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## ***So What's the Story***

***Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29***

***A sermon preached by Vicar Andy Hanawalt at Paradise Lutheran Church on 07/15/18***

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So the readings we heard today are sort of difficult. And as I thought about what I wanted to say this week, I found myself going around in circles. I'd start thinking in a particular direction, maybe even write for some, and then hit a brick wall, not quite sure where to go next. I know you probably not all that interested in my process, but I'm mentioning it to you just to highlight that the lectionary texts leave us thinking: why did they choose this? What do they want us to get from these readings. And if you've been coming to church for awhile, I'm sure you've had the same questions on certain Sundays.

So my week has been full of false starts and spinning my wheels, reading uninspired and unconvincing commentaries on our texts, sifting through a bunch of half formed or half baked ideas. And then early yesterday morning I thought maybe it would be interesting to explore why exactly these texts we're so difficult for me? Why am I finding it so hard to write a meaningful sermon based on the Bible passages we just read.

At first I thought that it was maybe because the texts were just too bleak, too sad, and too dark. We have an Old Testament prophecy about how the Northern Kingdom of Israel is continually failing to live as God's people, and that God would soon be forced to lift his protection and leave them to the violence and exile to follow as they are invaded by Syria. And of course we have the gruesome and cruel story of John the

Baptist's beheading. It's sort of hard to read these passages and see the “good news.”

But as I thought about it, I realized that the bleakness of the passages wasn't my problem. I've preached on dark, violent, and upsetting passages before. What was bothering me was something a little deeper and something a little harder to put my finger on than the violence of the passages. What was bothering me was that I was looking for a couple of “points” and “takeaways” I could neatly package up instead of first appreciating the readings as part of a messy, textured, complex story—a story that's *ultimately* good, true, and beautiful, but that goes through some dark places on its way to the light; a living, continuing, story that you and I—as Christians, are still a part of today.

For those of you who don't know, for our vacation the last couple of weeks, Christine and I took the kids down to Hollywood, Universal Studios, and Disneyland. We had a wonderful time, but being away from the church altogether and in that environment for a couple of weeks, I experienced the full intensity of the alternative stories and values promoted by our image and advertising driven secular, popular, and commercial culture.

This got me thinking about the power “stories” have over our lives and our thoughts. Stories about the world and our place in it, stories that define what's meaningful and valuable to us. We don't always think about it this way, but as humans we tend to organize our lives into a series of overlapping and interlocking stories.

Things happen to us one after the other, in an undifferentiated list, but don't really experience life that way, and

we certainly don't remember things that way. We highlight the relevant points and disregard the unimportant things, fitting things into a narrative—a story we can tell ourselves or others. As adults we each have a story of growing up. Many of us have stories of our families, stories of love, of romance, of betrayal, of sacrifice, and of friendship. And when we zoom out a little we see ourselves as being a part of several larger stories, the story of our country, the story of western civilization, the story of world history--sweeping epics that sometimes just set the background to our personal stories, and other times seem to directly intersect with our lives—like when someone is drafted into the army to fight in Vietnam War, or when someone marches the civil-rights movement.

The point though, is that no matter how far removed or tenuous the connections seem, our own lives are *always* part of a bigger story, or several bigger stories—and this is how we orient ourselves, define ourselves, and make sense of the world. And in today's world it can be all too easy to let our Christian story, our very core identity, become muted, pushed into the background, and maybe even forgotten when our culture saturates us with the louder, powerful, and ever present alternative stories.

As Christians, we define ourselves, we orient ourselves, and we understand ourselves, as being a part of the big story of Christ and the Church. This is who we are underneath it all. We may be a part of the story of our country—but we shouldn't allow patriotism to displace our identity in Christ. We may be a part of the story of enlightenment and the scientific revolution, but we shouldn't let enthusiasm for progress and ever expanding scientific knowledge displace our identity in Christ; and we may be a part of the story of industry and higher living standards, but

we shouldn't let consumerism replace our identity in Christ.

