“What’s Your Story?”

Preached at the Wollaston Congregational Church

On November 13th, 2016

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25

This week, this week … well, things turned topsy turvy. This week we experienced the climax of one of the most contentious, hard-fought, and frankly unpleasant election campaigns I have ever witnessed.

Today, our country finds itself divided and bruised, by verbal and physical assaults by Americans on one another. I think we are now crying out for a way to come together. There is a cry for a way to understand one another, to hear one another a deep level. A cry for a way to get beyond the shaming, condescension and rhetoric. And, I believe, that we can only find that way through deep listening to one another.

Now, I have to say that I got a really good break from the election rhetoric on Monday morning. I went to a half day conference entitled “Stories across the divide: Personal narrative and interreligious leadership” held at Hebrew College in Newton. Hebrew College is the Rabbinical school that shares a campus with my former seminary Andover Newton. The conference was pretty awesome, particularly because one speaker was the artistic director for the Moth Radio Hour, Catherine Burns. The Moth is one of my favorite radio shows. And I like radio. Listening to the Moth is a little like listening to stand up comedy, only the speakers tell their stories from their lives, uninterrupted, to a live audience.

For me, as I say, the conference was a break. I had just about had it with the election (hadn’t you?) and I just wanted it to be over. That was what I was ready to tell everyone I met, “I just want it to be over.”

The table where I was seated included an African American woman. When the subject came up, we turned to her. Her eyes filled with tears “I’m so afraid,” she said “so afraid.” She told us how she had recently moved to the suburbs from the city and so she needed to vote in a new location. She has no car, and has some difficulty with mobility. She realized that it would take over an hour to travel by public transportation to her polling station and so she had decided to take a taxi. She didn’t want to wait until Tuesday, fearful of how that might be, as emotions ran high. So she had gone to vote early. She shook her head again, “I’m so afraid.”

Later, I reflected on my flip response “I just want it to be over.” Comparatively speaking, there was little at stake for me, while this woman was truly afraid. I believe that what she feared was less the outcome of the election, more the vitriol and hatred that has been unleashed over the past months. This will not be going away any time soon. It took her story, for me to understand that fear. I was changed and humbled by the hearing of it.

Story telling isn’t only the telling, it’s the listening. And that was one of the lessons of my experience on Monday. It is deep listening that leads to understanding. Listening without interruption or comment, just allowing the speaker to tell their story.

We are changed when we listen, deeply, to the story of another individual. We hear their hopes and longings, as well as the things they suffer. We are often moved to compassion. How much more might we be changed when we listen, deeply, to the story of God’s hopes and longing.

So in the tradition of story telling, let’s turn to our biblical story for today. This is a beautiful oracle from the prophet we know as “third Isaiah.” Some decades before the oracle is given, the elite class: the military families, craftsmen and smiths, were taken from the land of Judah into exile in Babylon. There they had lived, building houses, planting vineyards, raising families. Some served as officials in the Babylonian empire. They were far from home, but life really wasn’t so bad.

After a number of decades, Babylon was defeated by the Persian King, Cyrus. When Cyrus took over, he decided that the exiles should be allowed to return home. This marked the “return to Zion”, a process of returning deportees, those who chose to go back. It lasted for over 100 years.

Meanwhile, when the exiles had been taken, the poor had been left behind. They labored in the fields, scratching to get by.

The temple had been destroyed and ransacked by the Babylonian invaders, and Jerusalem stood desolate, almost deserted.

The returning exiles were enthusiastic about rebuilding the temple. They brought some of the silver and gold that had been stolen by the Babylonians years before. They would restore Jerusalem to its former glory! Or so they thought. But their numbers amounted to about 20,000. The original temple had been constructed over many years by some 47,000 specialized and skilled workers. The task ahead was enormous – and for what? The field workers are scratching a living from the parched land. They have been keeping the home fires burning. What are these over-fed, over-optimistic returnees thinking? What do they think that the poor remnant have been doing all these years? If they had they been living this life all along they would be singing a different tune.

Time went by, and the rebuilding was underway, but there was no hope of restoring the temple to its former glory. This replacement was a DIY fixed-up version. The new workers were not commissioned by a great King, they did not have his riches and power. Instead they began, stone by stone to build back the temple, into a shell of a place it once was.

If only the returning exiles and the ones who had remained in Judah had listened to one another’s stories.

If only they had sat around the fire in the evening and told of those lonely years when they had been apart and their culture had been decimated.

If only the exiles had heard of the “left behind” people’s sense of abandonment and suffering.

If only those left behind had heard of the exiles longing to be home, their yearning for their former worship place and its sacred meaning that sustained them through the years.

So, it is in this tension that Isaiah, the story-teller, hears the word of God.

This is quite a story, because God’s stories are not set in the past. Have you noticed that? Whenever God speaks in the scriptures there may be reminders of things past, often references to the covenants made and broken. But the story is always of now and of the future, the places where God exists all at the same time. I am creating *now*, God says, not tomorrow, not yesterday. I am creating *now*.

I am creating a new heaven and a new earth! It is such a wonderful world in which the pain and suffering of the people will not even be remembered. The vision speaks of God’s yearning love for the people. It is the Lord’s great joy to alleviate their suffering many times over. Instead of an infant mortality rate of maybe 50%, there will be no child who dies in infancy. Instead of a life expectancy of maybe 30, a person of 100 years old will be considered a youngster. Jerusalem will no longer be a desolate and barren place, it will be a joy. Those who work in the fields will enjoy the fruits of their labors. And most astonishing of all, predator and prey, wolves and lambs, will lie down in peace. Lions will be going on a vegetarian diet.

It is the longing of God’s heart. It is a dream in which creatures who were formerly adversaries will lie down and snuggle together. They will feel the beat of each other’s hearts.

God can no longer bear to see God’s people divided and suffering. God anticipates, with hope and story telling, what God will do. God’s story telling speaks the truth of how things are, but God’s story telling also always speaks of transformation. We cannot listen to God’s story without being changed.

When we hear the story of what God is doing, we live into that story. We turn our attention, from hastily putting together the stones of the place that is tumbling down. We really listen to what God is calling us to do in this time and place. We listen to God’s vision of a time when no one will hurt or destroy, on all God’s holy mountain, which is the world.

On Monday, I learned that live story telling, such as what is broadcast on the Moth, is greatly popular with millenials. The young adults of our time have grown impatient with religious institutions that moralize and pontificate, segregate and separate. Many are seeking out authentic connection through coffee houses and story slams. They are beginning to live into that craft, and I am very hopeful for the millenials who may re-teach the craft to our communities of faith. It is our hope for participating with God in creating that new heaven and new earth.

Now, you can understand, I’m sure, that I have a passion for story telling and story listening. That is what our tradition of preaching is all about. Or at least, it is what I believe it must be all about. So, I ask you to hold me accountable. If I wander from story teller to moralizer, remind me of this, guide me back to story telling.

And, for you, I hope that you will hold yourselves accountable too, to tell your own stories of grace and transformation. Last week we heard a few stories of the saints of this church. We began to listen to what stories have unfolded on this holy ground. But, we have more stories to tell, my friends. I hope that you will tell the history of this church from the perspective of your lived experience.

I hope that you will tell the stories of how your faith life and church relationships have transformed your lives. Tell those stories here and tell them among your communities outside the church.

Not only that, may we challenge ourselves and hold ourselves accountable to listen to the stories of the other:

* the other in opinions and politics,
* the other in faith, or no faith,
* the other in race or nationality,
* the other in generation,
* the other who went to war and the other who stayed at home,
* the other in sexual orientation or gender identity.

So, tell us, what is your story?

Amen!