanted the fidelity of their hearts.

Walter Brueggemann frames it this way:

Nebuchadnezzar is the only superpower left... He imagines himself at the center... except for this odd community of believers that has the First Commandment in its craw, this odd rule of exclusivity that precludes signing on for any other loyalty. This community, embodied by Shadrach and his friends, has ringing in its ears, “Thou shalt have no other God.”

You know the story. They refuse to bow down to the golden statue of the Emperor. They say “no” to the empire and that gets them thrown into a furnace that’s so hot, even the guards get swallowed up by the heat.

Dear friends, most contemporary biblical scholars think that the first six chapters of Daniel were actually written hundreds of years later, during another diaspora. So, this story is being told as a way to navigate similar circumstances.

How does one remain a faithful Jew under a foreign empire?

How do you seek the good and stay true to who you are?

How do you live as a stranger in a strange land?

The easy answer is to see Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as defiant heroes.

In the late 90s the Beastie Boys, white rappers out of New York City, released a song entitled “Shadrach” that, set to a fast, hip-hop beat, screams out the right to self-determination. The last lines:

They tell us what to do? Hell no!

Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego

Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego

What’s lost in that take on this text is that they survive only because of God’s intervention and God’s faithfulness. They walk out of the fire without so much as a smoking side lock and the very heart of the emperor is changed. So, while they might be defiant heroes the real power is God’s. Therefore...

whatever murky mess you’re in,

whatever fire is at your feet,

whatever the struggle,

ultimate faith and fidelity belongs to God.

That’s the formative story for Israel...

What is your formative story?

What stories define you and draw you forward?

What stories are your prisons and what stories are your crowbars?

We have all sorts of stories that link our value to performance, or piety, or financial success, or middleclass comfort, or cultural acceptance. We tell national stories about our place in the world, our right to resources, and our relationship to God. And lots of us have stories, playing again and again in our heads, that were formed by parents or circumstances or the distortions of culture. I know way too many people who hear first that they’re unacceptable, or flawed, or disappointments.

What is your formative story?

Dear friends, let me suggest that what we need are stories that root us in a deep sense of God’s faithfulness. What we need are those stories that remind us again and again and again that we are loved and accepted by God in Christ. What we need are stories, not that arm us, but that disarm us. What we need are ways to recite family stories wherein God’s promises are tattooed on our hearts and are as central to us as our names....

So, to that end, on this first Sunday in Advent, we are giving to anyone with kids this massive-year-long-daily-book of readings and activities and prayers and stories. This hefty tome, entitled *Teach us to Pray: Scripture Centered Family Worship through the Year*, is produced by the Institute for Christian Worship at Calvin College. We've had a couple families as guinea pigs use it and rave about its simplicity and creativity. There is something for every day; you can use it whenever it works....

But, we're hoping that you'll pick one up and use it with your children as a way to instill in them (and you) stories of God's faithfulness, stories of what it means to belong to God in Christ.

Sarah Zylstra will be handing them out at the back table in the atrium. Thanks to the Mom's Group they're wrapped like the presents they are. If you've got kids, or not, we want you to take one home. If we run out we'll take names and order more....

Dear friends, even as strangers living in a strange land, you belong to God in Christ. That's our central formative story, told even here at this table. Even as exiles, come and remember who you are and whose you are.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.