

Flock Talk

Psalm 95

The Power of Story

I love stories! Stories are powerful. They shape our lives. We don't often think about it, but it's true. Your family has a story. It is made up of the experiences that you have had together. Those experiences make up your story, which in turn influences the values by which you order your life. What kind of food was served at your family's table? That impacts what you want to eat today. Did your mom require that you clean your room and make your bed every day? That discipline or lack thereof impacts what your bedroom looks like today. Your family story shapes your values.

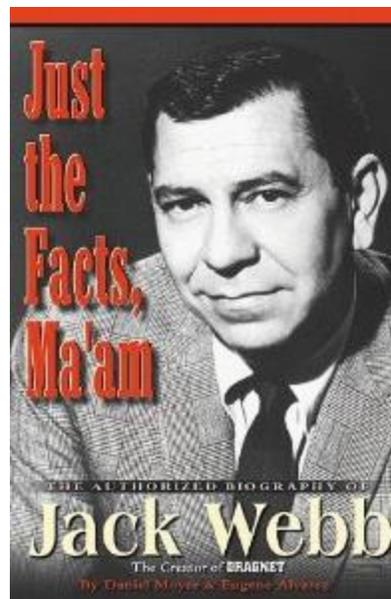
One of the experiences that make up our family story was the annual family vacation. My dad had three weeks and for several years we would use each of those weeks to travel from the Southwest to New York to visit my grandparents. While there, we would go out on my grandfather's sailboat and go clamming in the Great South Bay. (Give me clams on a half-shell and I'm in heaven! Most of the rest of you would probably have a different reaction...because your story is different than mine.) .

Of course, you can have a negative family story as well. The impact is still, unfortunately, profound. The people who populate our prisons most likely have bad family stories.

Stories are powerful. They profoundly influence our destiny.

But there's a big misunderstanding with stories that I want to try and address. The problem is that when we talk about stories, we modern people tend to discount them as make-believe. Perhaps we got the idea that stories are not true and reliable because of our experiences as children when our parents or a teacher would "read us a story." In many people's view, stories are not as important as "just the facts." But as the cops from Dragnet fully understood, it was really the story that they after so that they could make sense of the circumstances they were investigating. They wanted "just the facts" so that they could piece together the narrative.

I talk about story and narrative a lot and I know that makes some people nervous. As Christians we might think that doctrine and theology is more important than the narrative or story. We might think that what we believe about sin and redemption, heaven and the Trinity are more reliable than the Story. But the reality is that the Story came first. Doctrines and theology are man's attempt to make sense of the Story. We need both: theological doctrines and the Story. A wise seminary professor once put it this way: "Doctrines clarify while narratives (stories) vivify." In other words, doctrines help us understand God's ways while the biblical Story brings what we believe to life. And I would argue that it is the power of the Story by which we order our life.



At least that was true of God's people in the Old Testament. To the Hebrews, remembering what God had done for them was critical. That's why God instituted Passover and the Festival of Booths...so that they would never forget the Story. Our text for today, Psalm 95, was, quite possibly, written for the occasion of the Feast of Booths. The festival required that the Jews live in makeshift booths for seven days so that they would always remember the years in which God led them through the desert to the Promised Land. The importance of their historical experience – the Story – becomes apparent as we read through the psalm.

Text – Psalm 95 (ESV)

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
 let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
 let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
 For the Lord is a great God,
 and a great King above all gods.
 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
 the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it,
 and his hands formed the dry land.
 Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
 let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
 For he is our God,
 and we are the people of his pasture,
 and the sheep of his hand.
 Today, if you hear his voice,
 do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
 as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
 when your fathers put me to the test
 and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
 For forty years I loathed that generation
 and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart,
 and they have not known my ways.” [They forgot the Story.]
 Therefore I swore in my wrath,
 “They shall not enter my rest.”

Our God is an Awesome God (vs. 1-7)

Next to Psalm 100, this psalm is the most utilized passage that churches employ as a call to worship. Indeed, the psalm has two calls to worship. The first one is a call to vigorous – I like the word “rambunctious” – worship. Let us sing! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving! No dour faces. No holding back. The psalmist says to make a joyful noise to the *rock of our salvation*. We use the phrase so many times that we are in danger of passing over its meaning. We’re lost. We’re dying. We’re drowning. Get the picture? Sure you do. We’ve all felt that way at some time during our life. Remember your story! We needed salvation and God was the solid place – the rock that cannot be shaken – who saved us. The psalmist truly remembers what God has done in rescuing Israel from Egypt and her enemies for all these years. God is indeed their rock of salvation. So make a joyful noise!

You see God is worthy of our praise without reserve. The little word, “for,” at the beginning of vs. 3 reminded the Jews about their great God. The ancient Hebrews lived in a day of competing gods – competing stories, if you will. From the Exodus through the rest of the OT, the Bible affirms the necessity of observing the first commandment. The Ten Commandments begin with a reminder and then a command: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3). The up-and-down story of the Jewish people in the Hebrew Scriptures is the consequences of their obedience or disobedience to the first commandment. Would they follow after the gods of the Caananites or would they follow the God of their fathers? This is the tension that the Jews always lived with and the psalmist reminds them that Yahweh – the LORD – is greater than any competing gods in the surrounding culture. He reminds us that our God is greater, that he rules over from the depths of the earth to the highest mountain. The oceans are his as well – even to their unfathomable depths.

