

The Story of the Bible, Part 2

**“A Life of Faith, Hope and Love:
The Message of the New Testament”**

--CEFC 9/17/17;

I've never considered myself much of a storyteller.

I have great admiration for those raconteurs like Garrison Keilor
 who can hold people spellbound by their yarns,
 painting intricate pictures with their words
 that put you in the middle of the action.
 But I've never been able to do it myself.

My wife is very good at telling stories—
 she can expound events in great detail from beginning to end.
 But my story-telling isn't like that—
 I suppose, I'm too impatient.
 I'm more like Joe Friday: “Just the facts, M'am.”
 In college I studied philosophy instead of literature—
 My thought was, if you want to say something, just say it—
 in clear, concise propositions—
 no need for a lengthy narrative.

But there is one story I like to tell--
 an epic tale that spans the ages;
 a story of love and hate;
 of power and weakness,
 of loyalty and betrayal,
 of defeat and victory.
 It is a story that encompasses every human experience, and more.
 It is the story of the Bible.
 It the greatest of all stories—
 for it is through this story that the God of the universe
 has chosen to reveal himself to us.

Our purpose in these three Sundays in September
 has been to outline that story.

In the first act, you'll recall, we looked at the story of the Old Testament--
 considering it in three parts--
 First, was the creation--
 “God created the heavens and the earth.”

The notion of creation provides a foundation
 for our understanding of the order of the universe

and for our own unique place in it--
as that one species created in the image of God.
Here is the ultimate source of our dignity,
our value,
our personality, our rationality, and our capacity to love and to worship.

But as beings created in the image of God
we are also given moral responsibility--
we are *commanded* beings.

And the Old Testament story moves to a significant second stage in Genesis 3
when our first ancestors first distrusted the goodness of their Creator
and chose their own good instead.

They disobeyed the only command that restricted them,
and so, in what is called "the Fall,"
sin is introduced into the good world that God had created.
And with sin comes death--
physical death, but also a spiritual death,
in that the relationship with God for which we were created,
was severed--
as God in his judgment sent a curse on this earth and its first inhabitants
and he cast them from the garden.

Paradise Created, Paradise Lost.

It's a tragic tale--
and the tragedy only gets worse
as that first sin infects the whole race like a deadly virus,
passing on from generation to generation.
We feel the effect even today—
we all know that there is something wrong with this world—
We instinctively feel that this is not the way it's supposed to be./

But God does not abandon the human race,
and in his mercy he seeks to create within it a new people for himself.

He calls a man named Abraham--
and the Lord God promises his blessing on him and his offspring
to make of them a great nation,
and through that nation, he promised to bring his blessing
to the whole world.

Thus begins the third scene of the first act--
a scene that lasts through the rest of the Old Testament.

It is the promise of redemption,
the promise of Paradise regained.

This relationship that God establishes with Abraham, this covenant of grace,
is extended to his son Isaac, and to his son Jacob, who is renamed Israel.

And Jacob's twelve sons
eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel.

The promise of blessing is reaffirmed through Moses
whom the Lord uses to rescue the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt,
and through Moses the Lord gives Israel his law.

This divine law is to reveal to this people just who it is they are dealing with--
a holy and righteous God--
a God jealous for his own honor,
a God who demands justice,
and before whom one can come in worship only through animal sacrifice,
which is to say, only through a symbolic reminder that our sin deserves death.

But even this perfect divine law fails to reform the morals of the people of Israel.
This thing called sin is too deeply embedded in their hearts.

But the promise continues--
it is reaffirmed again through King David--
who serves a model of a king to come.

And the prophets of the Lord
in calling the people to repentance,
look to a day when God himself would work to save his people from their sin.
The Lord would assert his rule in the world, destroying every other rule,
and ushering in his glorious kingdom

This is the Old Testament story in a nutshell--
pointing forward to a coming day of salvation.

And onto the stage at this point
a new character emerges—
a character who turns out to be the central character—
the character around whom the whole story revolves—
This new character announces, "**The time has come.**"
"**Now is the day of fulfillment.**"

In Jesus of Nazareth the coming Kingdom of God has dawned.

In his words he speaks of the coming of that kingdom ,
by his actions he demonstrates its presence--
the sick are healed, the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and men and women are freed from the demonic powers of darkness.

Here is that coming son of David,
the prophet like Moses--
But he is more than that-- he is the very Son of God--
for he simply cannot be fit into mere human categories.

