

Once Upon a Time – Gen. 12:1-3 – Heb. 1:1-3a– FaithMC June 9, 2013

Since last September, we've ended almost every reading of the Scripture on Sunday morning with these words:

"This is the story of the relationship between God and people; may it guide us as we continue the story."

God didn't just create a universe; God created a Story. The Bible tells that Story up to a certain point, but the Story continues, and YOU are invited to claim your place in that Story, and to help that Story continue.

I invite you to listen to that Story this morning, from the beginning until now. If I were in a different congregation this morning, a few details would be different, but this is a universal story in which ALL are invited to participate.

Once upon a time, there was nothing—except for God. Then, God created a universe. God took what was nothing and made it something. God took what was in chaos and gave it shape and order. It was dark, so God created light. And God said, "Wow! That's good!"

Once upon a time, a little while later, God created humanity—male and female. They were made in God's own image. God created them to live in relationship with themselves, with each other, with the creation, and with the Creator.

But things did not work out as God intended.
Sin separated Adam and Eve from God, from themselves, from each other, and from the creation. Their disobedience brought trouble and pain.

Once upon a time, a little while later, God tried again. God called Abraham and Sarah to be the parents of a people: "I want to create a people who will be MY people," said God. "I've got a mission for you."

But things did not work out as God intended.
Abraham and Sarah's family was full of favoritism, jealousy, and scheming.

The descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah,
Jacob and Rachel became slaves in Egypt, abused and oppressed.

Once upon a time, a little while later, God called Moses to lead the Israelites
out of Egypt. Moses spoke, God acted, and a “mixed crowd” of people
left Egypt and journeyed to the foot of Mt. Sinai.

There they heard God say, “I have saved you; that’s just the way I AM.
Now IF you obey me and keep my covenant,
then out of all the peoples of earth you will be my treasured possession.
You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

But things did not work out as God intended.

Sin and disobedience brought more separation from God,
from themselves, from each other, and from the creation.

Once upon a time, a little while later, the people demanded a human king.
Reluctantly, God gave them a king, and God also gave them prophets to
keep the king in check, and to remind the people that
God loved them and had a purpose for them.

God called **Isaiah** and gave him these words to speak: “Do not fear,
for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

God called **Micah** and gave him these words to speak:

“What does the Lord require of you?

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.”

God called **Jeremiah** and gave him these words to speak:

“I am going to write a new covenant on your hearts.”

But things did not go as God intended.

Sin and disobedience brought separation from God,
from themselves, from each other, and from creation.

Once upon a time, a little while later, after their land and temple and hope
were destroyed, after being carried away into exile, after being dominated by
a series of hated foreign powers, God tried again. God did something new.
God came to earth in a human being.

God came to restore the separation between people and God,
between people and themselves, between people and
other people, between people and creation.

God came in Jesus to preach Good News to the poor, to release the
oppressed, and to proclaim: “The kingdom starts NOW.
It’s a whole new world—a new creation!”

Jesus said to the people: “I am the light of the world.”

He also said, “Don’t worry.” He also said, “Do good to those who hate you.”

Jesus talked to women and to Samaritans and to other outsiders.
He offended the religious establishment by calling them names
and breaking some of their rules.

He became a threat to all who had power, so they collaborated to kill him.

On the third day he appeared to his discouraged and hopeless
followers, and then in a few weeks he was gone,
but not before he said, “God wants you to be a people,
a people with a mission to fulfill. Make disciples.”

Once upon a time, a little while later, God re-charged their batteries,
and they went out and started preaching, and sharing.
All kinds of people believed—it was a “mixed crowd” of
Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, women and men, old and young.

God turned around the Christian-hater Saul and transformed him into Paul
the missionary. Paul convinced this new church that you didn’t have to
become a Jew in order to become a Christian.

