

The Stories We Tell

Hespeler, March 6 2022 © Scott McAndless – Lent 1

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13

Lemon meringue pie is my father's favourite dessert. You give him a choice of pies and he will go for the lemon meringue every time. My mother, who is the baker of the family, makes some of the most wonderful and tasty pies I've ever eaten. But she doesn't particularly make lemon meringue. I think it's because she doesn't think that her lemon meringue is as good as what her mother used to make. But anyways, when we were growing up, we had some wonderful pies but not often lemon meringue. When we did, it was always an occasion.

The Story

And whenever such an occasion came along, there was a story that got repeated in our family. We all knew the story, but we never tired of hearing it. The story went like this. When my parents first met and started dating, the day came when my father got an invitation to my mother's parents' house for supper.

My mom is the eldest child of her family, and you can imagine that her younger siblings were very excited to have their sister's beau come to dinner for the first time. And, as the time to dine approached and my mother was helping out in the kitchen, they were entertaining my dad by telling him that my mother had prepared the entire meal including, they promised him, a very special dessert prepared in his honour. This was, of course, a lie. My mother had helped, but she had hardly prepared it all and she had not made the dessert. But perhaps we can forgive those younger siblings for their exuberance in talking up their elder.

The Surprise

Finally, the moment came, and the meal was served. It was all excellent, of course. And then the dessert – my grandmother's inimitable lemon meringue pie. My father was served up a great big piece of pie and everyone present, especially those younger siblings, looked on as he took that first delicious bite from the tip. It was indeed delightful. But at that very moment, he looked down to see that, nestled between the lemon and the meringue, in the next bite he was about to take, there was a huge, dead beetle.

At this point in the story, we would all lean forward expectantly until someone would ask the necessary question. "What did dad do then?" "Oh," came the ritual answer, "he just took out the beetle, put it by the side of his plate and kept on eating."

What the Story Means to us

That was just one of the stories that was told in my house as I was growing up. I'm sure you have stories from your background as well. And the reason why some stories in particular get remembered and repeated is because they are more than just the memories of unusual events. They are



remembered because these stories give meaning and even a sense of identity to the people who tell them. I mean, if you know my mother and father, you will quickly realize that that story conveys a great deal about their positive character traits and the loving relationship that they've shared for so long.

Stories and Memories

The other thing about such stories is that they are not exactly the same thing as memories of the actual event. Even though that story was told and passed on by people who were there, that doesn't mean that it all happened exactly as the story is told. Quite possibly, some of the other people present would have seen the events of that night quite differently. The beetle probably didn't look like I imagine that it looked when I tell the story. I imagine that it was huge! All of this is because memory doesn't actually work the way that we think it does.

Human beings are actually not all that great at remembering events unless they do something. In order to store an important event in our long-term memory, we actually need to find some way to turn it into a story. It can be a story we tell ourselves or, even better, the story that we tell out loud to others, but unless we turn it into a story, it can very easily be lost to us.

How Stories Create Memories (and Not the Other Way Around)

But the simple act of turning the memory into a story modifies our recollection of the events. We change the memory to fit a narrative. And once we create a story, we remember the story rather than the original events. After that, every time we tell the story, we are constantly making our memory of those events fit what we need the story to tell us at this particular moment in time.

If, for example, the pie story were told at a celebration of my parents' anniversary, we would probably hear it as a very romantic kind of tale. But, if it was told when someone was passing on the recipe for lemon meringue pie, it might be heard as something a little less romantic and a little more of a food safety warning. What's more, researchers have demonstrated, when we remember that story, what we are actually remembering is not the original events, but rather the last time we heard or told the story.

A Sacrifice

All of this is basically because the way that we make sense of our world is by telling stories about it. And this is something that our reading this morning from the Book of Deuteronomy seems to understand and appreciate. The passage that we read this morning is an instruction for a particular kind of sacrifice.

It is the sacrifice of the first fruits, where the worshipers are to bring the first produce of their land and present it to the priest, who, by the way doesn't burn it on the altar or anything like that, it is basically a gift to support the priestly family. But what is really different about this sacrifice is the requirement for every worshiper to tell a story.

And a Story

The story goes like this: **"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to**

the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.”

