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“Telling Stories that Matter”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Neh. 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10; Ps. 19:1–6; 1 Cor. 12:12–31a; Lk. 4:14–21

Gracious God, we place ourselves, our lives, our community, and our world at your feet, asking that words of ancient Scripture, inspired by you, would be a lamp to our feet and a lamp to our paths, that we may find our way as faithful disciples of Christ, in whose name we are bold to pray. Amen.

Everybody loves a good story. Stories entertain us. They cause us to laugh and cry. They give us hope. They shape us. One of the gifts of this weekend when we celebrated the life of Arabella Meadows-Rogers was having her children, Matthew and Sarah, who grew up as little children in this church, with us, hearing them recount their stories of what happened to them here, people who reached out to them, ways in which they felt nurtured by this congregation. These things that most of us had forgotten had a lasting impact on their lives. That’s the way we live and learn from each other, through stories that we tell.

I was listening one day this week to *The State of Things* on WUNC with Frank Stasio, directed by our own Katy Barron. His guest was talking about how good stories need to engage the listener early. I would say the same thing about good sermons, and I hope you are engaged.

Good stories stick with us; they shape us. Parents and teachers tell us stories in hopes that we will try to emulate the good practices that are recounted in the

narratives. Our faith is built on stories. Ask a rabbi who God is; the rabbi will not give you a philosophical definition of God. The rabbi will say, “In the beginning, God created order out of chaos; a world out of nothing.” The creation story is the way in which our ancestors of the faith talked about God. Then there was the Exodus story that tells about God’s liberating power and God’s concern for people who are oppressed. The exile and the return from exile underscores God’s faithfulness, even in times of difficulty and struggle. And then there is the story which we just retold at Christmas: the story of a baby born in a manger, who gave his life for us and for this world, and who lives now among us to create a new world, a world that is being remade in the image God has for the world and for us.

Everybody loves a good story, and we are people who live from a narrative. We need narratives to help us find our way in the world.

In the Biblical lessons we read today, we heard about our ancestors in the faith, gathering to hear the Torah—God’s directions for living a life patterned after God’s will. The Commandments were read, and they gathered around, and they listened together, and it shaped their lives.

Jesus came into the temple in his hometown—it is always a difficult experience to go back to your home church and preach. Everybody remembers you when you were a little kid running around, and they don’t expect anything to come out of your mouth that makes much sense. Jesus was given the scroll, and he read a story from Isaiah, and everyone complimented him by saying, “Listen to those good words coming out of his mouth!” He told them that the very thing they were reading about in scripture was happening in their very midst. Then he went on to say God not only works in our midst, but God goes to outsiders, the people from other parts of the world, and God is at work there. It’s not just us that God is concerned about, but God loves the world.

The story made them squirm. God insists that we tell the whole story—our story with God is a mixed account. It is an account of “faith and faithlessness, of shame and glory.”

Congregations have stories to tell. One of the most interesting changes in theological education is the growth of congregational studies. One of the leaders in the congregational studies movement is at Duke, Jackson Carroll, whom many of us have come to know. Listening to the stories of congregations, people discover what God has been doing in their midst. You learn about the experiences that have shaped the life of a particular community. There are about ten stories about this congregation. What the church did during the Second World War and the church's decision to stay downtown are two of them. These stories provide insights about who we are as a congregation. Peter Fish helped me with this.

Behind these stories are the workings of God's spirit presence among us, as they are stories that happened in our lives together.

In the story about Jesus in the temple, the people got angry. We tell that story because we need to decide what kind of church we want to be. Do we want an exclusive church or an inclusive church? Do we want to go to the highways and byways and welcome others in, or reach out only to people who look, act, and think like we do? People who endorse our theological agenda and our political agenda, who worship and love to sing the hymns we love, or do we love the whole world as God in Jesus did? The story makes clear what God's intent is: God in Christ came to save the whole world. God so loved the world. God came not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved.

This week, the people of Haiti has come front and center in our lives. The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere was hit with a horrendous earthquake. How do we respond? Our response is not only about what we do for the people of Haiti; our response also is about who we are. What kind of people has God shaped us to be? How do we see God working in our world, and how are we going to respond?

Another story we read this morning is about the church in Corinth. That church had all sorts of problems: they had difficulties with their understanding of communion, of speaking in tongues. They were fighting, and unfortunately, one of the things we Christians do best is fight among ourselves. It is not something that pleases God. The question was, whose gifts are superior? Who were the really good, bright people? Which people are the best and brightest? Again, it is a question of

diversity and variety. We may affirm diversity and variety, but in actuality, they make us nervous. We think everybody should be like us, and then the world would be a much better place. “Not so,” says Paul. Just like the parts of the body, we need each other. “Let me show you a better way,” Paul says. Then there is the discussion on agape love, but that is in next week’s lessons.

This week, I want you to join me and others in reflecting on how God has been at work in our lives and in the life of this congregation.

The Session has appointed a committee to help us discover together what our core values are, and how we, led by God’s spirit, can strengthen those values. It is chaired by Scottie Seawell, an elder who grew up in FPC. It is called the Plumb Line Committee. A plumb line is a line from which a weight is suspended to determine verticality or depth. It is designed to help make sure things are in line. Scripture tells us God uses a plumb line to see if we are in line with God’s will and God’s teachings.

We are seeking to take a look at our congregation to see how we measure up or down to what God decrees for us. And we are doing this by telling stories of the ways God has been at work among us or ways that we have not been following God’s leading. I want to invite you to be a part of these conversations with other members of this church; other parts of the Body of Christ that may see or hear or feel the pulse of this community in ways different from you.

A number of stories have already been shared among us. It is a fascinating process. We are not just looking for positive experiences—we want to know when and where we’ve fallen short.

This weekend, we reflected on the life and ministry of Arabella Meadows-Rogers. We gathered some of her sermons and put them in a booklet that is available if you want to have one. They were very insightful and helpful. In one of the sermons, she talks about how, in this community of faith and this First Presbyterian Church, she learned that vulnerability is one of the ways God leads us and guides us.

In her sermon of September 14, 2008, she mentioned one of the persons whose vulnerability has been helpful in shaping us: a man named Richard Vereen. He was an African-American young man who landed on our door after he had been in Vietnam. He had issues with drugs and other illnesses. But this congregation took him in. It was not easy, but it was rewarding. As Arabella suggested in her sermon, Richard contributed as much or more to us than we gave to him.

As you know, we have a Memorial Garden out behind our church, where there are plaques of people who have died across the years. Arabella's plaque is now hanging there, but there is also one there for Richard Vereen. A number of years ago, a member of this church, who is now deceased, Gran Uzzle, owned a successful automobile dealership. He was also a lay leader in the church. Gran asked me to join him in the memorial garden.

As we stood beneath the wall of names, he pointed to two plaques. One was the plaque for George Watts Hill, lifelong member who was a prominent business and civic leader as well a philanthropist. He was a member of a highly respected North Carolina family. The other plaque was for Richard Vereen, who was someone who struggled valiantly to overcome his debilitating issues. He was part of our family. When Richard died, he had no other family, so we held his memorial service here. Gran Uzzle said to me, "Joe, every time I come into this garden and see George Watts Hill's and Richard Vereen's plaques near each other on the same wall, I know where I am—I am in church." That is the church of Jesus Christ.

Everybody loves a story. There are stories that make a difference because they bring us face-to-face with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us listen to what God is doing in our lives and in our world, and how God is calling us to be faithful together. Amen.