

Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Year C  
January 24, 2010  
Good Shepherd, Berkeley

Nehemiah 8: 2  
I Cor. 12: 12-31a  
Luke 4: 14-21

In his novel *God's Grace*, Bernard Malamud has one of his characters explaining the origin of stories to Buz, a chimpanzee: Here's how stories happened. "Somebody spoke a metaphor and that broke into story. Man began to tell (stories) to keep his life from washing away." Stories hold memories and they shape identities. Since the human race began we have held our history in the stories that shape and define us, that tell us where we come from and who we are. Our stories tell us how we're connected to creation and the universe, to God and to one another.

Story is at the heart of our religious tradition - both the Old and New Testaments. They are, in fact, the primary way in which the tradition has been handed down. Fred Borsch, former Dean of CDSP and former Bishop of Los Angeles points out that in the gospels people often come to Jesus and ask him a question, and he answers them with a story. We call these stories parables. One of the reasons parable stories are so engaging is because they lure the hearer into them and invite us to become participants. It is difficult to remain outside a story when we are invited to play the parts and become the characters.

It is also difficult to remain outside the stories when they are about us. Have you ever noticed how children love to hear family stories about themselves, especially about events involving them that they're too young to remember? We have videos of various family celebrations and when my daughter Elizabeth was younger she used to watch them over and over, so much so that we teased her about it.

The Bible is our Christian family's story. The objective of using biblical stories in

worship, in what we Episcopalians call the Liturgy of the Word, is to teach the stories of our tradition to those who are young or new to the faith so that they can find characters to identify with, to try on the parts, to learn their Christian identity and receive the memories. For those of us who have heard the stories many times before, we are offered them again and again because *we* change and therefore bring something new to the hearing each time.

This enterprise of story that shapes people and holds memory is behind all three of our lessons today. The Old Testament prophet Nehemiah tells the story of how the people returning from exile in Babylon, receive their memories back and regain their identity as Jews when the priest, Ezra, reads them the Law. In exile they had been cut off from their roots and from their tradition. They returned to Jerusalem not knowing the Law. And here, in the rebuilding of society after their captivity, they are given back the thing that makes them distinctively the people Israel – the Law, the Covenant relationship between them and God.

What does Nehemiah tell us they do when they hear the Law read? They weep. They worship the Lord and they weep. We're not really sure why they weep. Perhaps they weep with joy, for now they know again who they are and whose they are. Or perhaps they weep because they are convicted by the awareness of how far short of the Law they have fallen. At any rate, the message of their teachers is to rejoice, to keep the day holy and to experience the joy of the Lord as their strength. When was the last time any of us wept when we heard the scriptures read? Perhaps we're out of touch with such a response because we're still in captivity –mostly of our own making, I would guess - and we've been unable to hear the word of the Lord as a fresh start.

Israel's story as a container for the people's identity and memory is what Jesus is calling upon in today's Gospel lesson when he quotes from the prophet Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to

the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the lord's favor." These are words Israel has held in its memory as the promise of one to come, a messiah whose vocation will be to free and to heal, to bear good news and proclaim the Jubilee year when all debts are forgiven. What Isaiah promised, Jesus is, and so announces himself as, to his homies, there in the synagogue in Nazareth.

When Jesus lays claim to this memory he connects his story with Israel's story and offers us a new one; one that we, the church have claimed as our story, with Jesus' life and death and resurrection at its center. Luke takes these words of the prophet Isaiah and places them in the mouth of Jesus. Then he offers a whole new dimension to the storyline, the final dimension, if you will, when Jesus sits down to teach about the words and says simply, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ("Dude's, this is me.") Luke is doing a little foreshadowing here, in this quote from Isaiah. He's telling us what the story of Jesus is going to look like from here on out. In a sense Luke offers us a program for Jesus' ministry as it will unfold throughout the rest of the Gospel. Jesus' ministry will be a story of good news for the poor. It will liberate captives, restore sight, free the oppressed from their burdens and wipe the slate clean of all debts.

The whole enterprise of scripture comes alive for us when we realize that the story it is telling is a story about us, where we play the parts and become the characters. *We* are the poor for whom this is good news, for in the poverty of our small faith we *must* have the good news break in and give us a new identity as Jesus' own.

