

“The Stories that Make Us”

Acts 7:44-53

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We are kicking off a four week worship series centered around Storytelling, telling our stories and God’s story. Why storytelling? Because as the theologian Willie Jennings puts it, “There is no life without story. We enter story from the time we are born and never exit story even in death.”¹ The grand story of life connects each and every person, binding and shaping us.

Storytelling is an incredibly important part of our world. We see this in our culture today with the massive amount of money and time spent on movies, television, books, politics, and media. We see all our time spent on Netflix and Hulu and HBO and Amazon Prime and more because we love the stories they tell and the ways they unite us in story. We see the divisive nature of the political stories that are told in our nation on both sides. They create a strong us versus them mentality, all in the stories they tell. These stories have the power to shape us as individuals and as a people. They have the power to bring us together or drive us apart.

¹ *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Jennings p. 68.

Christians in particular engage in storytelling by weaving our stories with the stories of the divine. We talk about the gospels, which literally translated means good news, sharing a good story. We have a rich and diverse number of stories throughout both testaments of the Bible to help us understand God, ourselves, and our world. We are a people of the story, especially as they connect us to God and our neighbors.

Today we will be looking at the end of the story that Stephen tells in the book of Acts. Stephen was just a regular person, doing the best he could before he encountered the story of Jesus. He saw and heard about Jesus and his love for the poor and downcast. And Stephen was forever changed by this story. He went out and connected to others the same as Jesus, loving the poor and sharing this great story with all that needed it. His faith community elected him as one of seven people to help care for the poor in their community. He was so effective that people actually started bringing false charges against him because they were not ready to connect with “those people.”

So when he is brought before the Sanhedrin, the body of religious officials, on these false charges, he simply tells his story. But not just his story, he connects his story to the story of his people Israel, and their engagement with the divine as

well, wrapping all of three of these stories together. Hear now the end of Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin in our text today; Acts 7:44-53.

“Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, who found favor with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?’

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Stephen shares the story of God and God's people. A divine story of connection where God keeps pursuing us and we, the people, keep missing these connections. Stephen's speech goes through the patriarchs of the Jewish faith, to try and connect with the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin by connecting with the

heroes of their faith. He points out how God is trying to connect with us through Abraham and Joseph and Moses and Jesus and the tent of connection.

And as Stephen shares the story of Israel and God, he begins to connect his own story to their's. He notes how many times God has tried to be with us, but we have rejected that intimate connection. And now Stephen is facing that same rejection by his peers. Peers who are not ready to accept that intimate connection for because of our internal fear of the other, fear of being hurt, hatred and anger from our pain, pride by needing to be seen as strong, or greed from worrying about if there will be enough. This story is one that comes to all of us, trying to connect with us, and connect us to our neighbors.

The truth is that all of our stories are connected. One with another and all together with God. That is what we learn about our stories from Stephen's speech today. It teaches us that all of our stories are rooted in God's pursuing love. *All of our stories are rooted in God's pursuing love.* It is a grand story where God is engaging this world, wooing and romanticizing us.

That is our story today. God is working to fix the broken connections between one another and between us and God. And the truth is that God will not stop pursuing us or loving us. Our stories are deeply rooted in this never ending love. So the question is: do we connect or do we disconnect? Are you in a place

where you do not feel that love or do not think you are worthy of that love? Let this story telling of Stephen be a reminder that you are already loved and connected to the divine. That nothing you can do will stop this love from being yours. God will go to the ends of the earth and back to be with you. Let that love into your story this week. Reconnect with God this week in whatever way works best for you.

Or perhaps you already feel very connected to God. How might you bring that loving connection to the people around you? Does someone need to know that they are loved? Does someone need the compassionate arm of a friend as they grieve the loss of a loved one? Can you bring that connection to the poorest in our community with a warm meal or a safe place to stay? Go and tell your story of love and connection this week.

By sharing our stories, one to another, by connecting the ways that God has got our attention, and listening to one another, we will begin to love the story, connecting our stories with God's story. The story of unbridled love choosing us and pursuing us at all costs so that we are so filled that we cannot help but overflow and share these stories of love.