



Where do you Come From, and Where are you Going?

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

August 18, 2019, Hebrews 11:29-12:3

If I were to ask you, where do you come from? I'm guessing most of you would answer by saying the name of the place you spent the majority of your childhood. I grew up in Southern California, but now I've been in Minnesota so long that I feel like I'm from Minnesota. The question, "Where do you come from," can be tricky. If you asked Representative Ilhan Omar where she was from, even though one of the most important things about her right now is that she represents our district in Minnesota, we might be tempted to focus on the fact that she was born in Somalia. So it's not as simple as it seems.

If I asked you where you think our country came from, you'd likely hear many different answers. Some people would say that our country came about because of the courage of pioneers and conscientious objectors and those who risked a dangerous sea journey rather than continue to live in their own countries of origin. My great great grandparents were pacifist Mennonites who moved to Nebraska from Russia. But they weren't Russian, they were German. They had been in Russia because Catherine the Great said they would be exempt from the requirement of serving in the military if they would farm difficult-to-farm land near the Black Sea. Eventually the Russian government changed their minds, so my ancestors had to leave Russia—and they came to Nebraska, where they farmed, as

they had done for centuries. But where do you suppose they got the land for their farms? It had to have been land that originally belonged to one of the First Nations peoples that lived there, like the Omaha or Winnebago or Pawnee or Lakota. My grandfather was a Mennonite pastor who had a sense of humor. When his congregation accused him of what they saw as the sin of drinking coffee, he responded by laughing and saying that the only sin about drinking coffee was when it was too weak. So the story of my own history is a complicated mix of having been persecuted for being pacifists, and also having benefitted from the oppression of other peoples.

Where am I from? Where are you from? How far back do you want to reach? All of it impacts the present. And it all impacts our trajectory into the future.

The slogan “Make America Great Again” tells a particular story about where we have come from as a nation, a story that focuses on some pieces of our history while ignoring other parts of our history like slavery and the genocide of Native American peoples. Republicans and Democrats each have stories that they tell about the challenges that face us as communities and as a nation, and each point out the inadequacies of the other side’s story. The stories we tell on Facebook are curated and carefully selected subsets of the actual stories of our lives, which are messier and less pretty.

So where do you come from? And where are you going? What story are you in the habit of telling about your own life, and the life of the world you live in?

In the reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews for today, the author recounts a number of stories from the Bible: the story of God delivering the Israelite slaves from Egypt, even parting the sea for their liberation. The troubling story of the defeat of Jericho which includes the slaughter by the

people of God of its inhabitants. Stories of Gideon, Samson, Daniel. Some of these were stories of triumph; some were stories of great suffering and persecution. All these people are described as our spiritual ancestors who gather around us as “a great cloud of witnesses” in a story that continues to unfold today, and of which we are the main characters.

But really? Let’s be honest. When you hear the Bible read here every Sunday, how many of you see the stories as unfinished, and yourselves as protagonists in the plot? The stories in the Bible come at us across a vast expanse of space and time, and some of them are really difficult—some have violence and misogyny or describe a God who seems more judgmental than loving. Let’s get even more honest. The Bible, and the church, have been the source of great good in the world, but also a lot of oppression and violence.

So how are we to see the Bible as telling stories that we not only understand and relate to, but that we find ourselves a part of? In our culture we have no problem with stories in the movies, but somehow we’ve expected the Bible to be a scientific history book written by one person for the sake of telling us all what to do. However, I don’t think that’s what the Bible is. The Bible is an ancient anthology of literature of multiple genres that contain stories about messy people like you and me, and the ways that God interacts with these people as well as the way people perceive God to be acting. And perhaps that is exactly the point. The Bible was never meant to be a Pollyanna fairytale where everyone lives happily ever after. It was meant to show the real, gritty, imperfect and sometimes deeply flawed reality of human existence, and the fact that God is active among us in ways that lead to healing, and justice, and mercy, and life.