God knows we are captives to all manner of things – from the addictions and compulsions of our personalities to the huge systems of government, bureaucracy and corporate life that manipulate the world about us and upon which we seldom feel we have any impact at

all. Our only release is, paradoxically, a surrender – surrender of the illusion of control, surrender of our grasping egos, surrender to the mind and the will of Christ, which is the sole criterion for discerning our allegiances.

Does blind fit? I don't know about you, but it certainly does for me. Most days I miss more than I could ever see. How much more might we see if we looked with the eyes of Christ? Recovery of sight, as I understand its application to us, might be seeing in a way we used to see, for example seeing as we did when we were children, when even common things were cause for wonder and amazement. Seeing with the eyes of Christ means seeing without making distinctions, keeping our eyes open without prematurely judging so that we are open to the new thing that God is doing in us and among us.

When Christ frees the oppressed in us he is offering us the grace to change. He's setting the stage for our transformation. It is rarely a comfortable transition and we often long for the limited possibilities of what is familiar rather than the uncertainties of the unknown. That's the insidious seduction of oppression. It limits one's capacity to imagine the future with hope. It thwarts initiative and creativity. Oppression creates only stillborn possibilities. The freedom that is given in Christ's liberation is not merely a flirtation with the new for newness sake. Christ's freedom is given in knowing that God holds the future and therefore holds us in that future. The thing we are freed **for** is the building of the Christ's kingdom. It was begun in his ministry and is left in our hands for continued fashioning in his image.

We have said that the whole enterprise of scripture comes alive for us when we realize that the story it is telling is a story about us, where we play the parts and become the characters. One of the parts we must play, of course, is that of Jesus himself. One doesn't truly receive the story as one's own without, in some sense, becoming the story. I believe this is what St. Paul is

doing with the Christian story in teaching his Corinthians, using the metaphor of the Body of Christ as an image for the Church. This metaphor forms an identity and memory that we ourselves draw upon in liturgy and prayer. We are the Body of Christ no less than Paul's Corinthians, by virtue of our baptism. One of the things that happens when we make the Christian story our own is, it becomes incorporated into our identity. We don't hear about Christ, we are Christ. We are Christ's Body, Paul tells us.

A few weeks ago Robin Williams was interviewed by Charlie Rose and when he talked about his movie, *The Dead Poet's Society*, I remembered how much I liked it. *The Dead Poet's Society* is about an unconventional teacher of literature who goes to a very conventional boy's prep school. The movie unfolds the story of how he opens his students to a passion for justice, mercy, and ethical behavior, through the heroes of English literature, a topic that the macho atmosphere of this school considers obligatory but basically irrelevant to the real world in which these guys will be leaders. At one point the teacher says to his class: "We don't read and write poetry because we think it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, - these are what we stay alive for...The powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?"

In some way I think that's the question Paul poses to his Corinthians and to us. If we are indeed the Body of Christ, what is our part in it, what will our verse be? Are you an eye? That's terrific, but don't forget that you need the ear. If you are a hand, you still need to be a part of the Body in order to function. Remember, too, that the verse you contribute needs to be part of the entire play in order for your verse, and for the play as a whole, to make any sense. Hands and

eyes and ears can't work by themselves. We need one another.

And, perhaps most importantly of all, we *need* the lesser parts. The weaker parts are indispensable, an essential part of the story. Perhaps you don't feel you have very useful talents to give in the building of Christ's kingdom. Bring your gifts anyway. For your talents, and you, are essential to the Body of Christ, especially to the Body of Christ that is the Good Shepherd.

Next week, following this service, we will update the Christian story that Good Shepherd is. We will have our annual meeting and share the story of our struggles and our growth of our parish in this past year through reports from our various ministry efforts. We will release from office our Senior and Junior Wardens, and thank them for the responsible and caring way they have been main characters in Good Shepherd's story this past year. We will invite new characters to take leading roles in the story when we elect them to the Vestry. In the business and the fellowship, in formal voting session and informal lunch conversation Good Shepherd will play out another scene in the story of the Body of Christ in this place. It is your story and it is my story. It is the story of God's activity among us. It is a good story. Let's stay and tell it to one another, and give God thanks and praise for all his characters in this chapter.