

Advent 2 Year B
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The Bible is full of wonderful stories, as well as some that aren't so wonderful. You maybe have some favorite stories as a child--the story of young David slaying the giant Goliath with just a slingshot and five smooth stones. Or maybe it was the story of Jacob and his dream of angels climbing up and down a heavenly ladder. Or maybe a cleaned up version of Noah's ark, just the animals, two by two, and the rainbow, with none of the nasty bits about God destroying the earth. There are the stories Jesus tells--the good shepherd, the lost coin, the mustard seed.

And of course, if we look at all of those stories together, we find that all of it, the Hebrew stories of the Old Testament and the newer stories of the New Testament, they are all really, one big story--the story of God and God's relationship with us, humankind.

Though there are many characters in the story: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his son Joseph who had a coat of many colors, Moses, David, Mary mother of Jesus and her cousin Elizabeth, I think that sometimes it is easier to think about the three biggies.

There is, first of all, God. God who gets the story off to a start by sorting out the chaos and creating the good earth and all that dwell there.

Then there's us: humans, created by God and called by God--good. The third character in the story isn't really a character at all, but nonetheless plays a starring role. The third character--well that is sin.

A couple of years ago my friend Mark, who some of you met when he was here for our celebration of new ministry, went to a conference that was given for young leaders in the church. One of the topics that came up was the need to better define the word sin. Sin, they argued, has become a word that carries either little meaning or the wrong meaning for modern Americans. A new word is needed to carry the meaning of sin that scripture witnesses. The 20 and 30 somethings were asked, well what word or words would you use to describe sin? Their response it would be impolite to quote exactly, but it was something along these lines: human sin means that we are really, really messed, except that they used a word more vulgar.

Fair enough, sin isn't just something that we do, like swear, or cheat or whatever, it is the condition that leads us to swear or cheat or whatever.

It is the condition that prevents us from being all the glorious things God intended when he made us as humans.

So, here's how the story goes: There's God, going about being God, creating creation, creating us and then setting us free in the garden. With one small gift: the gift of free will. The gift of choice. We use it poorly. It will not be the first time we use it poorly. We have discovered our free will and along with it, our capacity to sin.

Over the course of history, sin will lead humans off track. Things will get really messed up. People will suffer for it: Pharaohs who make Hebrews into slaves, good kings like David who fall prey to temptation--one temptation after another--and remember, David is God's man. There will be big superpowers like Babylonia and Rome who misuse the land and the people of Israel.

Very bad things happen--this character we call sin is a very busy player.

But here's the deal, through all of this, there is this other thing that happens over and over and over again: God breaks into the mess to straighten things out. He taps Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. He softens the heart of Cyrus the great, the Persian king who conquer Babylon and the people are free to go home. Over and over again God intervenes to bring the people back to the story of God's love and providence--to make it their own story too.

The story as a whole is this: God makes us, we mess up, God intervenes, sometimes dramatically so, and eventually brings things round right. Someone I know said that he sees the whole of scripture as the story of God's interruptions of the sad legacy of human sin, in order to bring about new beginnings, new life. In order to begin again.

In order to begin again, especially if we are the particular humans who have messed up, something else is required: repentance.

Remember, both John the baptizer and Isaiah, in that beautiful reading, either speak of repentance outright, or infer it.

Now, the definition of repentance isn't saying we are sorry, though we may indeed feel sorry for what we have done, or what we have failed to do. Nor is it guilt, though we may feel guilty. We might think of it as regret--regretting not what we have done, but who we have become.

But repentance also involves the decision, the very act of deciding, that we will strive to do better. And, in fact, it is an even bigger word than that, a more powerful act than that. It is the word, and the act, whereby we stand up and say "God's story is my story too--and I seem to have lost the plot." It is saying, "I want to be a part of God's story again"

Repentance does mean turning away from the sins we have done, ---and we all do them, and starting anew. Not a bad thing to do and thank God we are given the opportunity to do that. But there is a bigger meaning to the word, and it is the meaning John the Baptizer has in mind when he speaks to the crowds who come down to the Jordan River. It is the meaning that Isaiah has in mind as he sings to the people:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

so, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

There is a question in this meaning of the word 'repentance' and the question is this: "God is about to do a new thing, begin a new chapter in the story: do you want to be a part of it?" If so, a way must be prepared in the wilderness of our hearts and our lives. There is no God walking in our lives, working in our lives, without us wanting it. Without us knowing we want to be a part of the story too.

So, I think, that is the question we are left with on this second Sunday of Advent, a Sunday where the writing of Peter reminds us, we wait with some impatience for the coming of God. This season of waiting for God: Stay ready, because it can happen anytime and anywhere. That is a truth the ancient Israelites knew well: God does interrupt life to bring about new beginnings.

So we wait, and while we wait, we keep in our minds and hearts the option, the need of repentance that Isaiah and John the baptizer call out us to:

God is about to do a new thing--come, be a part of it. God's story is your story too.