



Our Stories, God's Story

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Matthew 4:12-23*

As you will hopefully remember, I and a team from St. John's did a bunch of focus groups here at St John's this fall. I know you've probably been wondering what happened with them. I'm here to tell you. In those focus groups we asked you things like this: "What do you find most inspiring or nourishing here at St. John's?" and "What are you most hungry for?" and "What keeps you up at night?" Over and over again, in lots of different ways, the team heard some themes. We heard that you are hungry to share more with each other about your lives and about faith, but you don't know how to talk about it. We heard that you are hungry to learn more about the tradition—many of us aren't very familiar with the Episcopal Church or with scripture in a way that makes a difference to us, and we'd like to be. We heard that you really want to make a difference in the world, but you need more ways to connect what we are doing here on Sunday and what you do in your daily lives Monday through Saturday.

After sitting with this and praying and reflecting on it, our team decided that we would begin to address some of these themes by experimenting with offering small groups in which we start telling each other some of our stories as individuals and as a faith community, and learning to connect those stories with the Great Story of who we are as followers of Jesus. So stay tuned for more information about those small groups, which we'll have during Lent in

several weeks. But what does it mean, to connect our stories with God's Story, the Great Story of our tradition?

I think that's partly what Jesus is doing in today's gospel reading. In the gospel reading from today, Jesus begins his public ministry. After his cousin John is imprisoned, he picks up the baton and begins preaching a simple message. "Repent," he says, "for the kingdom of heaven has come near."¹ The author of Matthew's gospel connects this with the story told by the prophet Isaiah: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light."² What's amazing about what Jesus is saying here, is that it sure doesn't look like the kingdom of heaven has come near. John has just been put in prison by Herod. Israel is still occupied by the Roman empire. It is a time of ongoing oppression and violence. But Jesus is living and telling a different story than the one being told by Rome, or Jewish leaders of his time. He is saying, right here, right in the middle of everything that is happening, is the kingdom of heaven, and you can repent and turn and just step right into it. The kingdom of heaven for Jesus and early Christians didn't mean the afterlife. It meant the reign of God. The kingdom of heaven for Jesus meant that you could live your life being governed by different values, different rules, a different story than the one being told around you. When we call Jesus "Lord," this is what we mean. You could live a life that does not gain power through violence, but through love. This message that Jesus was preaching was both ancient and radically new. Jesus learned how to locate his story in God's ancient story, in the stories of the prophets and his spiritual ancestors. Jesus decided to live his life according to the words of the ancient prophet Isaiah, his spiritual ancestor. He accepted God's call for him to be a "great light to people living in darkness and the shadow of death" in the

¹ Matthew 4:17

² Matthew 4:16

words of the prophet Isaiah. He was locating his personal story in the broader current of God's story.

And so what does Jesus do next? He goes out and calls some disciples. He sees Simon Peter and Andrew mending their nets, and he calls them. And they immediately get up and follow him. The same thing happens with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They leave everything and follow him. We were talking about this story in Brownbag Eucharist on Tuesday and someone said, "Wouldn't it be nice to have that much certainty following Jesus." But I don't think these early disciples had any more certainty than we do. What they had was hope. I think they saw in Jesus the possibility of a story that was different than the story around them, and they were willing to risk and to sacrifice to pursue that hope.

But what does that look like for real people in the 21st century in America?

I was recently listening to the national church's Way of Love podcast. So in this podcast, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, who is African American, was being interviewed by the Dean of Union Theological Seminary, a priest named Kelly Brown Douglas, who is also African American. Incidentally she is also the Canon Theologian at Washington National Cathedral where our former Rector Mariann Budde is now Bishop. In this podcast Dean Kelly and Bishop Michael were reflecting on the fact that both of them were descendants of slaves. And at one point Kelly pointed out that the Episcopal Church is a predominantly white church. She asked Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, what does it mean to you, to be a black man, the black Presiding Bishop, descendant of slaves, for a white church?

In response he shared a story about his youngest daughter Elizabeth. When Elizabeth was a little girl she was playing and her finger got caught in a door.

The door closed on it and it actually took off her finger. So he rushed her to the hospital, and as they were waiting for her to be treated, he was rocking her and holding her and trying to comfort her. And he found himself telling her this: “You are the descendant of old slaves who lost everything they had, and they made it. You are made of tough stuff, and this hurts. A lot of life is going to hurt. And you are going to fall, and you’ve got to get yourself back up.”³ Bishop Curry went on to say that he realized this is what his grandmother had said to him when he was a child and had gotten hurt. He said that his family and his community “knew the legacy of those ancestors who had suffered so horrendously and worked so tirelessly so that not they but that those who followed them could live the dream...”⁴ He said that because he was aware of their sacrifices on his behalf, he knew growing up that he “had to be part of humanity in a way that made a difference.”⁵

This origin story, for Bishop Curry and Dean Douglas, had merged with their story of what it is to be a follower of Jesus. He said that he knew his own call was to remind the Episcopal Church that it was time to “follow Jesus for real.” This is the story that Bishop Curry is living into. His story and God’s story have merged. The story Bishop Curry is living and telling is different than the stories swirling around us in our culture, and it is a living beacon of hope and a testament to the power of God’s love that is the only thing stronger than oppression and violence and death.

So that brings us to today. What story are you living, consciously or unconsciously? What story are we living as a community, this story of St. John’s? Are we living the story of a church community that supports one

³ Excerpts from “Bonus--Interview with Dean Kelly Brown Douglas (Part 1)” (Season 2, Episode 13), *The Way of Love With Bishop Michael Curry Podcast*, January 7, 2020, accessed January 26, 2020 at <https://wayoflove.episcopalchurch.org/episodes/season/2/episode/13>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

another? Are we living the story of a beautiful neighborhood church in Linden Hills where people are respected and raise their kids with good values? These are good things. But surely we are more than that. We have spiritual ancestors, and they are not the founding fathers of this country. We have ancestors like Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, and Moses, and David and Bathsheba, and Mary and Peter and Paul. We have Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich and Theresa of Avila and William Wilberforce and Bishop Whipple and Enmegabowh and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King. Most of all we have Jesus. This is our lineage and our heritage and our story. Our spiritual ancestors are always the ones who, within the great darkness, see a great light. Our story is the story of Jesus who shows a God who does not use violence, but who brings those at the margins to the center, who heals the world through love. Our story is the story of Jesus who is willing to risk and sacrifice everything to reconcile all people and the earth to God.

Like Peter and Andrew and James and John, we call follow Jesus even though we don't have certainty. We wrestle with lots of things. The way forward isn't always clear. But what we do have is hope. As Rachel Held Evans, who wrote the book we studied this past summer, put it: I am a Christian because the story of Jesus is still the story I'm willing to risk being wrong about." We are going to find out how God is inviting us to step forward into following Jesus, as a community, for such a time as this in the life of the world God so loves.