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You can feel the PATHOS behind the questions in Jeremiah, can you not?

Can see GOD—like an exasperated and perplexed parent—shaking his head and wondering how his relationship with the Hebrew children has dwindled to nothing.

> **"What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me,**
> **And went after worthless things and became worthless themselves?!"**
> God asks.

God's people have forgotten their stories.
They've lost touch with the narrative that gave them birth.

And because they have forgotten, they've lost touch both with God and with themselves.

And into that VACUUM other stories have rushed to take their place.

> **"My people have committed two evils, says the Lord.**
> **They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water…**
> **and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water."**

There was a time when Israel and Judah KNEW who they were;
knew they were a covenant people chosen to be a conduit of blessing for the world.

There was a time when they knew the ONE LORD to whom they owed their allegiance —indeed, their very existence.

But generations came and went, and memories grew thinner and thinner until there was no substance left. *How did it happen?*

The stories we remember and tell matter.
When stories are no longer told, we forget.

The prophet tells us that even the GUARDIANS of the stories—the ones charged with telling them and passing them on publicly, ritually—had failed to uphold their sacred duty.

And when the stories of a people is no longer told, the people forget who they are.[1]

[1] Sally A. Brown, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*…pp. 3-7. Brown's insights significantly shaped what I have to say in this sermon and one I preached on the same Sunday in 2013.

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Dear Siblings, what was true then is still true now. Our lives—individually and communally, are composed of stories. And the stories we tell about ourselves and the world MATTER.

Some of the stories we tell are cautionary tales…
- The uncle whose life was consumed by alcohol,
- The cousin who landed in prison,
- The classmate whose life was forever altered by a single, impulsive act.

Some stories grow in their telling until they cross the threshold into legend or myth.

Some stories capture pivotal moments in the history of a people or nation: Plymouth Rock; Valley Forge; Gettysburg; Wounded Knee; Pearl Harbor; Hiroshima; Watergate; My Lai; the COVID epidemic.

And some stories—though never repeated because they are too shocking or embarrassing or painful to tell—nonetheless exert their power over us, leaving us with physical or psychological scars that eat away at us like ulcers or hold us in a constant state of post-traumatic stress.

At Holden Village earlier this month Chris and I participated in a BLANKET EXERCISE led ELCA Pastor Manuel Retamoza, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and a first-generation Mexican American.

Dozens of us gathered in a large circle in the Village Center—imagine a space the size of two basketball courts—and in the center were blankets covering the floor, laid out to mimic the outline of Turtle Island—what we call the United States of America.

Each participant was invited to find a blanket on which to stand, and gradually, over the next hour, as we listened to readings from historical documents, journals, speeches, letters, and eyewitness accounts, we heard the story of the steady, relentless genocide of Native American Tribal communities, beginning in the East and moving to the West across the continent.

After each reading the persons standing on the portion of the map where the actions had taken place were tapped on the shoulder and asked to sit down, and as they did so the blankets where they'd stood were folded up and taken away.

It was a powerful experience that exposed us to a shameful history;
a trail of tears.

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The STORIES we tell about ourselves and others MATTER.

The FALSE NARRATIVES we cling to—FEIGNED RIGHTEOUSNESS, MANIFEST DESTINY; our DIVINE CHOSENNESS, our God-given ENTITLEMENTS—have the power to BIND US.

Jesus was known for the stories he told. Stories that proclaim the truth about God and humanity with such insight, strength, and moral clarity that two millennia later they still shape what it means for us to be followers of Jesus; to live as he would have us live.

The people Jeremiah addressed had lost touch with the sacred stories that had formed them as a people. The cistern had run dry; and in that vacuum, lesser stories had rushed in to take their place.

The central message of Jeremiah rings true still today:

We need to hear the stories of faith—of who and whose we are, of how we got here, where we're heading and why—and not only HEAR them, but PRACTICE and TELL THEM—lest we find ourselves unmoored and adrift, digging cracked cisterns for the lesser stories that infuse our culture and are eager to sell us on what's most important, where we ought to be going, and how they can get us there.

Friends, let's be clear…. Not all stories are equal. Not all stories are worthy.

Some stories championed by those who inhabit the halls of power are FALSE NARRATIVES whose aim is NOT to help us REMEMBER but rather TO FORGET.[2]

Intent on erasing parts of the American story they find objectionable, they urge us to embrace a mythical American past that never was—or to manipulate the Jesus story to fit ideological agendas.

But the crucified and living one will have none of that.

[2] Trump, criticizing the Smithsonian Museums, wants to white-wash the American story by toning down or dispensing altogether with its cruel realities. https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/walk-smithsonian-museum-reveals-american-genius-cruelty-trump-125120152

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In our reading from LUKE, Jesus' word to the ever-competitive, jostling-for-the-best-seats-culture he lived in (and we live in) is: **All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.**

His advice to his class-conscious, I'll-scratch-your-back-if-you-scratch-mine hosts is: **Expand your invitation beyond the usual suspects. Include people who will never be able to repay you: the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.**

Fellowship at a table like that will bring you blessing far beyond what you can imagine—for this is God's Way.

As we listen in on this conversation, what we're really hearing is a description of the inclusive Meal Jesus himself instituted; the Meal at the center of our life together.

This Meal shows us how to re-member what had been dis-membered by human attempts to separate and divide, judge and cast out, select or punish.

At this Table we are brought into the ongoing work of making creation whole.[3]

When we show up here, Christ meets us with his very own self, and gives us the grace, the strength, and sustaining power we need to follow his lead.

When we break bread together we become part of the new STORY God is telling, a STORY in which God takes our old, cracked cisterns and makes them whole.

May it be so. Amen.

[3] Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007) pp. 76-77