

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
October 31, 2010 - All Saints  
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## Stories of Faith

Swiss Village is a great place to hear stories. With the average age of SV residents a little more than 85 years, it's a place with *lots* of stories! There are stories that make you laugh – like the one about the horse that went to pick up the school children...*all by itself*; stories that make you cry – accounts of abuse that took place in children's bedrooms so many years ago, and some stories that simply cause you to shake your head – like hearing about traveling cross-country to California in 1954 in a '40's something Chevy...with a car loaded down with all earthly belongings and 5 children! (Oh yes, they crossed the desert at night...but when they ran out of gas the mother did wonder if she would ever see her husband again when he caught a ride on the back of a passing motorcycle...)

No matter the story, very often the story-teller ends by reflecting on the passage of time, the treasure of memories and an expression of gratefulness for God's blessing and providence. Especially in late life, it seems, the events of life are reviewed. Sometimes this revisiting of the past evokes feelings of gratitude, sometimes it awakens feelings of regret, yet for people of faith these stories are almost always intertwined with thanksgiving for God's presence and leading – through all of these “times.”

It is also of interest to note that of all the stories that folks *could* tell with so much life experience, it is often the *same* stories which are retold. It seems that there are *particular* stories which help us make sense of life, stories which most poignantly “bear witness” to God's saving acts. In times of uncertainty or threat, these are the stories which offer strength and courage for way forward. In times of blessing, past blessings are recalled.

On the church calendar, tomorrow is the day known as “All Saints Day.” In more poetic language, the day is known as “All Hallows.” So today, of course, is “All Hallows' Eve,” or “Halloween.” A couple of years ago on this weekend, we expanded our worship center to include pictures of those whose spiritual legacy continues to nurture us. Saints – not especially well-qualified, “special” people, but rather “ordinary” disciples. Persons like the ones described in the Ephesians passage which Dave just read for us...those welcomed by the grace of God into the Body of Christ...followers of Jesus...just like us.

At this season, we're given the invitation to attune ourselves to the “great cloud of witnesses;” those who have been part of God's salvation story as it has unfolded through the generations. This morning, may we allow our memories and the re-telling of the Story to inspire us, to challenge us and to cause us to take a serious look at our own “Salvation story-telling”.

A “theological” description for the Old Testament record of the people of Israel and their covenant relationship with God is the term, “salvation history” (Heilsgeschichte) The Old Testament is the life-story of the people of Israel. It is recounted in great detail in the books of the Pentateuch - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - and also in the poetic language of the Psalms. Listen to this excerpt from Psalm 105: listen for the details of the narrative; listen for the vantage point of the psalmist...

Psalm 105 – (Bernie/Marie to read)

*O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the people...*

*...He is the Lord our God;*

*He is mindful of his covenant forever,  
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,  
the covenant that he made with Abraham,*

*his sworn promise to Isaac,  
which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,*

*...when they were few in number,  
of little account, and strangers in it, wandering from nation to nation  
from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them;*

*...when he summoned famine against the land,  
and broke every staff of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them,  
Joseph, who was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters,  
his neck was put in a collar of iron; until what he said came to pass...*

*...the king sent and released him...*

*He made him lord of his house and rulers of all his possessions,*

*Then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham.*

*And the Lord made his people very fruitful and made them stronger than their foes,*

*He sent his servant Moses and Aaron whom he had chosen...*

*...He sent darkness and made the land dark...He turned their waters into blood ...their land swarmed with frogs, even in the chambers of their kings. Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold, and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled. Egypt was glad when they departed...He spread a cloud for a covering and fire to give light by night. They asked and he brought quails, and gave them food from heaven in abundance. He opened the rock and water gushed out...So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing ...Praise the Lord!*

In hearing this poetic re-telling of the story of God’s people, we aren’t expected to receive this as objective historical documentation (if there even is such a thing!). The Old Testament isn’t attempting to be a scientific, *secular* history, rather it is a *sacred* history. The words of Psalm 106 recount another side of the story:

Psalm 106 (Bernie/Marie)

*...our ancestors, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wonderful works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea.....they had a wonton craving in the wilderness and put God to the test in the desert; he gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them...*

The Old Testament collects – first in oral fashion – then in written form - the experiences of the people of Israel as interpreted through the lens of their faith in God. The Old Testament bears witness to the people’s encounter with God. It is the story of God’s participation in their lives.

Last week, I sent around a link to an article in last Saturday’s *Journal-Gazette*. The article related conclusions of research centered on the question of biblical literacy. As we hone our identity as a congregation, it is my desire that one of our top priorities will continue to be an ever-increasing biblical literacy followed by an ever-increasing religious literacy. That is, I wish for us to grow in understanding of our tradition’s sacred story and of the sacred stories of other religions. Biblical literacy is not the same as scripture memorization. Memorization of scripture may be a valuable investment in the larger goal of “literacy.” Yet, snippets of scripture belong with the larger narrative if they are to inform us in matters of our faith and practice. It is important that we learn the “Big Story” in which all other biblical stories are contained.