In this man Jesus,
the Author has made himself a character in his own story.

Many think that this must mean that the story is coming to an end--
it is reaching its dénouement, its climax,
the deus ex machina is revealed,
and everything will come together in one happy ending.
Superman has come to the rescue.

But what happens?
The story takes an unexpected twist--
Jesus is arrested, and after the mockery of a trial,
the King of the Jews is crucified as a common criminal.
He dies on a Roman cross.

Is this the end of the story?
Was it a tragedy after all?

No! Not at all!
for on the third day, the tables are turned--
Jesus is raised from the tomb,
victorious over sin and death.

His disciples are surprised, afraid and overjoyed all at once.
They know he is the Messiah, the Son of God--
they know he did speak the truth about the Kingdom of God,
and they know that it was not for his own sin that he died.

The risen Jesus teaches them for a period of about forty days,
appearing to as many as 500 at one time,
but then he is taken away from them,
exalted to the right hand of the Father in heavenly glory.

But before he goes he tells them that he will come again,
and in the meantime he will not leave them alone—
He will send the Holy Spirit of God
to come upon them to empower them,
so that they may be his witnesses sharing this message of good news
beginning in Jerusalem and extending to the whole world.

And the New Testament Book of Acts tells the story of how that happened--
how this Jewish sect grew to become a world-wide people of Jews and Gentiles.

And the rest of the New Testament
is a collection of letters written by these commissioned messengers of Christ
instructing and encouraging the early Christians in their new way of life.
They bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ
and all that that means.

And it is this message of the New Testament
 that I want us to consider this morning
 under the three headings of **faith**, **hope**, and **love**--
 corresponding to three dimensions in time.

As that message is about faith in what God has done;
hope in what God will do;
 and living in love in the present
 between the "already" and the "not yet."

First, I want you to see how the message of the New Testament relates to the past--
 The New Testament writers call us to faith in God
 on the basis of what he has already done.

Our God is a God who acts in history--
 and that action, as we have traced it through the life of the nation of Israel,
 has found its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is the decisive turning point in the divine story--
 this is the "D-Day" in the history of God's dealing with sin and death in our world--
 Like the Allied invasion of Europe in 1944
 which signaled the critical moment in World War II,
 through his Son Jesus Christ
 God himself has invaded our space and time
 to overcome the power of evil.

But this divine visitation didn't take the form we might have expected.
 Instead of arriving in royal splendor,
 he was born in a manger.
 Instead of growing up as a prince,
 he was the son of a Galilean carpenter,
 Instead of assuming a glorious throne,
 he ascended a shameful cross.

It seemed a foolish message--
 this notion of a crucified Messiah.
 But in this mystery is found the wisdom of God--
 for God in his wisdom
 did not want to flatter us with our own self importance;
 he wanted to humble us before him--
 he wanted us to know that only by identifying with the shame of this cross
 could we know the glory of heaven.

The cross of Christ declared to us that we were sinners who deserve to die.
 And only when we could look at Christ nailed to the cross
 and confess that we were the ones who belonged there,
 only then would we be in a position to appreciate

the depth of the grace and mercy of God--
 the lengths he would go to bring us to himself
 and to bring himself eternal glory.

For this message of good news is only good for those who first know the bad news--
 the bad news that before a holy God

we are all guilty—
 all have sinned and gone their own way.
 We all stand condemned and are bound for hell--
 eternally cut off from God's loving presence.

But the apostles call us to look back at what God has done in Christ--
 paying the penalty of our sins in his death
 so that we might be set free from the guilt that binds us.
 Jesus, risen from the grave, has conquered the forces of evil
 that held us captive,
 setting us free to become servants of God.

Look to Christ in faith, they tell us--
 believe that his death is for you and your sin.
 Trust that he is now raised in glory as Lord of all.
 Call upon the Lord in his mercy
 and be joined to Christ, such that his death becomes yours
 and his new life is yours as well.

There is nothing you can do to set things right with God--
 you can never put God in your debt;
 you have no rights before him--
 you must humble yourself in his presence--
 simply receiving by faith his gift of salvation in Christ.

This is the good news--
 that we can be **justified** before God--
 that is, we may be declared not guilty on the basis of the work of Christ.
"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"
 Paul writes (Rom. 8:1).

This is the good news--
 that we may be **reconciled** to God--
 where once we were his enemies,
 he now calls us his friends--
 more than that, he adopts us into his family as his beloved children.