This summer, a group of people from St. John's read a book by Rachel Held Evans called *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. In it, Rachel describes all the different kinds of stories in the Bible, and she says this about it: "The Church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center."¹ She says this: "I am a Christian because the story of Jesus is still the story I'm willing to risk being wrong about."

What is the story of Jesus really about?

In the reading from Hebrews, the author describes these incredible stories of both triumph and defeat, glory and persecution, and says that these spiritual ancestors of ours died "without receiving the promise," and could not without us be made perfect. But the Greek "to be made perfect" would be better translated "to finish the course, to reach the goal." We aren't just the main characters in an unfinished story. We're characters in a story that is going somewhere, a story that so clearly has a destination it is compared to running a race.

The destination, the finish line, of the story of Jesus is the promise of God for healing, justice, love and mercy for all people and our planet. It is the work of God to restore and reconcile all things, through Jesus who is the beginning and end of the journey. It is the Beloved Community. In the same way that the story of recovery from alcoholism can be compared to "12 steps"—literal steps on a journey—the experience of following Jesus is compared to running a race toward justice and mercy. It's a relay in which our spiritual ancestors, with all their messy imperfections, have passed the baton to us, and it's our turn to run toward healing, to run toward the

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired* (Nelson Books, 2018) at 157.

Beloved Community and a world in which God is the main actor and in which oppression and violence are no more.

It would be downright strange if I preached a sermon about stories without actually telling one. But the story I'm going to tell today is a difficult and complex one, and I'll keep it brief. There was a young woman named Fu Li Kalter who was raised Unitarian Universalist, but when she came of age she researched many different faith traditions and communities, and ended up picking St. John's, and the Episcopal faith, as her spiritual home. She was baptized and confirmed here a few years ago. Fu Li had autism and struggled with some things, but she picked this place because she felt loved and accepted here, and because the theology we preached seemed consistent with the way we acted. However, I am heartbroken to tell you that two weeks ago she committed suicide. Her interfaith funeral service will be Thursday, and I hope you will come. Her parents gave me permission to speak about her in preaching—in fact they asked me to speak about her in preaching. Fu Li's story is one that includes both triumph and great suffering. From the perspective of Christian faith, she herself is in the cloud of witnesses watching us, to see how we will make this journey into God's kingdom, how we will run the race that is set before us. Fu Li was a beautiful human being, and an imperfect one, and we are beautiful and imperfect people too, on a particular journey in a particular story—a story about God's Beloved Community.

The “finish line” of this journey is what the word faith is about. It's about the capacity to imagine something that doesn't yet exist. It's about Dr. King being able to say that he had a dream, that he could see that the arc of history was long, but that it bent toward justice. It's about imagining a world in which everyone is kind to people like Fu Li, who other people might sometimes experience as difficult to understand or hard to relate to.

Our scriptures are full of stories of deliverance, resistance, hope, healing—to use the old fashioned word, they are stories of gospel, which just means good news.

This “finish line” of the journey of faith, the destination of our story, is never about one person alone. It’s always about the whole community. Where we come from and where we are going are pointed in a single direction: we come from the whole complex mix of our personal and communal stories in life and in scripture, and we are running, not walking, toward the kingdom of God. We are running, not walking, because the need for healing is urgent, and there is no time to waste. We are running, not walking, because the Way of Jesus takes discipline, and stamina, and commitment. And it is all empowered by the Holy Spirit, the agent of God’s love and reconciliation who goes before us, to show us the way.

I’d invite you to spend some time this week thinking about where you personally have come from, and where you are going. What would it look like for you to see your own life in continuity with the lives of people of faith in scripture? What would it look like to see scripture, not as a closed book, but as an open story that is unfinished? What if there really is a great cloud of witnesses, the people of the past and the people of the present, watching to see how we choose to live? What if the imperfections and even the violence in scripture is meant to be something that God in Christ works through us to heal?

Rachel Held Evans says this: “If the biggest story we can imagine is about God’s loving and redemptive work in the world, then our lives will be shaped by that epic... Imagine if you believed this. Imagine if every day you

behaved as though this were true: You are accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world."² **Amen.**

² Ibid., at 218.