And I find it fascinating that there would be this requirement in order to bring the sacrifice. Each worshiper is required to recite, not a prayer, not some liturgy, but a full story. One question I've got to ask is how tired did the priests get having to listen to that same story over and over again? But surely this was required for a reason. The writers of this law in Deuteronomy understood something important about human nature. They understood what I've been saying, just how important stories are to human beings. As I said, the stories that we tell are able to form and shape our memories. That is particularly important when you want to help your people form a common identity. They need to have a shared story.

How Stories Help us Process Memories

But stories are also really important for helping us to process our memories. Do take note of what this story in the Book of Deuteronomy tells. It's actually a horrible story of mistreatment, abuse and trauma. It is a story of a whole nation that lost its homeland, that was subjected to slavery, oppression and abandonment by their God. And I'm sure you are aware of the extreme damage that those kinds of memories can do. You have heard, I imagine, of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. When people have gone through traumatic events, the memories that they carry in their mind and even in their body can be extremely destructive to their lives and their relationships. The more traumatic the events, the more potential for damage there is, but even mild trauma, if you carry it around with you, can have a very damaging effect.

How We Deal with Trauma

And here is one reason why that happens. When you've lived through something difficult, you tend not to want to think about it or dwell on it. This is understandable, of course. Remembering it stirs up painful feelings and so you'd rather just put it out of your mind. But remember what I said about us being storytelling creatures. In order to helpfully integrate a memory into our lives so that we can deal with it in a constructive way, we need to turn it into a story.

But if you don't want to think about something traumatic that happened to you, you're not going to be able to turn it into a story. That is precisely how a memory of a negative event can become dangerous. Because when you have not turned it into a story because you don't want to think about it, the memory of the traumatic event doesn't just disappear. Your brain holds on to those sorts of memories as a kind of survival instinct. They are, after all, memories of things that were or seemed to be dangerous. Your brain wants to keep those memories because they seem like vital information that will help you to survive future dangerous events.

When We Fail to Process Traumatic Memories

But, if you don't examine those memories and turn them into stories, they cannot be stored in the productive part of your brain that can use them constructively. Instead, they get stored in a much more primitive part of your brain, you might think of it as your animal brain, called the amygdala. And

when a traumatic memory is stored in your animal brain, you cannot deal with it rationally. Instead what happens is that you tend to get triggered by things that remind you of the original traumatic events. You may react irrationally with fear or by lashing out at the people you love with anger. As you can imagine, this can lead to some very difficult problems in your life.

So, what you actually need to do is to have the courage to examine the memories of the traumatic things that you have lived through. This can be extremely hard, and people often need help to do that. At the very least, they need friends who understand them and who they can trust to talk through these memories. Some people need trained professionals to help them to do this and there is absolutely nothing wrong with needing that kind of help.

But the process itself is relatively simple, even though it can be extremely painful and hard. The process is to turn it all into a story, a story about your life, about who you are. It is about telling a story in which the suffering is not the end of the story but rather a point on the way to the end. It is also about telling a story in which you discover something about who you are on the way through the struggle.

What the Story did for Ancient Israelites

That why I find that the story that the worshiper tells in the Book of Deuteronomy is so powerful. It is indeed a story about trauma, about slavery and oppression that an entire nation went through. The point of telling the story is indeed to face that dark history. But it is also very clearly the story of a people who do not allow their trauma to define or limit them. It is a story about people whose God heard them and who saved them **“with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders.”** That certainly makes it seem as if they are indeed a very special people to have such a God.

The Stories You Tell

So here is the challenge I would like to leave you with today. Take some time to consider the stories that you tell about yourself or about your family – the stories that you tell to others and the stories that you tell to yourself. Consider how they shape not only your identity and your self-esteem but also the memories of the things that have happened to you. Are there ways that you could tell those stories differently so that they are more uplifting and affirming?

And if you do have some events in your life that you find particularly hard to remember for some very good reasons, I have an even greater challenge for you. In a safe context, preferably with someone you truly trust, tell those stories and find some way to tell them that don't just make the trauma the end of the story. Consider how they can be stories of survival, hope and maybe even victory. Above all, find a way to tell those stories that makes it clear that there was a God who cared about you in the midst of what you struggled with. If you're able to find that story, I suspect you might discover the truth that God really was there and has been with you ever since.