

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 10, 2018.

The Bible is full of stories and full of reports. By “stories,” I mean passages that invite us to think about human behavior, especially our own behavior. By “reports” I mean passages that record events. Often, the stories are based on events, but the purpose of the stories is not to report, but to explain. In like manner, the reports always have a point to make, but they often are triggered by an event, something that occurred, something that actually happened.

We begin this morning with a story (**Genesis 3:8-15**). It is all about us. It’s the story of Adam and Eve. Adam first blames God: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid.” Then Adam blames Eve: “She gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Eve then blames the serpent: “The serpent tricked me.” Then God piles on: “Because you – Mr. Serpent – have done this, cursed are you among all animals and all wild creatures.”

The only character in this story who doesn’t blame someone is Mr. Serpent. He just has to eat the blame, described here as “dust.” And, beyond that, God warns Mr. Serpent that in the battle between God and Satan, blows will be exchanged, but, in the end, God will win. This outcome of picking on Mr. Serpent hardly seems fair, when it is clear that the man and woman got themselves into this mess by eating the fruit of the tree declared off-limits by God. But fairness is not the point of this story.

Though there has always been speculation about the beginning of things, including human behavior, this is not a report of an event. This is not the evening news. The story of Adam and Eve is rather an understanding of why you and I behave in certain ways. The story is an illustration. It deals with our first reaction, when confronted with our own misbehavior, to deflect responsibility, to put the blame elsewhere, or at least to share the blame with someone else.

It’s what we do, isn’t it? It’s also what we encourage our children not to do. And, when they do blame others for their own misbehavior, we fire right back. “I’m not interested in what they did. I want to know what you did and why you did it.” And, what do we sometimes get in return? “Well, you do it. Why can’t I do it?”

Not an easy question to answer, which is why we try to explain things in the form of stories. Sometimes it’s the best we can do. And, in the case of the Bible, this effort is quite remarkable. We accurately see ourselves in these stories.

But the Bible is more than a collection of remarkable insights about human and Divine behavior. There is also hard reporting in the Bible. There is news. The gospels are rather eye-witness accounts of the life of Jesus and those around Jesus, from ancestors to parents to followers.

In today's Eye-Witness News (**Mark 3:20-35**), we learn of a crowd that surrounded Jesus and claimed that he was losing his mind. When the family heard that the crowd was threatening Jesus, the family went out to protect him. Jesus, in a somewhat cocky manner, said something like "I can take care of myself." This response was familiar to his family. They had seen this attitude before, and would see it again.

Jesus responds by telling the crowd a parable about a kingdom divided against itself and a house divided against itself and even Satan divided against himself. The point of the parable was to counter the claim of the Scribes that the power of Jesus over demons was evidence that Jesus himself was possessed. Jesus said, "That's nonsense. Why would I, how could I, do a good deed if I was bad? The reason I can do a good deed is because I am good. So there!"

Having made his point, the crowd tells him that his family is looking for him. We would hope that Jesus would say, "Oh good, I was worried about them." But that's not what he says. "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Another way of saying, "My concern goes beyond my immediate family." He then points to the larger group and says, "Here are my mother and my brother! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Imagine this as a newscast, perhaps with a panel of experts. People were already confused by the behavior of Jesus, and this comment about his immediate family would only add to that confusion. But that was the news of the day. It was an eye-witness account of an event, an account that would be passed on by word of mouth and eventually recorded and thousands of years later read by a congregation on the Chesapeake Bay.

So, we have stories about the human condition, and we have reports about this carpenter from Nazareth who appears to have Messiah credentials. What is missing is some sense of how the stories and the news accounts of Jesus go together. What is the fit? Well, enter St. Paul and his communication with the early Christians in Corinth (**2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1**). Paul argues that the stories and reports that the Hebrews wrote, studied, lived by, and offered to the world were validated, confirmed, fulfilled in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The essence of all the stories that constitute the Old Testament is that God creates us with both behavioral expectations and free will, and that, despite our best intentions, we sometimes exercise that free will in a manner that falls short of those expectations. This failure to perform as expected will require intervention on God's part. That is, you and I will need a Savior, a Messiah, one who will exemplify obedience, even unto death. And one whose resurrection will encompass all of us.

The New Testament, on the other hand, is a collection of reports, not stories, of that Savior, that Messiah, finally arriving and engaging a creation in need. This engagement, with cosmic consequences, takes place in a particular time and setting. We tend to treat the birth of Christ as a story, but it really was an event, an occurrence. Not a dream, not made-up, but a reality, reported and passed on and, as demonstrated by our presence today, believed and accepted.

We often call the Good News "the greatest story ever told," but it's really the "greatest event ever witnessed." Paul writes, "Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."

The stories and the reports are for our sake. Just before communion, the minister reminds us: "The gifts of God for the people of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you – really died for you - and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving."

These "Gifts of God" come in two forms. There are stories that capture who we are and why we need a Messiah. And then there are the reports of God's decision to fulfill that need. We need to be saved, and we are saved. This morning's Psalm (**Psalm 130**) captures the longing for this fulfillment: "My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen in the morning."

Well, news flash! The wait is over. The Savior is here. He might not be exactly what we expected, but it is he. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen! It really happened. A miracle? For you and me, absolutely. For God, a decision: I love these people.

Amen.