"We are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus," Paul writes (Gal. 3:26).

We are accepted by God--just as we are,
 when we come in faith,
 seeking his mercy.

This is the good news.

Death, our great enemy, stalking us our whole lives,
 ready to ambush us at the end and to steal any lasting meaning
 or significance from us—
 death has been conquered by the resurrection of Jesus--
 and he now introduces us into a relationship with God
 that death cannot destroy.

Look back in faith at the life, death and resurrection of Jesus—

The gospel is a proclamation of what God has done in Christ--
 that's the first part of the message proclaimed by those first Christians.

Christians look back at the life, death and resurrection of Jesus

as the decisive moment in the story--
 as the "D-Day" turning point in God's saving purposes.

But what is most interesting is that

the world was not suddenly transformed overnight
 after that decisive work of God.

Life in Jerusalem and in Rome remained about the same

on the day after that first Easter.

But you could also say that life in Paris and in Munich remained about the same
 after the Allied forces took the beaches of Normandy in June of 1944.

Things appeared just the same,

but those who could understand the flow of history--
 those who could appreciate the significance of what had just happened--
 they knew that things would **never be** just the same.

D-Day did not end the war;

there was still plenty of fighting to be done.

But D-Day made VE-Day, the day of victory in Europe, ending the war,
 an inevitability.

So it was in the minds of the first Christians.

Jesus came announcing the coming of the kingdom of God--

in him the promises of the Old Testament would find their fulfillment.

All the hopes and dreams of the people of God would be realized--

God would establish his righteousness and justice,

he would redeem this fallen world--

he would finally set things right

and do away with the sin and pain and death

that had spoiled his good creation.

This present age would give way to the age to come.

But even after the coming of Jesus into the world, this didn't happen—

not yet.

But what did happen

gave the first Christians full assurance that it would happen.

For in the resurrection of Jesus they saw the first installment
 on the new creation that is to come,
 In him they saw the first phase in the victory over sin and death;
 in him they saw the dawning of the new age;
 In him was the first and decisive stage in the fulfillment of God's promise.

And this risen and glorified Jesus promised that the D-Day of his first coming
 would certainly result in the VE-Day of his second coming--
 that Victory on Earth Day,
 when the kingdom of God would be ushered in
 fully and completely with all its glory.

So just as the first Christians looked back in faith,
 they also looked forward in hope--
 an assured and confident hope--
 sure that what God had begun in Christ,
 he would surely bring to completion.

**"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith,
 we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
 ... And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God"** (Rom. 5:1,2).

**"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
 In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope
 through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade --
 kept in heaven for you,
 who through faith are shielded by God's power
 until the coming of the salvation
 that is ready to be revealed in the last time"** (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

The story of this world is heading toward a grand conclusion--
 human history has a goal.
 God is going to wrap it all up and bring it to a close.
 He will fulfill his promises—
 and in Christ they are all "Yes!"

We are given a vision of that end in the Revelation of John
 in the last book of our Bibles--
 He gives us a glimpse using graphic imagery of that great and final day
 when Christ will come in glory like a rider on a white horse,
 with his eyes like blazing fire with many crowns upon his head.
 He will come and be declared King of kings and Lord of lords.
 All those who have been faithful to him through persecution will be vindicated.

And he will be seated on a great white throne to judge the nations,
 and anyone whose name is not found written in the book of life

will be thrown into the lake of fire.

And a new heaven and a new earth will be revealed--
 like a great city coming down out of heaven from God,
 with a loud voice from the throne saying,
**"Now the dwelling of God is with men,
 and he will live with them,
 They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.
 He will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain,
 for the old order of things will have passed away"** (Rev. 21:1-4).

That's VE-Day—God's victory over sin and death in this fallen earth.
 The Paradise once lost will be regained.

This is the great Christian hope--
 the assurance that God will do what he has promised he would do.
 That assurance is firmly grounded in what he has already done in Christ.
 Christ is risen—he is risen, indeed!

God will fulfill his promises to Abraham—
 In fact, God will fulfill his promises to Abraham
 in a way that Abraham himself could never have imagined.
 Whereas he had promised Abraham a land,
 he would give Abraham the whole world.
 Whereas he had promised Abraham
 that many nations would be blessed through him,
 Abraham would see that those from every people, nation, tribe and tongue
 would share in that blessing.

