Sermon for March 17, 2019, Lent 2

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17 Luke 24:25-28

Lord Jesus Christ, send your Spirit upon these words that we may be different because we have listened. Amen.

Living The Word

Everybody has a story. This truth was made clear to me many years ago by a former pastor. I was having trouble understanding why a particular church member was acting the way she was, and when I asked for my pastor’s opinion, he simply said, “Everybody has a story.” Period. No speculation. End of discussion. What he meant was, in part, that people act or react the way that they do because of where they come from and because of their personal history. Once I understood that truth, it was a lot harder for me to judge others because I, too, have a story. And so do you.

Our stories come from our own unique upbringings and experiences, and they equip us with survival gear that later in life we need to outgrow, but many times we often fail to realize that. Mental health therapists tell us that those of us who were raised in abusive families will tend to be abusive in our own households and relationships. Those of us raised by alcoholic parents will tend to become people-pleasers. Those of us raised by very controlling parents will tend to become nonconformists. Only children often acquire different characteristics from children with siblings, and on and on as each individual story is formed.

The importance of our stories is this: we can become stuck in them and defined by them. It takes a journey of exploration to understand our history, where we come from, so that we can understand who we are today, now. During that journey, we make discoveries, some pleasant, some not so pleasant, but essential discoveries that help us determine what we can let go of, and what is worth keeping, what defines us, and what really no longer matters. It’s all called “growing up,” which not everyone does. We undergo this journey if we really want to be the people God created us to be. Not who our parents wanted us to be. Or our grandparents. Or our spouses. Or our institutions. But God. To know who God created us to be, we have to know our spiritual story, as well, which is found in scripture.

Jesus made that same journey. Some of my former confirmation students had a hard time understanding when I explained to them that Jesus was a Jew. Some adults have difficulty with that, as well. But Jesus’ story is that he was born of and reared by Jewish parents. These Jewish parents taught him their spiritual story, included him in their family rituals, and so he went to synagogue with them and learned those scriptures—all Old Testament, remember--and he practiced Jewish rites, and later in life he taught in those same synagogues. The Jewish people’s sacred story, the story of their identity as God’s chosen people, was in his bones.

But along the way, as Jesus himself grew up, Jesus modified their story so that it became his story, one he could share with all people, including those outside the fold, which is important to remember. So many times throughout the gospels Jesus says, “You have heard it said, but now I say . . .,” interpreting the old message, the Law, in his inclusive, grace-filled way.

Being human like us, Jesus, too, had to let go of many pressing, heavy expectations and old ingrained records in order to become who God called him to be. Remember some of his friends and family making fun of him? “He’s just Joseph’s son, a carpenter from Nazareth,” or when Jesus, having to live into who he was meant to be, asked “Who is my brothers and my mother?” Remember the pushback that he constantly received from the Teachers of the Law when they tried to test him and entrap him in his interpretation of scripture, which he understood much more fully than they did? Remember how they finally accused him of blasphemy, which led to his death? Yet Jesus never let go of scripture which he quoted again and again throughout the gospels. How many times might Jesus have faltered if his reliance on scripture had not undergirded him? Scripture was an essential, fundamental part of self-understanding that guided him to walk his own unique path.

And walk Jesus did! Cari Haus, who writes for the Web site ILuvWalking, says Jesus traveled distances on foot that we have a hard time comprehending. Here are some of the figures:

\* If Matthew’s story is accurate, Jesus, as a young boy, would have walked about 400 miles with his parents during their return from Egypt to Nazareth.   
  
\* Every devout Jewish male in Galilee was expected to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for religious festivals, which meant a 240-mile round trip from Nazareth x 3, which equals 720 miles/year.

\* Based on the gospel accounts, Jesus traveled 3,125 miles in his three-year public ministry alone. His disciples would have walked many of those miles with him.   
  
