

The Stories We Live By

Luke 9:10-17

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ 24 June 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

10 On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. 11 When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

12 The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.” 13 But he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.”

14 For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” 15 They did so and made them all sit down. 16 And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. 17 And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces. (Luke 9:10-17, NRSV)

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I was the first child in my family. The oldest of three boys. And there was a story I told myself about that role. I would be the best. I would obey the rules. I would study hard. I would go to college. I would always maintain a good reputation. I would never make a mistake. (I know, pretty crazy!)

This was what it meant for me to be the first child in my family. This is what it meant for me to be a man in my culture. This was my narrative. This was the story I lived by. I can bore you with countless tales of how I tried to live out this story—how it sometimes helped me and how it sometimes destroyed me.

We all have stories that guide us. Stories we tell ourselves that direct our lives. Narratives that influence (if not control) our direction.

So what is the story you live by? What is your

narrative? Perhaps it is a simple, personal one. Or maybe it has a bigger scope. How about this story, “Everyone is out to get me.” Or maybe this one, “America is an exceptional nation.” Or this story, “I can do anything I set my mind to.” Or this one, “No one from our neighborhood ever makes anything of themselves.”

Think about it, what story are you trying to live out as a person? What story are we trying to live as a neighborhood or nation? How does that story control or direct who you are, who we are, today?

Now let’s think about the Bible. Have you ever considered the fact that the great percentage of writing in scripture is story? Have you really embraced the reality that the Bible is mostly narrative? That’s a pretty important fact.

For some reason, the writings we have in the 66 books of the Protestant Bible are mostly story. Of course, we have little bit of philosophy, a dash of poetry, some rules and instruction—but mostly we have narrative.

And this is important. You see, we human beings, we Christians often want to reduce everything to formulas, rules, and concepts. But that is not how God comes to us. God comes to us in story. And that is Good News.

“The Word become flesh and dwelt among us.”¹ God decided to join in the human story. And I suspect God is less interested in us analyzing the story like we are dissecting frogs in 8th grade science class than God is in us entering the story and joining in the dance of the spirit. That is where we discover the truth, that is where we discover the meaning, that is where we discover the reality of God.

Now please don’t get me wrong, by “story” I don’t mean fiction. Like you I stand on the historicity of much of what I see in scripture. But just because we can recount and celebrate an actual event doesn’t mean we have been formed by its truth. We still need to enter the story, to take it on as our own, to let its narrative guide us. As I have heard it said by more than one Bible scholar, “we don’t interpret scripture—scripture

¹ John 1:14.

² Luke 9:13, *NRSV*.

interprets us.” Can we let the Bible interpret our lives? Can we let the story of God have its way with us?

Today we come to a Bible story that is so important, it is the only miracle story of Jesus that is told in all four gospels. And while the details vary in each book, the story is essentially the same in each telling.

Once upon a time Jesus’ disciples returned from a mission on which he’d sent them. After they make their report to him—he takes them away to a place just north of the sea of Galilee, not far from some of their homes. It is a deserted place and perhaps they are there together for rest, perhaps to pray and revive.

As you might expect, by this time Jesus and his followers are well known enough to attract a crowd and people find them — even as they try to get away. Yet, oddly, we are told that Jesus “welcomes” the crowds teaches them about the realm of God, and offers healing to the ill and broken.

Then late in the day, Jesus’ disciples come to him, worried about the crowd and they logically suggest that he send them away to find food and lodging. But Jesus will have none of it and responds with a striking command—“You give them something to eat.”² The puzzled disciples look around and report to Jesus what they see, “There are 5000 men here (and more when we count women and children) and all we’ve got is 5 loaves of bread and two fish. Unless we go and buy food that will not be enough.”

For some reason that really doesn’t stop Jesus, who starts by telling the disciples to organize people into groups of 50 each. Then he begins the fourfold process he will do at least one other time at the Lord’s Supper. He takes the bread (and fish), he looks up to heaven and blesses God for the food, he breaks the loaves, and he gives it to his disciples to distribute. Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives. Actions he probably did again and again. Actions we do every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

We are then told “All ate and were filled.”³ That, my friends, is the very simple, understated, yet powerful description of this miracle. When Jesus intervenes, “everyone eats and is filled.”

Then the story concludes with these words to remind us of God’s abundance, “What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.”⁴ Twelve

baskets—lots of food—far more than 5 loaves and 2 fish. Twelve baskets—perhaps reminding us of the twelve tribes of Israel.

What a simple yet powerful story. The first thing to do is to just drink in its power. The first thing to do is to just celebrate God’s provision. A true miracle. A sign of God’s kingdom. An opportunity to wonder.

But we are actually invited to do more. If we just acknowledge the miracle and move on, we may have missed some very important things. If we move to quickly, we only see the *what* of this story, but we have not yet explored the *why*. Yes, this is a miracle story, but it is so much more.

There are at least three things I want you to notice here. First, this story is a story about *identity*. About Jesus’ identity. Look at the passages that come just before and just after this text.

This miracle story is preceded in Luke by a story about the evil figure of the ruler Herod, the same one who executed John the Baptist, and the tale ends by Herod asking about Jesus and offering this question, “but who is this about whom I hear such things?”⁵ Herod asks a question about Jesus’ identity.

The miracle story is followed by another account asking who Jesus is. But this time, Jesus himself who asks the question of his disciples, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”⁶ You can read on to see how his disciple Peter responds to this question. But what I would like us to notice is this—the passage we read today comes right between these two questions about identity, between two inquiries about who Jesus is.