The salvation story of the Jewish people begins in the OT and then continues through the writings of the inter-testamental period. Our Protestant canon doesn’t include these writings so most of us don’t know much about the return from exile and the days of Jesus. Andy, with your rich Catholic history; you would be familiar with the stories of the books of the Maccabees, of Tobit, Judith, etc. Our literacy with our Christian faith grows as we learn about these books which the early Swiss Reformers (1530) described not as books to be “despised” yet not given the same “divine authority with the others.” The accounts found in the Apocrypha provide additional images for how we think about God and how people responded to God in difficult times. (Do get your hands on a Bible which includes the 14 apocryphal/deuterocanonical books)

From the time of the inter-testamental period then, the story of faith continued its unfolding. The Gospel stories are collected and invite us into a new understanding of “covenant.” The OT, that is the Old Covenant, becomes the New Covenant with the Good News of the coming of Emmanuel, “God with us now– God’s intentions for humanity embodied in Jesus.”

Yet, these Gospels are not simply journalistic attempts to capture an objective, historical snapshot. Through the eyes of faith, the Gospel writers relate for us – just like the story-telling Psalmists of the OT – the movement of God among his beloved “people.” In light of this new understanding of covenant, God’s “people” now discover that it is not only they– the “particular (that is –chosen) people” of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in whom God delights -but *all* the peoples of the world!

And throughout the centuries the Story continues... today is also known as “Reformation Day.” We remember the actions of the priest, Martin Luther, who on October 31, 1517, challenged the Church’s practice of bringing a marketplace mentality into matters of

faith. The good works and the saying of prayers, which would fulfill the required penance for sins, were known as indulgences.

Yet, a new twist emerged in the lives of the church establishment when the *buying and selling* of indulgences became another way to receive pardon. For example, Pope Leo X offered indulgences for those who gave alms to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. (A pretty steady market!) Martin Luther protested this financial “forgiveness” by nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther protested... “the Salvation Story is being mis-told!”

A stirring which was simmering in those days – and not only in the heart of Martin Luther – burst forth. A call for reclaiming and reviving the Story spread across Europe. A people desiring to be more closely knit to the “salvation story” of the Old and New Testaments began to re-tell the Story. (By 1567, all grants of indulgences involving any fees or other financial transactions were cancelled by Pope Pius V, even though the practice of indulgences remains.)

The Church was badly shaken, but through this very intense time, once again, the Salvation Story burned brightly. The Body of Christ was reawakened to the call to be a people of blessing - to all peoples and to share the grace-filled message of a loving, welcoming God, and to walk in the way of the humble, servant Jesus.

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The people of God – through time and space – bear the story of salvation, whether they lived in the day of Abraham and Sarah, in the day of Moses & Miriam or Judas Maccabeus & Judith or in the day of Jesus and Paul. The people of God, each in their *own particular* time and space receive and re-tell the salvific movement of God as it continues forward “to all generations.” Nearer to our time it was carried by persons like Martin Luther, Conrad Grebel and Menno Simons... And guess what? Today...*we* are the story-tellers!

From time to time, it is good for me to pause and entertain thoughts about the wonder of living. Consider for a moment, all the contingencies, the “what if’s, the close calls...that might have happened to any one of our ancestors. Had the stream of life been interrupted at any place through the generations, our own lives would simply have “never been.” And then too, I like to think about the “timing” of life. How is it that my “wisp” of life is happening right now? And since it is happening right now...and yours is too, we have the gift of relationship with one another! The sharing of God’s story!

It’s good for me to think this way from time to time. Instead of feeling helpless or cynical about life and its meaning, I’m stirred to marvel at this incredible – *truly incredible*– opportunity to live and to be part of the Great Story of the work of God among God’s people...the people of the world- in this very time and in this very place!

Yes...the story continues...and right now, right here, the Salvation Story is ours to tell! For this brief season, we are the bearers of this treasure. Sometimes, the story line seems apparent– when way forward seems clear; at other times it is ours to tell through the lens

of discouragement and disillusionment. As we hear again the formative faith stories of our ancestors – in all their nuance and richness, I invite us to consider the life-changing events of our own lives – what happenings are for us like the call to Abraham and Sarah to be a people? What stories are for us like the great rescue out of Egypt and the daily sustenance in the wilderness years?

Do we realize that our stories link us to the Salvation History of the past and the unfolding revelation of God into the future? At the same time, it is *incredibly* important that we, the story-tellers of today, discern with one another which “version” of the story we “hear” ourselves telling. Are we telling a story faithful to God’s intentions for the “earth? (and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein?” Psalm 24:1) Or have we, too, like the Church of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, become acculturated and sloppy in our allegiances? What kind of story will future generations have to work with when our lives are past?

Our shared stories connect us to the “saints” of the past “*so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we (too) may know what is the hope to which we are called...what are the riches of his glorious inheritance (Eph.1:18-21)*. As EMRF sojourners may we delight in our opportunity to share the Salvation Story of God which –*right now*- lives among us and through us! AMEN