Peter wrote a letter in which he said, “We are a chosen people,
a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”

And God kept re-charging the people through the Holy Spirit,
giving them the power they needed to continue the work
Jesus had been doing: preaching, healing, teaching, sharing,
loving, breaking down walls of prejudice.

But things did not always work out as God intended.

Sin and disobedience separated people from God,
from themselves, from each other, and from Creation.

After three centuries of being a small, marginalized, oft-persecuted church, Christians received the official blessing of the state. They quickly forgot about following Jesus and began using worldly wealth, worldly power, and worldly violence for self-preservation.

Once upon a time, a little while later,
some Christians decided it was important to live holy lives and to follow Jesus, so they formed monastic communities where they could pray and work, study and preserve the Scriptures, grow in faith, and help the poor.

Benedict led in the way of community, prayer, and peace.
Francis of Assisi called for a simple life in harmony with God and with Creation.

John Wyclif and John Hus called people to a personal faith in Christ,
a faith that is to be shared with all people.

Once upon a time, a little while later, in central Europe in the 1500's,
God called a series of reformers to strengthen and purify the church.
Because they protested, they came to be called "Protestants."

The most radical of these protesters wanted even more change, daring to say
that the church should be controlled the Scriptures and the Spirit,
not by the state.

Because they baptized only adult believers, their enemies called them
"re-baptizers"—Anabaptists.

Because they were a threat to the marriage between church and state,
thousands of Anabaptists were tortured, drowned, or burned at the stake.

Their radical message of following of Jesus spread up north to the
Netherlands, where a priest named Menno Simons
joined their story and gave his name to the movement.

But things did not always work out as God intended.

Sin and disobedience brought separation from God,
from themselves, from each other, and from Creation.
The persecuted Anabaptists became afraid, went into hiding,
became “the quiet in the land,”
became rigid and legalistic, unable to resolve
disagreements without splitting into different groups.

Once upon a time, slowly and gradually,
beginning in the 1800’s, these Anabaptist folks started
again to share their faith with others, as they had at first.
They began going to all the world to tell people about Jesus.
They went to every race, every nation, every language.
These white folks with European heritage were so successful
that they became a minority group within the Mennonite Church.

But things did not always work out as God intended.

Sin and disobedience brought separation from God,
from themselves, from each other, and from Creation.
They sometimes confused their traditions with their faith,
they were often unsure about how to relate to the cultures around
them, and too often their disagreements led to fragmentation.

Once upon a time, about 55 years ago,
there were more Mennonites in Newton, Kansas, than the two existing
Mennonite churches could hold, so Faith Mennonite Church was formed.
A creative, energetic, and innovative congregation, we have proclaimed the
Good News of Jesus, we have sought to serve, to love, and to be
God’s partners in the growth of the kingdom.

But things here have not always worked out as God intended.

Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, we have experienced separation
from God, from ourselves, from each other, and from Creation.

But we keep reclaiming our place in God’s story,
we keep looking for ways to be salt and light,
we keep trying to follow Jesus and to point others to him,
and we keep calling one another “sister” and “brother.”

Once upon a time, *in a time yet to come*,
all the people of God,
all the people from every time, every place, every nation,
every race, every language,
all the people of God will be gathered around the throne
of God in heaven.

In spite of the habitual stumbling of God's people throughout history,
we will all stand there together in joy, in unity, and in perfection.

Our mission will have been fulfilled,
not because we did it so well, but because God is God,
and God's purposes WILL be fulfilled.

All who have been part of God's story, in all their magnificent diversity
and in all their persistent imperfection,
all who have chosen and claimed the story as their own,
will gather as one in worship and in praise.

And never again will it be said, "*And things didn't work out as God intended.*"

For from that day on, there will be no more sin, no more stumbling,
no more separation from God, no more separation of people
from themselves, no more separation between people,
no more separation from Creation.

In that new creation there will be no barriers, no pain, no falling short.

Finally, the Story will be complete.
God's purposes will be fulfilled.
YOU will be there, and the Story will never end.