

In the stories of Israel we find out our own stories.

We begin to believe - we begin to have real faith
when the stories engage our own stories – when we find ourselves - in the stories –
and we hear their trials as our trials. We hear their longings as our longings.

Last week we read a very early story – about Abraham and Sarah -
and about the visitors with a humorous surprise.

And perhaps some of you remembered some surprises in your life,
but not just the surprise, but some unexpected blessings.

Move ahead a couple of thousand years –
Abraham and Sarah did become the parents of a great nation – God's great nation.

Today we heard a story about Jesus.

What Jesus is saying to group after group in those three years of his ministry
is that how you treat one another, but more so, and especially, how you treat the least of you
is important – for that is where you meet the creator.

It is important who you stop to help, and who you share your abundance with,
that be food or clothing, or shelter – or knowledge, or skill – or observing carefully
how communities, or cultures, or countries are ordered that results in widespread poverty and illness.

Jesus wants to know if we are willing to step up and do all we can to alleviate conditions,
that dominate, and oppress, and limit the lives and the possibilities for God's people.

We often do not give our attention to these things.

He told them, you have instead established a religion
that supports a corrupt society and satisfies itself in observing empty rules
about what to do when and when to do it,
and a system of worship in the temple that sustains a few in the hierarchy.

And empty worship obscures the very nature of God,
and our relationship to and with God.

That's what he told him.

Now Jesus is telling his disciples some things to expect after he is gone.

This reading is really about the cost of discipleship –
the cost of being authentic followers of this way of life -
this way of living in communion with spirit.

The way – the way of Jesus – was not comfortable back then – and they who became disciples -
would eventually incur the same wrath that would lead Jesus to the cross.

“A student is not above his or her teacher.”

He was not calling on them to provoke those in power in the church or government
for they were the ones most offended by his message -
but to confront.

When people seek freedom –
when people see themselves as so valuable that the divine cares about every hair on their head –
they are willing to stand up to the powers that are accustomed to putting them down.

And that was the case in the Roman Empire at that time.

That may not seem so real to us here in this country much of the time.
But, we know it is true in many places in the world – oppression of illness
In some places people become refugees and survive terrorist activities –
to then die of a killer disease like malaria.

Nothing But Nets is a joint venture between
the United Nations Foundation, the National Basketball Association, and The United Methodist Church.

Right now in Zimbabwe a child dies every 30 seconds from a mosquito bite,
these nocturnal mosquitoes that attack them while they sleep.

“Nothing But Nets” is a combined effort
to provide insecticide treated nets to protect children sleeping at night.

Why do we participate in this? Because it is being a follower of Jesus. It is in our mission.
And, Methodist Churches are out there, and our members and clergy, and missionaries can distribute them.

They don't get lost or diverted by unorganized or repressive regimes.

In Mali, 2.1 million children are sleeping safely under nets – the largest distribution to date.

Why do we participate in activities like this?

It is part of our mission to manifest the love of God through social outreach and justice ministries.

And it goes back to those things Jesus taught his disciples.

Yes, it is complex, and it takes the work of many – but it is discipleship.

We make these connections because we are followers of the way of Jesus.

Yes, it takes money, and it takes work.

The way of Jesus is making a difference in the world. Sometimes it is risky.

Sometimes it is standing up for those who are discriminated against. It used to be race in our country, more often in the past few years it has been sexual orientation. But in many places in the world people are oppressed and tortured because of nationality or race, or political status. Jesus would remind us that no one is free until all of us are free.

It is about being a disciple.

That's why many will choose not to do it – not to follow. People can do that. We can go to church and never be a follower of Jesus – never be available enough to find out.

We can call ourselves Christian and never step out of our comfort zone, and work at a shelter, or go to parts of the world so different than our own - to lend a hand - to encounter the world as a child in a place where there does not seem to be much hope.

It is a lot easier to be the kind of Christian that enters a church from time to time and thinks about nothing more than how the sanctuary is set up, or what kind of music is played.

We can do that, but we miss what Jesus wanted us to have.

Did I tell you the Parable of the Cave?