It as if the Gospel writer is saying to us, “do you want to know this man’s identity—do you want the answers to these questions? Then look at *this* story, right here.”

So, we ask, what does the story tell us? It tells us a lot about Jesus’ power and authority, after all, he makes miraculous provision for the crowds. We might even say that this confirms his divinity.

But look closer, what kind of miracle does he do? Does he dazzle us with a magic trick? Does he bring down lighting or withhold rain like some callous but powerful God of Rome? No, what Jesus does is simple, humble, almost without drama. Jesus sees people’s need and serves them. Jesus sees people hungry and invites them to dinner. Jesus notices plain folk, and meets them

² Luke 9:13, *NRSV*.

³ Luke 9: 17, *NRSV*.

⁴ Luke 9: 17, *NRSV*.

⁵ Luke 9:6, *NRSV*.

⁶ Luke 9:11, *NRSV*.

where they are. This loving service is at the heart of who Jesus is.

So we start with Jesus' *identity* and then we find that this is a story about *interruption*. We are not told in this story about why Jesus and his friends withdrew from the hustle and bustle of life. But it is a good bet they needed rest. Or decided to take some time in worship and prayer. Or perhaps even met up with their families. They took a retreat.

But Jesus does not let that decision get in the way of serving people. Whatever he was doing, he sets it aside. He welcomes the crowd, teaches the people, healing their disease and instructing his disciples to feed them all. In this story we see Jesus embracing interruption as if it were an opportunity. We see Jesus creating an opening for the kingdom of God.

If we begin with identity, continue with interruption, we end with a story about *intention*. Many of us read this story and are amazed at what Jesus does here. We are blown away at the miracle that Jesus performs.

Yet I have always been struck by one very important phrase here. It is a phrase that points not to Jesus but to his followers. Verse 13 has Jesus telling his disciples "You give them something to eat." The Good News Version says "You yourselves give them something to eat!"⁷ Don't you find this a little bit odd? Here we find the one we know as the embodiment of the God of the universe—outsourcing divine power. Here we find the Holy One asking mere humans to take on his work. In this story we see that Jesus' intention is to have his followers do what he does. Jesus' intention is for his disciples to be his hands and feet in the world.

This story invites us into an experience of who Jesus is—and we understand his *identity*. This story also invites us into a reflection on the things that come to us in life—and we understand that *interruption* is often an opportunity to love and serve. Lastly, this story invites us into a consideration of what it means to follow Jesus—and we understand that Jesus' *intention* for his disciples is to share his power and in doing what he does.

I want to end with one more thought. We have great stories in scripture. Some people might even Christians have the best stories. And whatever else we might say about our faith, I am certain that God is inviting us to join in the story of God's interaction with humanity. We are asked to share in the "mighty acts of God."

But pay careful attention to this—God's stories often stand in opposition to the stories we live by. God's stories are often a counter narrative to tales we tell ourselves.

Think about it, in a world where leaders demonstrate their power in violent or abusive ways, Jesus' *identity* was grounded in a power that serves people's needs and welcomes them into his circle. In a world where most of us are so focused on our own projects and pain, Jesus told us there is a story where *interruption* is not a problem to be solved but an invitation to make a difference in people's lives. In a world where we often feel weak and helpless, when many of us would like to give over our agency to another, Jesus shows us a story where his *intention* is that we claim his power and work on God's behalf in service of others.

There are so many kinds of stories that people are telling in our world today. There are many stories that we embrace in our own lives. This week, I have been thinking a lot about the stories we tell as we consider the plight of children being imprisoned and families separated on our southern border. Think of the different words we hear: "They will overrun our country." "People are taking our jobs." "There are too many criminals." "We are a nation of laws." Or one that I tell myself frequently, "I can never make a difference."

How might today's scripture story stand as counter narrative to these stories? Does it? Could it be that the Jesus who feeds the crowds is more interested in mercy to those in need than to to laws of any particular country? It is a story worth thinking about. Could it be that the Jesus who takes time away from his own projects can turn what seems to be a nuisance or problem or interruption into a chance to rise above who we have been? It is a story worth thinking about. Could it be that even when we feel helpless, it is God's intention for us who call ourselves disciples to know that we are empowered to actually do something about the issues we face in our world? It is a story worth thinking about.

I wonder, when we look at our lives, what story are we telling ourselves? I pray (like the old hymn) it is a story we love to tell. I pray that it is Good News for us. I pray that it is Good news for all people. I pray that it is a story that everybody can join. More than anything, I pray that it is God's story.

Amen.



⁷ Luke 9:13, *GNT*.

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. What stories do you live by? What are the controlling narratives of your life?
2. Read Luke 9:10-17 again. What do you notice that you have missed before? Why do you think this story is so important that all four Gospel writers include it?
3. If you were telling this story to someone who had never heard it, what elements would you emphasize? What is the story inviting us to think about?
4. Jim said that this passage is a story of identity, interruption, and intention. Think about and discuss those three things.
 - a. What does the story teach us about Jesus' **identity**?
 - b. How does Jesus deal with **interruption** in the story?
 - c. What do we see in the story about Jesus **intention** for his disciples?
5. God's stories are often a "counter narrative" (a challenge) to our stories. In what way does the story that we read in Luke 9:10-17 challenge the stories/narratives/beliefs of Jesus' day?
6. How is what you hear in this story a counter narrative to the story you tell about your life? How is it a counter narrative to the stories we tell about our nation and world?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What does this story tell us about Jesus?
How are we like the disciples in the story?