In vs. 6, there is a second call to worship, different in quality than the first. The first was a call to a joyful noise for the sovereign Lord who rules over all things. The second call – “Come let us worship and bow down” – is a call to humility. In this psalm, we see the importance of a balanced corporate worship life. Some folks insist that worship should always be high energy and up-tempo. Others emphasize the importance of reverence and bowing the knee. We need both. After we have spent ourselves in vigorous praise, we need to humble ourselves and quiet our spirit. It’s time to connect with our God.

In any relationship, it is essential to have quiet times to talk and reflect together. Anyone who is married knows that to be true. You can only spend your energy on the merry-go-round of activity for so long before you need to reconnect and re-establish your relationship. That is the dynamic in place in this psalm. The first five verses speak of the great King who rules over all. The next two verses speak of the Great Shepherd who tends and leads his flock. It is relational language.

Unlike many of the psalms, Psalm 95 does not have a subscription telling us who wrote it. We don’t really know. But it is very possible that David wrote this psalm because of the shepherding

language of these verses. God made the nation of Israel for himself. He is their Maker and their Shepherd. Throughout their history in the Old Testament, he had led them and guarded them from their enemies. When they strayed – as sheep tend to do – he disciplined them so that they would stay near to him. It's a beautiful picture and it captures the history of God and his people.

A Sober Warning (vs. 7b-11)

Jesus said, "My sheep will know my voice" (John 10:16). I don't know a whole lot about sheep, but from Jesus' words in John's gospel, I do know that they are led by the shepherd and they do know his voice. And so the psalmist, using the same picture, urges the people of God to heed the Shepherd's voice. The consequences of not hearing and obeying God's voice are sobering, as the Jews very well knew from their history.

Many of you remember the story. God, through Moses' leadership, had just delivered them with a mighty hand out of slavery in Egypt. He brought ten plagues upon the land so that the Pharaoh would finally release them. And when the nation came to the waters of the Red Sea with their enemies hot on their tail, he opened them for the people to walk on dry ground. Surely, God was one who would care for his people and provide what they needed. But when they came into the wilderness they doubted and complained, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exodus 17:3) The complaining was so bitter that they threatened to stone Moses. God gave them water from the rock, but Moses named the place "Massah and Meribah" which mean "place of strife" and "temptation," meaning that the people tempted God. Along with the people's complaining about water, they also refused to enter into the land that God had promised to give them. You can read the sad story in Numbers 14. God had promised them the land, but when they faced the challenge of faith, they wept and complained and dug their heels in. God nearly destroyed them on the spot, but Moses interceded for them. Nevertheless, none of that generation ever entered into the Promised Land.

That was their story and the psalmist reminds the Jewish people of it so that they would never again make the same mistake and not trust God when he expected them to live by faith.

What Will Be Our Story?

Thousands of years later, this psalm rings true for us. The words are not an empty recitation of historical happenings. Israel's story is God's story. And we have been brought into God's Story through Jesus Christ. The New Testament makes it clear that we are the people of God. The first part of the psalm is our story. We worship the Lord who is sovereign over all. We bow before him because he is our Maker and our Shepherd. "We are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand." The warning is ours as well. It is ours to listen to his voice.

So what will be our story as a church? The Scriptures make it clear that God not only deals with individuals; he deals with groups of people as well. As this New Year dawns upon us, we are faced with a testing of our faith. Like the Hebrews, whose history was rehearsed in Psalm 95, we, too, have a story with God. There have been times of blessing and challenge in the history of First Baptist Church. But through it all, God has shown himself to be a faithful Shepherd to us.

2015 brings us new and exciting challenges. We have a new mission statement, "Helping people find and follow Jesus," that we need to own and put into action. We have people that we must reach. We have new programs and new ways of doing things that we must consider if we are to be effective in Kingdom ministry today. And, I'm sure you know, it is very important that we refresh our facility to open our arms to the community and to fulfill the mandate of our new mission statement.

These are exciting but critical days for us as a church. 2015 will be a challenging and dynamic year for us. And change is always disconcerting. It is very tempting to just go back to the way things used to be. The Hebrews experienced that temptation. When faced with the challenge of faith, they complained and wanted to go back to what they knew – they wanted to go back to Egypt. It's universal. It's the same for us as it was for them. Moving into the future requires faith in God. It's where the rubber meets the road. When we go back to the way things used to be, we can control things. And we like that because control means comfort. But when we control things we make ourselves God. Moving forward in faith, on the other hand, puts God on

the throne and us in our place as his sheep. And that is the place of blessing – the place of rest where God is God and we are not.

Being a preacher is no easy thing. I love the reading and the study. I love writing the sermon and developing the PowerPoint. I enjoy being up here and trying to express in words what I believe God would have you hear. But the hard thing about being a preacher is that God's Word impacts you before you deliver it in a sermon to the people. That's certainly been true with this psalm for me this week. Am I listening to God's voice and am I willing to obey him into the future in faith?

I've addressed this message to us a church – as I believe the psalm was originally addressed to the corporate body of the Hebrew people. But it has a personal application as well. In the rhythm of life, we are not always faced with a crisis of belief or faith. But I am certain that many of you here this morning are wrestling with how to deal with some significant challenge in your life. Remember your story with God. Has he not shown himself to be the Lord and to be faithful to you? Remember and heed his voice for moving out in faith.

The warning of Psalm 95 is quoted in the book of Hebrews, chapters 3 and 4. There is a message of urgency in both the psalm and in Hebrews. It is simply this: "Today." Not tomorrow. Not sometime in the future. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Friend, trust him and move forward in faith. He is your Good Shepherd.

Church family, let us humble ourselves and kneel before our Shepherd. Let us quiet our souls and hear to his voice. And may God grant us faith to move forward into the promise of this coming year.

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