\* A conservative estimate of the distance Jesus walked during his lifetime was 21,525 miles. The actual distance traveling around the world along the equator is 24,906 miles*.* So it is no surprise that we find Jesus walking with two disciples who are wrestling with their own stories and helping them understand through scripture how his story intersects with theirs on those crucial short seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

As we saw last week, these two characters, Cleopas and his companion, are walking away from the disappointment of Good Friday and the confusion of Easter morning. They are heading out of the city to what appears to be their home, to their sanctuary in Emmaus. Most of the other disciples decide to hide out together in Jerusalem, but these two keep walking, in public, and the risen Jesus, who is still walking, joins them on the road. Remember that he asks, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” (v. 17). What we first discover is Jesus’ willingness to let Cleopas express questions, doubts, and fears before providing answers: “We don’t know why this happened. We don’t know where Jesus is.” And those questions are okay. Maybe we’ve even asked them a time or two ourselves.

In order to make decisions about who we are, we have to be curious about where we came from. It’s one thing, and perhaps easier, to reject what we no longer believe, but it’s a completely different journey to explore what we do believe. In order to decide what we believe, what our personal faith is, we have to question what we’ve been taught. The same pastor I mentioned earlier also said during a Bible Study, “If you ever meet someone who claims to have all the answers—unless it’s Jesus—run!” Jesus never gets angry at those in the gospels who ask questions, nor with us.

Cleopas, as we recall, wonders where this new fellow has been for the last several days and goes on to tell this stranger the story of what happened to Jesus of Nazareth. These two travelers had walked with Jesus himself on at least some of those 3,125 miles, and all that time they thought they were moving toward a promised destination. Now they seem to be walking with no real purpose in mind, like treading water.   
  
As the stranger walks with them on this road, he begins to tell them about a longer journey they'd all been on. He fills in the blanks for them as he unfolds or opens up scripture for them. Starting with the journey of God's people from liberation in Egypt under Moses to the time of the prophets and through all the signs along the way, Jesus walks them through the story of God's plan for, and God’s love of, his people. The way Jesus explains the words of Moses and the prophets carries new hope and new life. Don’t we wish we could have been those two disciples whose hearts, we are told later, were burning within them as Jesus “opened” the scriptures to them? Jesus’ story becomes the disciples’ story as it gets into their bones, and, as we will see later, they gain more than information about God; they become transformed by God.

The words of Moses, the prophets, Jesus Christ, and his apostles carry new hope and new life for us, too, because, as Christians, whatever our stories and our history are, they are intersected by the scripture story, a story of love and redemption.

On our Emmaus roads, we, like these two disciples, come to know God’s love story through Jesus Christ as he is found in scripture. If we don’t know scripture, if we don’t read the bible, we can’t very well know for ourselves who Jesus is. All we can know is what others tell us about him. Perhaps the greatest gift of the Reformation was translating the Bible into English and other languages so that everyone could know Christ for himself or herself. Our Presbyterian logo demonstrates this centrality by depicting a bible on the pulpit with the symbol of the dove, divine inspiration and guidance, above it.

As that walk to Emmaus demonstrates, the bible is much more than a decorative showpiece displayed on a table or a handy place for recording major life events. It is the Living Word, which means, among other things, it guides the way we live and walk this journey. Our Presbyterian ancestor John Calvin called scripture a “corrective lens,” like reading glasses, that we use to better understand who Jesus Christ is. Twentieth century theologian Karl Barth suggested we read the Bible in one hand while we read the newspaper in the other in order to know how best to respond to daily events. In our confession written during WWII, the Barmen Declaration, the authors wrote that “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scriptures, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” How can we trust and obey someone we do not take the time to know?

What we glean from our two disciples today and Jesus’ patient teaching is that the disciples recognize that their lives are a journey of walking with Jesus and learning from Jesus, in order to be changed by him. Discipleship isn’t a drive-through process; it is a life-long journey that involves learning who we are—Children of God, independent of titles and degrees—and to whom we belong—God alone. We learn through scripture which is much more than a set of instructions to be followed before leaving earth, but is story after story about people like us and about how God desires over and over again to connect with them, so much so that he sent his son to walk a dusty road with two frightened people who were trying to understand where they were going, where they had been, and having known Jesus, who they now were. Aren’t we like them?

Everybody has a story. How much richer it becomes, how much it is redeemed, when we live it in partnership with The Word.

Thanks be to God.