

Lent 5C
Peace, Seattle
April 7, 2019
John 12:1-8
Isaiah 43:16-21

NEW NARRATIVE – NEW FREEDOM

While I was in Minnesota recently, visiting my mother Shirley in her final days, I was simultaneously going through personal items at my parents' home as we prepared to put their house on the market.

My folks had lived in their Apple Valley home for some 40 years, having moved there in 1978 just after it was built, and so there had been ample time for accumulation. Though they'd managed to pare things down through the years, there were still plenty of things that needed to be dealt with and plenty of decisions that needed to be made.

Much of this was handled by my sisters, so that by the time I arrived on the scene there were only a few areas needing attention. One of them was my parents' theological and devotional library.

As surely a carpenter needs tools—hammers, saws, drills, and the like—to practice their trade, so, too, pastors need books to practice theirs. Books are their tools. And through the years, especially his parish years, Dad took this to heart and built up an exemplary mid-20th century theological library.

When I entered his study as a kid I could sense how important those books—and the words they contained—were. The message was clear: “You’ve entered serious territory, a place where ideas matter; a place where serious work is done.” You get the picture.

When they first moved into the house on Lower Hamlet Court, Dad engaged a local cabinet maker to fashion floor to ceiling shelves for what became his first floor study; shelves that held his, and eventually Mom's, theological libraries. Let me just say, there's no question where my love of books comes from!

Now, four decades later, the job fell to me and my brother Mark to decide the fate of all those books.

Some, it was clear, could still be useful—all the titles published from 1980 onward we boxed up and brought to the Seminary as contributions to a program that distributed books internationally.

Others were classics by the likes of Kierkegaard, Bultmann, Barth, Niebuhr and others—those we figured might still be valuable to contemporary students of theology. But the vast majority of the books were beyond their shelf life and had to be unceremoniously disposed of; their ideas and narratives no longer relevant for a new day.

Mark and I did what had to be done, and it became another lesson in the transient nature of this life.

With that task completed, I could now sit down, between visits to see Mom and Dad, and sort through the small, neat pile of items from my past that had been filtered out and set aside for me.

A few of those items delighted me—the “lost” penny collection from my childhood, for example, which I’d long ago given up hope I would ever find. The navy blue collector card I first started filling in when I was in elementary school included two WW2 vintage steel pennies of which I had been most proud.

But when the collection disappeared in one of our family moves, I became convinced that my younger twin brothers had pilfered them to buy candy at the corner store. They’d never fessed up—and now I knew why!

In the same large envelope I found another treasure: wonderful handwritten notes (in fine cursive script!) I’d received from Montana classmates after moving to Minnesota in the midst of my 4th grade year. These, along with the pennies, I brought home.

But there were other items that didn’t make the return trip to Seattle. Most of these consisted of letters I had written to my folks through the years, some of them during times of significant trial.

As I began reviewing them I could feel the weight of those trials begin to bear down on me once more. Needing a quick dose of perspective, I made a quick phone call to a confidant, and minutes later those old letters found their way into the recycle bin.

The relief was palpable. I would not let bygone events worm their way into my present or my future.

The prophet Isaiah says as much today to God’s people as they prepare to leave the land of their exile and head for home:

“That old material that once dominated your lives?—leave it behind. I’ve got something better in store for you—in fact it’s unfolding right now, and if you pay attention you will see it!”

We all know people dominated by narratives from their past; narratives that hold them captive; narratives from which they are unable to extract themselves.

There may be good reasons for this. And yet, staying stuck in old patterns exacts a price on the present, and can prevent us from seeing the promise and the possibility of an alternative future. We all know them, and at times we are them.

Old narratives can become prisons, personal or familial hells that can keep us captive if we let them. But new narratives—new narratives are true gifts, opening a door to a future we could scarcely imagine was possible.

Thinking of my own family narrative has me looking at the gospel for today in a new way.

Think with me for a moment about Mary. Where does this act of devotion—her risky, lavish gesture of anointing Jesus—come from?

Certainly it’s an expression of gratitude to Jesus for giving Lazarus—her brother and Martha’s—back to them. Martha serves the meal; Mary serves up precious oil of nard.

But I wonder if there isn’t another reason as well. It was she, Mary, whom Jesus had recognized previously when he was a guest with them. Then, as on this night, Martha had served but Mary had sat at Jesus’ feet as a disciple. And it was as a disciple that he recognized her.

His greatest gift to her was SEEING HER as she truly was, recognizing her theological and spiritual curiosity, accepting her as deserving of his company, of his teaching, and so providing her with a foothold onto a new narrative path, one in which she wouldn't be trapped in a category due to her gender; one which would shape her life from that time onward.

Jesus had recognized her as a disciple and now, on this night, it becomes clear that she grasps at level deeper than anyone else in the room, where her Lord's story is heading. And without words she tells what she knows by anointing him in anticipation of his coming death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, our extraordinary witness today, was born into a narrative of privilege.

His father was professor of psychiatry and neurology. From his mother's side came professors of church history, musicians who'd studied under Franz Liszt, and some of the finest painters in 19th century Germany.¹ He grew up—a twin with sister Sabine—in a family of eight children in the large home of a well established and well respected family.

From the time he entered school onward he was a Berliner and with his family watched the events unfolding in Germany in the 20's and 30's from a front row seat. From a young age, he experienced a call to be a pastor and theologian and persevered even in the face of teasing by his older siblings, who told him the church was a poor, feeble and boring institution.

But Bonhoeffer was both brilliant and determined to follow his own path, come what may.

As Hitler and the Nazi party became ascendant, Bonhoeffer argued against the German State Church's demand of allegiance to the Führer, and he established a secret seminary for training pastors outside the confines of the State Church.

In the face of increasingly anti-Jewish laws he became a vocal opponent of Nazi policies, and when he did so, the narrative that was his birthright as a member of the privileged class began to change. He was put on a "watch" list, and was forbidden to publish books or speak publically.

A trip to the United States in 1931 had opened a new realm of interests and relationships to Bonhoeffer, but when he returned to the US in 1939 as the drums of war were gaining volume, he instantly regretted it. Offered an opportunity to remain in the US where he could be safe, he declined.

As he told his American colleague Reinhold Niebuhr,

"I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

Eventually, after his return home, it was his participation with the growing German resistance that saw him arrested in April of 1943, and two years later, on April 9, 1945, after being implicated in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler, he was executed.

His last recorded words as he was being taken from his cell to the gallows, were:

THIS IS THE END, BUT FOR ME THE BEGINNING OF LIFE.

In the end, the narrative by which he lived and died, was a narrative that grounded him in the crucified and risen Christ, the suffering servant who'd entered into total solidarity with broken humanity, the risen Lord who both demands all and gives all.

¹ These and other details are taken from Eberhard Bethge's biography of Bonhoeffer: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) p. 3 and following.

Among those books my brother Mark and I sorted through in our father's study was an early collection of Bonhoeffer's writings.

Already, so soon after his martyrdom, there was a growing sense among pastors and theologians—my father among them—that the hard won theological insights that Bonhoeffer had put to paper and the ethical choices he'd made as a human being held something critical for the church to learn and integrate.

Indeed, though many of the books we sorted through were no longer pertinent, Bonhoeffer's writings have never been out of print.

Sisters and brothers, whatever narratives you were born to, whatever scripts became part of your life along the way, God's message today—through Isaiah, Mary and Dietrich—is that none of them finally have the power to determine your future.

For all the negative scripts that have sought—and seek still—to hold us captive have been breached once and for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The prison doors are open! God is doing a new thing—and it is marvelous in our eyes. Thanks be to God.

Amen.