It's like parents promising their child a stuffed animal for Christmas,
 and the child awakening on Christmas morning
 to discover that they had given him a real, live puppy.
 The promise was fulfilled beyond his highest expectations.
 So it is with the promises to Abraham.

The first Christians were filled with hope--
 it was a hope that **motivated** them--
 it encouraged them not to invest too heavily
 in the treasures of this world in all their various forms--
 for this world is passing away.

When multi-millionaire Andrew Carnegie died
 people wondered how much he left behind.
 The answer was simple: he left it all!
 It is only the treasure in heaven, in that world to come,
 that abides forever.

No wonder Christians will willingly and eagerly
 leave their possessions and loved ones behind

and go to the ends of the earth to proclaim this message of good news.
It was this hope that motivated them.

This was a hope that **encouraged and comforted** those first Christians--
The apostle Paul could endure being flogged with lashes,
beaten with rods,
pelted with stones,
shipwrecked on the high seas and much more--
and consider them all as but light and momentary troubles--
just temporary inconveniences--
in the light of the overwhelming eternal glory that would be his.

Nothing was too difficult to endure
when they thought of the end to which their lives and all of human history
was inevitably headed.

And it was this hope of a glorious end that gave them confidence--
"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm.
Let nothing move you.
Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,
because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1Cor. 15:58)

Faith in what God has done;
Hope in what he will do.
But finally, I want to talk a little more about the present
and consider a central aspect of the message of the New Testament
that we've only touched on.

For in this story of God's redeeming work in the world
we are told first of God standing over us--
as King, as Judge, and as Father;
Then we are told of God coming alongside us--
as Jesus Christ, the Son.
But the gospel also reveals a third dimension of God's work--
that is God dwelling within us as the Holy Spirit.

The story of God's work unfolds
as a very personal Trinitarian work--
the work of God the Father,
God the Son,
and God the Holy Spirit--
all working as one to draw us into a new relationship with our Creator.

For Jesus had said to a man named Nicodemus, a teacher of the Jews,
that no one can enter into the kingdom of God
unless he is born again--
born of the Spirit of God--
given new life on the inside.

that perfect relationship of love.

The Spirit of God within us starts to change us from the inside—
He empowers us to seek God's holiness in our lives—
transforming us into the image of Christ.

The Spirit begins to bear fruit in our lives--
the fruit of peace, patience, kindness, self-control, and so on,
and the supreme expression of that fruit is love.

How many people who become Christians
say that one of the most significant changes in their lives
was their ability to care for other people in a way they never could before.
Love, Jesus said, is to be the single most significant sign
that a person really is one of his followers.

The Holy Spirit of God is a spirit of love--
We live now in the love of God
by the power of the Holy Spirit of God in our hearts.
And God's word assures us that nothing--nothing at all--
can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.
And because the Holy Spirit of God is a spirit of love
the Spirit now within us is a down payment,
a first fruit,
a foretaste,
of that heavenly world of love that is to come.

For in that world our faith will become sight,
and in that world all our hope will be realized—
all that will endure is love—
for love endures forever in that world of love.

So you see, there is a flow to history--
It has a point of beginning--with God as the Creator.
Before the world began he had a purpose in bringing all things into being.
It was a good creation--a paradise--
into which he put creatures created in his own image--
able to reflect his personal character--
able to love and to worship--
but also they were able to turn away in moral rebellion
against the rule of their Creator.
And they did--
and that paradise was lost--
sin entered the world,
and with it corruption and death.

But God in his mercy and grace had a purpose and a plan to rescue
a people for himself--
a plan to regain that paradise--

and to reestablish his rule, his kingdom, among human beings,
and so bring glory to himself.

And beginning with Abraham and the Jewish nation
that God revealed himself to the world.

That revelation culminated in the greatest miracle of all--
the Author of this story became a character in it--
Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Son of God.

In him the full depth of the love of God is displayed
as he gives up his life as a sacrificial offering for our sin,
dying so that we might live.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended to the Father in heaven, from which he promises to come again
to gather his people to himself to be with him forever.

But until then, empowered by the Spirit ,
he has commissioned his people to live in faith and hope and love,
sharing this message of good news with the world
in word and deed.

This is the story of the Bible.

And as we close, I'd like to address two groups of people--

First, to those who stand outside of this story,
to those who haven't joined in this story,
to those who haven't ever embraced this story as their own--

I ask--

What is your alternative?

What is your story?

What framework do you have for understanding the world
and your own place in it?

