

## Rebuilding the Foundations *Remembering Our Way Out of Exile*

Isaiah 40:28-31

April 14, 2024

A word of personal testimony. Among the many convictions that led me into pastoral ministry sixteen years ago and continue to sustain me in this odd and wonderous vocation, none is more important than this one: stories are sacred. Stories possess power to create connection and convey meaning. I believe that our human stories can be channels for divine truth. I believe that the message of God's grace is written not only in the pages of scripture but in the experiences and encounters that shape our narratives as well.

People of Christian faith are story people. After all, before there was orthodox theology, before there were letters from Paul or arguments over policy, before the Apostles' Creed or Constantine's conversion, before soaring cathedrals or church hierarchy, there was a story. Whenever we worship, we bring all our individual stories into the same sacred space, and we gather around a common story, the story of God's love for us and for the world. We are story people.

And to worship is to be reminded on a weekly basis that we belong to this story at least as much as it belongs to us. Imagine just before bedtime, the young child turns to his father, "Dad, tell me a story."

"What kind of story would you like to hear, son?"

"Tell one with me in it." That's what we do here.

One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, wrote these words, "My story is important not because it is mine...but because if I tell it anything like right, you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours...It is precisely through these stories...that God makes himself known to us...If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished."

I worry that we are at risk of losing track of these stories—the great Biblical narratives that inform and animate our faith, but also our personal encounters with God, our testimonies, our stories. In an era of bite-sized brevity and matching attention spans, who has time for these stories? Buechner believed such a loss would impoverish us, and he was right about that. Stories enrich our lives. Stories form our faith. They are also the basic building blocks of community.

This is why I was only mildly surprised last week when I read a piece in the *Atlantic* titled, "The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust." The cost the author referenced was not spiritual in nature. Or maybe it was.

After detailing the now-familiar statistics around increased secularization and decreased church attendance, and his prior support of it, the author shares what shifted his perspective. It was this: the loss of identity formed by a shared story. He explains that organized religion provides "not only a connection to the divine, but also a narrative of identity, a set of rituals to organize the week and the year, and a community..." In other words, what faith offers, what we desperately need, and what far too many among us have lost is time and space to share stories, to tell stories, to talk about and listen for what matters the most.

When was the last time you paused long enough to hear someone else's story or to tell your own? Perhaps it happened during the holidays or a vacation, over a cup of coffee or on a long car trip. I've been interested this week by how many folks have mentioned to me how Monday's eclipse felt like a glimpse of the divine, and how many folks specifically referenced how the experience was deepened by

sharing it with others. How neighbors made their way out into common spaces in neighborhoods, church parking lots, business places. How stories were shared as we witnessed this miraculous event of beauty. Sacred moments that connect us to one another and to God. But you have to slow down long enough to listen, long enough to tell.

Since our older son Samuel was a baby, Sara and I have read to the boys each night before they fall asleep. That time is a gift, a gift we cherish, an opportunity to slow down and just be together at the end of the day. I believe this. And yet. I remember one night, Sam was two, and I was reading to him. And it hit me that he didn't know the words. He didn't know the order of the story. Aha! I can begin to skip words, and then whole pages. I could read the first page and the last page of the book and save all the time taken up in between. After all, the sooner I finished this reading thing, the sooner he would fall asleep, the sooner I could get the kitchen clean, the sooner I could sweep the floors, the sooner I could answer that pile of emails waiting for me. I was proud of myself for this discovery as I speed read my way through children's books. And then it hit me. In my attempt to trick my infant son and rush to the next thing on the list, I was bypassing the most important moment of the day. I hope I'm not alone here. How often do we fail to cherish the holy moments while we're living them? How often do we rush right past the presence of God?

A couple of weeks ago, I was offered a speaking invitation that both delighted and terrified me. This is not my typical reaction to speaking invitations. My mother used to say that the most dangerous place in the room was between Chris and the microphone. I feel right at home up here in front of you. But this invitation was different. I was asked to come talk with our high school juniors and seniors on a Sunday morning. I was scared. Now I love talking about scripture or some interesting topic about which I've read and researched. But this was different. I was asked to share my own faith

journey with a group of teenagers. What a daunting challenge. Tell a story with me in it. Remember where you have been and how you came to be here. The group of teens could not have been more gracious or kind. I was reminded that it is a blessing beyond measure simply to be heard.

In today's scripture the prophet Isaiah speaks to people held captive in the land of Babylon. His imagery of God's power and might, creator of the ends of the earth, does not grow faint or weary—that imagery does not align with the lived experience of his listeners. They are exiled, deported, displaced, forced to live as refugees in a foreign land. The haunting words of the psalmist paint the picture well: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps... how could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

Nonetheless, into the silence of harps hung out of hopelessness, Isaiah's prophetic words ring out with this call: Remember. Remember. Tell the old stories. Exile is coming to an end, and you must begin to imagine your life beyond captivity. It is an act of courage that begins with story. Remember God's faithfulness in the past, step into future boldly. But first you must remember.

Throughout this program year at Second Church, we have been focused on the ministry of rebuilding. This work is *not* about returning to an era of former glory. But neither does it mean we start from scratch. It is about imagining our lives beyond the present moment, immersed in the stories of God's past faithfulness. This rebuilding theme has taken us in many different directions. Several of you have mentioned it was a little too literal to have to rebuild the porte-cochere this year. We've witnessed some extraordinary reimagining of our ministry to youth and their families. You've heard testimony to that this morning. Thanks to the dedicated leadership of volunteers with both vision and passion, we have reimagined a signature mission of this congregation

and created *Second Treasures*, a new thrift store supporting outreach to our neighbors, rooted in the wonderful tradition of sales each summer and fall in our building. From the depths of the pandemic, we have rebuilt a congregation of worshipers each Sunday as we see exciting growth in our attendance. Drawing on Second's roots and history as a church for the city of Indianapolis, we are building bridges in the community and responding to the call of our moment to convene conversations about a shared future of hope and possibility.

Rebuilding the foundations begins the way all movements start—with stories. I am convinced that the way forward for our city and our nation has everything to do with rebuilding communities capable of telling and hearing stories.

But we have to take the time to listen. We must develop the spiritual discipline of bearing witness rather than aiming to win an argument or dunk on an adversary. As Marilynne Robinson reminds us, "nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense." Think of that.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? If the answer is yes, then you must tell your story. You must remember these stories that form the foundation of our faith. And here is what will happen: as you speak, you will find your strength renewed as if you are being carried on eagles' wings. You will run without fatigue. You will walk without exhaustion. You will remember, and you will be remembered. You will be recreated by the author of all life. Let the rebuilding begin. Amen.