

I love to tell the story; 'twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

I am sure all of you recognize these words as the refrain of that dearly loved hymn *I Love To Tell The Story*. This refrain kept going through my head as I studied our Bible readings for today, especially our reading from Deuteronomy. I kept thinking about the stories and narratives that are gifted to us in scripture. A narrative is a retelling of something that happened. A narrative is not the story itself but rather the telling of the story. Narratives are important because they shape history, they give identity and they shape us as people.

How often over the course of this 2016 Presidential Campaign have we heard candidates talk about “narrative?” I venture to say multiple times. Many of the candidates have said we need a new narrative and each candidate thinks he or she is the one who can best provide us with the needed narrative that will bring change for the better.

So, today, I have to ask, “Do we or do we not need a new narrative?” I do believe we need the big stories that give meaning and depth to life, large narratives that enable us to better understand ourselves and our relationship to God. However, do we need a new narrative? I think not. The people of God we find in the Bible give us the really big story, the story

that is **our** story, the narrative we need to hear. In the Bible we are given THE story that gives depth and meaning to life, THE story that helps us understand who we are and **whose** we are, THE story that gives us identity. And, today, we are again gifted with a narrative that is part of that story.

The people of God we find in the Bible were so good at telling the old, old story. When they found themselves in new places, they were encouraged by their tradition to go back to the old, old story that represented their beginning and was foundational to their identity. That is what we find in today's reading from Deuteronomy. When the people found themselves in a new place, whether that meant entering a new geographical place or simply entering into new phases of their communal life together, they were encouraged to go back and tell the old, old story. They were encouraged to recite that old narrative describing their history, who they were and their covenant with God.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy begins with these words, "when you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess." Now, we know that the book of Deuteronomy was written around the 7th century BCE when the Assyrians had power over the Israelites. 7th century BCE was long **after** the Israelites had entered the

Promised Land, even though the instructions in Deuteronomy act as if the people are not yet there and still wandering in the wilderness. Anyway, the people are to go back to the narrative of their foundation as a community, that big story that has been their guide as people of faith. Just listen again to the instruction the Israelites are given, “Once you enter the land that God, your God, **is** giving you as an inheritance and take it over and settle down, you are to take some of all the first fruits of what you grow in the land that God, your God, is giving you, put them in a basket and go to the place God, your God, sets apart for you to worship him. At that time, go to the priest who is there and say, ‘I announce to God, your God, today that I have entered the land that God promised our ancestors that he’d give to us.’ The priest will take the basket from you and place it on the Altar of God, your God. **And there in the Presence of God, your God, you will recite:**

A wandering Aramean was my father,
he went down to Egypt and sojourned there,
he and just a handful of his brothers at first, but soon
they became a great nation, mighty and many.
The Egyptians abused and battered us.
in a cruel and savage slavery.
We cried out to God, the God-of-Our-Fathers:
he listened to our voice, he saw
our destitution, our trouble, our cruel plight.
And God took us out of Egypt
with his strong hand and long arm, terrible and great,
with signs and miracle-wonders.

And he brought us to this place,
gave us this land flowing with milk and honey.
So here I am. I've brought the first fruits
of what I've grown on this ground you gave me, O God.'" (*The Message*)

Every time the people of Israel are taken to a new place they are instructed to recall the foundation of their life together, telling that narrative about the God who rescued them, gave them the land and placed them where they now are. And, the telling of that story becomes a form of liturgy as they recount the covenant God made with them, the God who has given them life, the God in whom their entire being is rooted, the God who has placed them in community, the God who makes promises and keeps them.

I think we as people are always moving into new places both literally and metaphorically. As I reflect upon this past year of life together within this Faith community, I realize many of us have moved into new phases of life. Some of us have seen our children move away, some of us are facing the onset of illness, some of us have retired or will be retiring, some of us have faced the loss of a loved one, some of us have lost jobs and some have found jobs, some have moved into nursing homes, some have faced excruciating pain in life, some have literally moved into new homes, and some – like me – are beginning a new decade in life. As we enter these new places and phases, we remember the love and grace of a God who gifts us with life, who has named and claimed us as God's own, and who

promises to be with us through the entirety of our lives. Just as the Israelites were instructed to remember and recall that narrative that shaped them, we, too, are to recall that story of God who has made a covenant with **us**. This story we hear today is **our** story. This is not the story of people long ago, it is **our** story, it is **my** story.

If only we would really get this. The Bible is not a book that gives us answers for the problems we face in life. It is a book that gives us **our** story, **our** narrative. You see, **we** are the ones who are in slavery. **We** are the ones rescued by God. **We** were once without a land. And **we** are now the recipients of a land, a land that is flowing with the graciousness and love of God! **This is our story.**

This crazy, wild story of Israel is **our** story – a story that has its roots not in us, but in the grace and love of God. And, for us Christians, this great narrative of love and grace does not end simply with the gift of the land. This story continues, finding its fulfillment in one named Jesus, who, by the way, as our gospel lesson shows, **also** relives the great story of Israel, doing so as he wanders in the wilderness for forty days and faces the same temptations that his people faced. In the story of Jesus, one born in a no-named place, the story of the inclusion of the forgotten and the poor, the story of the healing of sick and dying people, the story of

forgiveness of broken people, the story of a world where the rich are poor and the poor are rich, the story of a love that was so big and so massive and yet so unwelcomed that it was nailed to a cross, the story of a love that was so big and so massive that even the grave could not stop it – **in this story we find a place, we find a community, we find a tradition, we find a narrative that we participate in.**

Oh yes, we need **that** narrative, we need **that** big story. We do not need a new narrative. What we need is the wild, crazy story of God and God's people – the story that takes us to new heights, that connects us to each other and to God. **That** is the narrative that lasts.

And you know what? When that day comes and we find ourselves in “scenes of glory, singing the new, new song, it **will** be that old, old, story that we have loved so long. Oh, I love to tell the story; ‘twill be my theme in glory to tell the old, old story of **Jesus and his love.**”