What do you have to give meaning to history,
and any sort of lasting significance to your own life?

How do you define who you are?

Is it really merely dust to dust, ashes to ashes?

Is that all there is?

Are you really just an accident of nature?

I remember when I was a student in Oxford,

being involved in what we called "dialogue evangelism."

The concept was very simple--

a student would invite a dozen of his friends to his room for a meal
and tell them that he was inviting a Christian to come

who would outline in a few minutes what Christians believe,
 then they can come at him with their hardest questions.
 I played the role of that Christian,
 and I tell you, I always entered those situations with fear and trembling.
 But one of the big impressions I recall from those meetings
 was how often the students would listen to this story
 and wish that they could believe it.
 For they knew they had no story like it of their own.
 To them it seemed too good to be true.
 Nothing better fits the facts of our experience;
 nothing better explains reality.

But why couldn't they believe it?--
 because deep inside they didn't want to--
 for this grand story demands the acknowledgement that the story of life
 has an Author that is not me.
 The story of life is not something I can simply make up however I like as I go along.
 No, this story has an Author with a capital "A" to whom I am accountable.
 This story has an Author who requires my submission and faith.

Many people are never willing to come to that point--
 that point of submission of their wills to God--
 and so they miss it all.

I urge you not to do that--
 don't be left out;
 don't let your pride get in the way.
 Humble yourself before this God-- and so discover his truth.
 Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Turn to Jesus Christ in faith and join in this glorious story of love and redemption.

Finally, to those who have done that--
 to those who are a part of this story--
 I simply say this--
 live your life in the light of it.

Hold on to this story,
 recall this story,
 rejoice in this story--
 and don't let it get lost amidst all the competing views of the world
 that are always floating around.

For it used to be that the Christian view of the world
 was the common conception in our culture.
 This story was reinforced by the voices around us.
 But that's no longer the case.
 We now live in a post-Christian world.
 Everybody is making up their own story--

Whether it be a **New Age story**--a story of karma and reincarnation,
 or a **scientific story**--
 a story that explains everything in terms of
 atoms and natural laws and survival of the fittest;
 or a **materialistic story**--
 a story that says that he who dies with the most toys wins;
 or a **hedonistic story**--
 a story of personal pleasure and constant entertainment,
 or a **power-play story**--a story of the king of the hill;
 or a **leave-me-alone-I'm-just-trying-to-cope story**--
 which is no story at all—
 with mere survival as the only goal.

We're tempted to adopt aspects of all of these stories--
 but they are false stories--
 don't be deceived by them.

Let the Bible's story grip your heart and mind
 so that it may shape your life.

In our confused world
 there is desperate need for people who know who they are,
 and who know where they are going,
 and who live lives of love in the light of those convictions.
 Our God calls us to be those kind of people--
 and by this story we can be.

Prayer—

Glorious Day
 Benediction

In the words of the Apostle Paul—

Rom. 16:25 Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel,
 the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ,
 in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past,
 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings
 by the command of the eternal God,
 so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience of faith —
 to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

What the Bible Is All About

Part III, 9/27/17

**“A Life of Faith, Hope and Love:
The Message of the New Testament”**

In the New Testament, the biblical story continues: The first Christians lived in *faith* in what God *had done* in Christ and in *hope* of what God *would do* in Christ. Their assurance and joy came in knowing that they were united with Christ in both his past and future by the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of *love*.

I. Faith in what God has done--
the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

II. Hope in what God will do--
the coming of Christ in glory

III. Living in love between the “already” and the “not yet”--
the present work of the Spirit

Are you a part of this Grand Story?

Sermon Discussion:

**“A Life of Faith, Hope and Love:
The Message of the New Testament”**

- How do the terms "faith, hope and love" help to sum up the message of the New Testament?
- How is the message of the gospel a "foolish" message (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18ff)? How does that make it more credible?
- How is the gospel a proclamation of what God has done more than what we must do?
- How would you respond to someone who says that Jesus could not be God's Messiah because the world has continued as it was before since he came? How is his resurrection only the "first installment" of what he has accomplished?
- Why is hope essential to the Christian message? How is the Holy Spirit the guarantee of our future hope?
- How is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham greater than he could have imagined?
- How is the gospel necessarily Trinitarian—involving the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How is the notion of "sending" (of both the Son and the Spirit) central to the gospel message?
- What is the goal of history? What part can you play in moving it to that goal? How can you align your life with the story of the Bible?