

Advent 4 Year B 2020
December 20, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are the stories that we tell about ourselves. Maybe it sounds like some nonsense you'd hear in power of positive thinking book, or a saying you might find on a tchotchke at the Cracker Barrel, but it's true. There have been multiple studies that show that children in particular only choose to do what they think is actually possible. And changing this mindset is not as straightforward as telling children, "If you can believe it, you can achieve it." Having been a child once and now raising a child of my own, I can assure you that they won't believe you. Kids *inherit* a narrative, a story about themselves given to them by other people, family and friends and school, even church! We adults aren't really any different. We tell stories about ourselves too. When we go to job interviews, we are encouraged to give examples. And we do so by telling stories about ourselves, or if you prefer, by telling our story. The only real difference between children and adults is that adults have more ability to change their story, and they are less likely to do it.

The stories we tell about ourselves are powerful. They form the outlines of what we think is possible, and in that way, they define who we are. However, they are always incomplete—sometimes partially, sometimes even critically incomplete. That's not to say that the stories we tell aren't true, nor are we lying to ourselves and others, at least not usually on purpose. But it does mean that the stories are missing something, sometimes something very important.

There's a man we'll call Scott, and we can use the story he tells about himself as an example. To hear him tell it, his family used to be well-to-do, living in a large house in the suburbs. His parents used to throw parties every weekend. As he got into high school, the parties stopped and his parents had to sell their nice house and move into an apartment. After he graduated, he went through "get rich quick" scheme after "get rich quick" scheme, and he always had a lottery ticket in his pocket. His reasoning was that as soon as he got the money again he could buy his parents' old house and things would go back to like they were when he was a kid. The story sounds like a guy who's down on his luck and is maybe not making the best decisions given his situation. But his telling of the story leaves out important details. He leaves out his own alcoholism, and the fact that his parents' parties included illegal drugs. His parents were convicted of possession charges, and that was what led to their changing of fortunes. The story he tells about himself casts him as a down on his luck man who is working to right the wrongs of fate. The story isn't totally false, but it's not honest or complete. It leaves out the most painful parts of his life, in some ways, it leaves out the thing that is killing him. In twelve step programs, even if you've never done one, everyone knows that the first step is to admit you have a problem. The first step is literally to tell the truth.

And that's not the only kind of incomplete story we might tell about ourselves. My husband was a long-term substitute teacher in a 7th grade classroom a few years ago. His first or second day in that room, a student came up to his desk and said "I'm a dumb kid." At first, he replied "Hey, same. Me too." until he realized that she wasn't kidding. As a parent, and as an educator it broke his heart. Because of the story she received and told about herself, and from the work she turned in, he could see she wasn't putting in the effort in her schoolwork. The story she told about herself said she would get bad grades, and so she did. But this story, too, is incomplete. As a substitute teacher, my husband would give the kids riddles and 5-minute mysteries, short story puzzles that they would ask questions to solve. For every riddle, this

student would write it out word for word to try and solve it. She would ask endless, insightful questions for every 5-minute mystery. Near the end of my husband's time in that classroom, he told her "you're not stupid, you're a problem solver. And school work is just hard for problem solvers." Hopefully, he changed her story at least a little bit.

The stories we tell about ourselves matter. They change the way we present ourselves to others, they change the way we think about ourselves, and they change the way that we view and understand the world around us. Everyone has a story to tell of themselves, of who they are.

We see these stories play out in our readings this morning, too. David has told a story about himself. He is a mighty king, with plenty of riches and power, and he's going to do a favor for God. He wants to build God a temple, to make a house for God. David is important, and as king he is going to do what he wants. Sure, he consults his prophet Nathan, because it's nice to have the approval of the court prophet. But his story as a king who is resting on his laurels doesn't have room for Nathan to say no. So, David begins planning to build a house for God. But God says no. Through the court prophet, God reminds David of the truth of his story. God reminds David that he was not always a rich and mighty king or a prince, or every nobility. "You were a shepherd," God tells David "and *I* took you from the flock to make you a prince over *my* people."

I'm sure Mary has a story she told herself too. She was an ordinary girl looking forward to being married, starting a family, and helping her husband run his carpentry business. But the angel Gabriel changes that story. God breaks into both of these stories, reminding David of who he is and who he was. In God's denial of David's story and plans, God makes a promise that instead of David doing God a favor and making God a house, God would instead make David a house, a royal family. God would make David's house into a dynasty that would rule forever. In the same way, when God breaks into Mary's story, Mary claims a new identity. She is no longer an ordinary girl, but a highly favored one, someone that every generation would call blessed. She ultimately responds to the angel, "Here I am," indicating that she is ready and willing to respond to God's call. In the new story that God has given her, she proclaims, "I am the servant of the Most High God." Her song, the Magnificat, which we used as the Psalm today, tells this glorious new story that she receives from God.

Sisters and brothers, this is what we are waiting for this advent season. We are waiting for God to break into our incomplete stories, and to change those stories. And in doing so, we wait for God to change our lives and ourselves. God breaking into our human story, our human history, is the whole point of Christmas. The whole point is that God in the baby Jesus comes into our world, and give us a new identity: a full and complete story that names us as children of God, loved and valued.

The holiday season is full of noise and rushing and stress. And even this year, as we find ourselves staying closer to home, it doesn't seem to be any easier. But amidst the noise and stress of our lives, the Christ child comes to us, to give us a new story, a story full of grace and love, forgiveness and peace.

Today, we are invited to join in that story and proclaim with Mary that we are servants of the Most High God. We are reminded, by the Christ child, who we are, and whose we are. We are children of God, loved and cherished. Thanks be to God. Amen.