

Stories

When I was learning to drive as a teenager, my brother-in-law offered to help teach me. He was a lineman for the local telephone company and well-versed in safe-driving practices. I was grateful for his guidance. He taught me how to drive at a constant speed before cruise control. When I spent too much time looking at the rear-view mirror and worrying about what was going on behind me, he gently redirected me to the windshield, focusing on what I was going to encounter. I'm a much better driver because of him.

I've been thinking a lot about such stories lately, stories that we tell about ourselves and our families. At the Wednesday evening Lenten discussions we've talked about family histories – what I call “who our people are” – connecting them to biblical stories. Canon Marlin Whitmer has started a major project to record stories of Trinity Cathedral, documenting the parish legacy of teaching and healing.

The Bible is full of stories about “who our people are.” That's not surprising given that Israel defined itself by its history. What's fascinating is that those Bible stories continued to be reinterpreted for new generations even though the core elements remained the same. Take what St. Paul did, for instance. He was an unabashed Christian who knew his Jewish roots. In one of his letters he even claimed to be a better Jew than his opponents! In today's passage he reinterpreted Jewish history in a very Christian way.

The church in Corinth included both Jews and Greeks, so Paul included a lot of detail about the defining event in Jewish history, the Exodus. He described Moses leading the people through the Red Sea, following God in a pillar of cloud. They ate the spiritual food of manna and drank from the rock struck by Moses. Later Jewish tradition held that Moses' rock followed them on their journey. Paul characteristically interpreted the rock as Christ.

Paul knew how often the people turned away from God in spite of everything God had done for them. They grumbled, they worshipped a golden calf, and they had a big decadent party just like their idol-worshipping neighbors. Repeatedly Moses had to intercede with God on their behalf, but even so plague and poisonous serpents killed many of them.

Having described all of this disobedience, Paul makes his point: watch out! Don't think that you're any better than them or any less likely to fall if you're not careful. Don't put God or Christ to the test because God does not suffer fools or arrogance. That was true for ancient Israel, true for the church in Corinth, and is true for us now. These stories are reminders of what can happen when we stray from the path God puts before us.

At the same time, God is faithful. God will accept our repentance and receive us back. That, too, is part of the story. As many times as Israel repented, they were forgiven. In Christian history, Peter is the classic example of a forgiven sinner, denying Jesus three times yet still loved and accepted by the resurrected Christ.

Some years after learning to drive I returned the favor to my brother-in-law, helping his youngest son get his license. I knew how much more pleasant it is to learn from someone other than one's

parents. As I sat in the car with my nephew I tried to remember everything his dad taught me, passing on all of those safe-driving tips. It's ironic that my nephew now lives in a city where he doesn't need a car, but at least I know he can drive one safely.

Stories do define us. They tell us who we are. Yet they aren't static. They need to be reinterpreted for new times. I now know that going forward in life it's more important to look through the windshield than stare at the rear-view mirror. So I am glad that we are talking about our stories and the stories of Trinity. But let's not stop there. Let's find the core elements of who we are and use our stories to help us see where we are going and what we can become.

[Lent 3: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9.]