One of the most important things we do, I think, when we gather together to worship Sunday mornings, is to remind ourselves and each other that we are a part of a story bigger, more mysterious, and more beautiful, than any of these other stories that press in on us from all sides. We're part of the story of the life of God.

And because this is a true story we should expect it to be complex, many-sided, and sometimes hard to understand. And we can come together and hear about Israel being warned impending exile and of John the Baptist being cruelly executed without the need to quickly and easily to grasp a clear theological lesson. These stories have meaning to us because, as the Church, the story of Israel and of John the Baptist are parts of our story—and we live in continuation and in communion with those who came before us in the faith.

Now, its easy for me to stand up here and blame the pressures of secular culture for making it hard to fully connect with the Christian story, but the church itself is partially to blame for this. From at least the third century, the church has sought to truncate the gospel by trying to boil down the complicated mysterious and fully textured *story* of God, into a set of theological propositions, dogma about the nature of God, or the mechanics of forgiveness, or proper ethical behavior. All important things, but easily forgettable when not anchored in the story the Bible tells.

When the Church came together to articulate its faith in the forth century, the story of of Israel and most of the Biblical narrative is conspicuously absent from it's creeds Bible in the words of the Christian creeds:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary . . .*

Wait a minute; how did we just jump from Genesis to Matthew, ignoring all *38 books of the Old Testament*? Isn't God's covenant with Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and David much of what the Bible is about? Isn't that an important part of the Christian story? Or is that all just background information—a “setting” for the story of Christ that could have just as easily been something else?

The reality is that our faith is flattened out and drained of much of its color when we *just* see the Bible in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. The real story it tells involves creation, fall, covenant, Israel, and redemption.

When we see this larger story the Bible is telling us, the texts talking about the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and its people going into exile begin to have more meaning to us. The same is true for the story of John the Baptist and his belief that he was preparing the way for a Jewish Messiah.

After King Solomon, Israel split into a Northern and Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom *was* destroyed and its people—the so-called lost tribes of Israel—were sent into exile and disappeared. And it was the horrifying knowledge of the meaning of exile, of having their core identity and civilization swallowed up and wiped from the face of the earth, that informed the way that the Southern Kingdom interpreted its

own exile to Babylon 200 years later.

To their astonishment, God remained with them as they went into exile in a foreign land—away from the temple, the center of their culture, the thing that defined them as Jews. And it was this knowledge that God was still with them, still faithful to his covenant after all, that gave rise to a new sense of identity not tied as much to their temple as to their biblical texts. And this experience of God's faithfulness to his covenant became the basis for the Jewish hope and expectation of a messiah, who would eventually fully liberate them as a nation and allow them to be a light to the gentile world. But this is all passed over when we stick to creeds and abstract doctrines.

The Bible tells us a story where God made the world—at least in part—so he could claim a people as his friends. That covenant was made with a people, Israel. God didn't choose Israel because it was special but Israel became special because God chose it. God and Israel had a love affair for many centuries, but their relationship was damaged by sin and evil. Eventually God sent his son Jesus to sum up everything about creation, everything about Israel, and everything about himself. And this was the time, it seemed, to open that precious covenant out to the Gentiles, or in the words of Paul to “graft them into Israel’s covenant.” The Gentiles—that is, you and I—could become part of the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit came to gather the Gentiles and all creation into the passionate and everlasting covenant between God and Israel—an expansion and enlargement that Jeremiah, Jesus, and others identify as a new covenant.

So when we gather around the Lord's table today we're doing more than just moving into a sacred space of closeness to God and each other. We're not only acknowledging the grace that

binds us to God and to each other, but we're stepping into the reality of a story: a messy, baffling, mystical, confusing, good, true, and beautiful story. A story so much greater than we can every fully comprehend in this life. The story of God, Israel, Jesus, The Holy Spirit, The Disciples, and The Church. The story of you and the story of me.

**AMEN**