

Come Holy Spirit. Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you.
Amen.

Did you all just hear that door slam before the gospel just a few minutes ago? It surprised me because usually when that happens, it's about halfway through my service, somebody leaves and shuts the door. It's not going to happen again during this sermon. Please. If you have to leave ... if you're fed up, just be quiet about it please.

As human beings, the stories we tell inform our understand of ourselves and the world in which we live. Within our stories are assumptions and values. Just a few words spoken can bring to mind a whole narrative arch. If I said, "Four score and seven years ago," you'd probably in an instant be transported across the generations to a field of battle and there a gangling president making a short address to cast a vision for a wounded nation, or if I said, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," you'd go there. You'd be in front of the much smaller television screen looking at a grainy image and then see Walter Cronkite, his irrepressible glee at the magical moment. In these days there is a narrative that is being cast that articulates the vision for the world and for humanity that while it's not entirely new, I think we might all agree is deeply troubling.

The narrative that's out there goes something like this. It's an unforgiving world. You better look out for yourself and only yourself. Being nice, it's for sissies. If you're hit, hit back harder. If you're not getting what you want, there is somebody to blame. I'll even tell you who it is. If you don't think I'm accurate in this, listen carefully to the narrative that's behind with those who are running for our nation's highest office are saying. They are giving ... if you will ... chapter titles to the collective narrative of our society in this time but in this place, at this moment, as a people of God, we tell a different story.

Our once upon a time frames and informs who and whose we are and what we are going to do and thus it is neat and right that on this day of baptism and confirmation, we tell two remarkable stories that at their core anchor us. What we do here today is all about being changed. It's about being made new. That's why we go out and we meet Saul on a road and the disciples on a boat. The Saul that we meet is a man of his time. If we started earlier chapters we would have met him at the lynching of Stephen. He is consumed with zeal. He is heading to Damascus to stamp out this Jewish heresy.

The narrative of Saul's life is informed by the political machinations of his time. This Jesus movement will be opposed. What happens on that road is nothing less than an encounter with the living God, with the risen Jesus. We're told that Saul is blinded by the light. For three days he is in darkness. He is not eating, he is not drinking. He is dead. He is in the tomb. Now, on that boat, the disciples we're meeting in our gospel are really not that different. They have left the chaos of Jerusalem and returned to Galilee. They are back fishing. They have given up on this Jesus stuff. They are back doing what they know how to do. They've heard the stories and they have slipped back to the familiar, the predictable and the safe. They are casting their nets in darkness. They are after fashion entombed but their night gives way to dawn as well. While the half-light of morning is not blinding as Saul's experience. What is revealed knocks them off kilter too.

On the shore, in just a little distance ... a man calls greeting and offers them fishing advice which when they accept reaps astonishing results. That moment his disciples and Saul are one. For Saul, it's through the touch of a tentative Ananias. The scales fall from his eyes. For the disciples, sight is restored by flapping fish in tailing nets. For Saul, the conversion is so dramatic that he is immediately baptized. Saul is dead, Paul is born. The disciples in the boat, they too are turned around. Peter ... in a veritable and irrepressible baptismal moment jumps in the water to meet the Lord.

In different ways, Paul and Peter enter holy waters. For one it is such a profound experience that it coins the phrase "road to Damascus experience". Blinding light, temporarily disabled and movement from against Jesus to forever for Jesus. Peter takes the plunge in the midst of this daily toil. His turnaround is not his first but it's a conversion that belies a tidy beginning and end. Change, transformation or both through the waters.

We this day ... we greet new followers of Jesus who will take the plunge into holy waters of baptism. I say to you, you can get wet today. You all in the splash zone here. Beware. Taking the plunge and those being confirmed also ... new direction, new companionship in our life together. These beloved ones continue the story. These are our stories. We are Saul who becomes Paul. We are Peter who fails and fails and denies and then races to the tomb in hope, who then jumps into the water to swim to Jesus.

Today is about change and transformation. If you didn't come here today to be different when you leave, you came to wrong place. This is about new direction in each of our lives. Not just for those being baptized, not just for those being confirmed. For all of us. Each of us sits on the edge of water. Each of us is invited to remember our story. Who we are. Who God is. What Jesus did. What Jesus is doing and what we're going to do about it in our lives.

When we renew the baptismal covenant, we are Saul becoming Paul, we are with Peter taking the plunge. When the disciples catch up with Peter and pull the nets ashore, Jesus is waiting. There is a charcoal fire with fish and bread. It's Eucharist. He shared with them the last supper. This is the first breakfast. In a three-fold questioning the breath of change, forgiveness and love flows over them.

"Simon, son of John. Do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord. You know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs."

"Simon, son of John. Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord. You know that I love you."

"Tend to my sheep."

"Simon, son of John. Do you love me? Do you love me."

"Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

It's about the love. Through the waters flow love. Jesus' love puts him on the cross. Jesus' love pulls him through the empty tomb. Jesus' love puts him behind locked doors to give peace. Jesus' love puts him on that beach and Jesus' love puts him with us around this holy table. Jesus' love changes all of us. As I pray over these stories and pray to enter this moment with you, I found myself going ... I guess it reflects some way to my own story, my own past and what began to just wisp through my memory was the hymn "Blessed Assurance." Lord didn't make hymn notes certainly in my southern DNA and maybe something in your memory as well. You may know it.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,

Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine,

Heir of salvation, purchase of God,

Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Yes. True of Saul who becomes Paul. True of Peter and John and all the others. True of Grace, Sarah, Virginia, Zoe and Susan. True of Melissa, Ashley, George, Henry, Gabriel, Susan, Brandon, Jordan, Evan. True of each of us. We have a story. In the beginning was the word and in the end ... well it seems like it's around the table or a charcoal fire ... an ending really without an end.

Our story is not about an unforgiving world but of an ever-forgiving God who keeps coming for us and is vigilantly waiting for us. It's not about us looking after ourselves but caring for our neighbor. The moral of our story is not the one with the most toys wins but the one that is more blessed gives and that those who want to find their life must lose it. Our story is about Jesus and are travelling with this one. Blessed assurance, Jesus is yours and yours we all say, Jesus is mine.

In deed that spiritual has a refrain. It goes something like this.

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Savior all the day long;

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Savior all the day long.

It turns out that Fanny Crosby who wrote these words was actually blind physically yet she could clearly see. The scales had fallen off of that sister's eyes for sure and they've fallen off of ours. The light is dawning. There is water between us and a fire on a shore not too far away. Are you ready of the water? Are you ready to take the plunge? Do you know your story? Jesus is by the fire with a forever feast prepared for us. He will tell us who we are and where we're going. It is a great story. It's not a tragedy. It's not a comedy. No. It's a fairy tale that is coming true so come. Come into the water. This is our story. This is our song.

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Savior all the day long;

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Savior all the day long.