Three wise men were encouraged to find what had been called the cave of wisdom and life.

They made careful preparations for what would be a challenging and arduous journey.

When they reached the place of the cave, they noted a guard at the entrance.

They were not permitted to enter the cave until they had spoken with the guard.

He had only one question for them,

and he required that they answer only after talking it over with one another.

He assured them that they would have a good guide to lead them through the regions of the cave.

His question was a simple one, "How far into the cave of wisdom and life do you wish to go?"

The three travelers took counsel together and then returned to the guard.

Their response was, "Oh, not very far. We just want to go far enough into the cave so that we can say that we have been there."

The response of the guard manifested none of his great disappointment as he summoned someone to lead the three seekers a short distance into the cave,

and then watched them set out again after a very short time,

set out to make the journey back to their own land.¹

How far are you willing to go into the cave of wisdom and life?

Some people never get involved in a church. Perhaps they use the excuse,
I don't need that kind of community – I don't need religion – I am spiritual but not religious.
A spirituality that does not provide a pathway into a more vital life is no spirituality at all.

It is just a vague appreciation of nature, or beauty, or even joy.

But, it is not a kind of awareness that draws one into deeper living.

Deeper living, what is that?

Deeper living is when you see that there is much to do in the world,
and it takes the work of people together
people in relationships that build things that are bigger than they are.

Churches call people - to lives beyond themselves.

Churches call us into exploring what the God of creation wants of us and needs of us.

We as Christians find God through Jesus Christ -
we find a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

And we get an inkling of the image of our creator
and an inkling of who we are called to be – who we might be.

But you know, a lot of people for a few years now – perhaps a lot of years -
turned away from church – from organized religion because church used to be about
believing a set of statements. Remember the Apostles Creed?
"I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only son
who was crucified and buried, ascended into hell, and on the third day he rose from the dead....."

Creeds like that became empty to many of us.

And when the language of the creed no longer represented what we sensed was real
we wondered if there was such a thing as faith.

If being faithful is a matter of adhering to a set of beliefs
some of which - many of us - wanted to be free to question – then perhaps we were not faithful -
perhaps we were no longer Christian.

And if we were not in an environment where we could explore the stories and the history
or even the way we did church - we just left.

We knew there might be something - but organized religion just did not have it.

What many of us have moved to is a different way of being church,
being a Christian is no longer so much a set of beliefs
to be memorized in a creed that we can repeat –
as much as it is about relationships.

And it is through the relationships that we learn,
and we question, and we ask about someone else's experience.

We share these stories of Jesus – or of Abraham and Sarah – as we did last week.

And through the stories we explore what they can mean in our lives.

There may be no one interpretation, no one lesson for us.

But, as we engage with persons of different views – we start to build community
and find meaning - beyond our own lives – and we want to make a difference.

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Or, we can be like the pilgrims who just wanted to go far enough
to be able to say - they had been there.

We can be what some people identify themselves as - I am just a Sunday attender.

Don't expect anything else of me. And that is their total Christian experience.

They don't get much. It does not change their life much.

Did you know there are churches that don't even meet for worship in a fine space like this?

There are small groups of people who only meet with one another in homes
where they study the Bible, and reflect on the lives they live.

They pray together. They learn together, and they begin to see how together
they can not only inspire their own lives, but make the world a better place – even in small ways.

What are they doing? They are responding to Jesus. They are being disciples.

They will confront systems that promote poverty, or conditions that make people sick,
or oppression that contributes to crime and violence.

And just like our story today warns, there may be consequences.

But, these followers of Jesus, go about what he has called them to do - and who he has called them to be.

So, our story today,
is - in part - about how following Jesus caused a lot of conflict for those early followers.

But, remember,
no other human being who ever lived has had a greater effect
on the world than Jesus of Nazareth and his followers.
And you can say that and not even believe he was God – or a window into God.

But for those of us for whom he is our window,
for those of us for whom he is God becoming human
and walking this earth with us,

he is about living life as deeply and as fully as we can. Amen.

¹ By Paula Ripple as printed in *The Sower's Seeds* by Brian Cavanaugh