

I Believe: Sanctification | 7th Sunday After Epiphany | February 24, 2019
Pastor Nick Shults | St. Mark Lutheran Church | Sunnyvale, CA

The story of God in Christ doesn't end with our death but rather with our resurrection. As we await that day we point the world toward its restoration by loving and serving both bodies and souls.

Introduction

What makes a good story? What are the crucial components to make a story engaging and compelling? Author Donald Miller in his book, "A Million Miles in a Thousand Years", boils a story down to this:

"A Character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it."

Think about all of your favorite stories, whether it be books or movies and you'll see that they contain precisely these elements. In order to be drawn into a story it's got to be about a character that we're actually rooting for, who wants something compelling and worth our while, and overcomes some sort of conflict to achieve that worthy end.

Whether it's a romantic comedy, a classic good vs. evil, even a 30 minute sitcom. Each and every one of them contains these pieces.

It strikes me, then, that the biblical story of salvation is no different. Indeed, it is *the story*. And it's a story, not about you and me, but about a good and loving God who wants something (namely the salvation of the world) and he overcomes conflict (sin, death, and the power of the devil) to achieve it. The narrative of our salvation narrated throughout the pages of scripture is indeed compelling. The question for us this morning is simply this: "How does it end".

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We're concluding this series called "I Believe", part of our effort to go through the entirety of Luther's Small Catechism, Chief Part by Chief Part, over the next couple of years. Luther himself said that he had to keep going back to the catechism and study it like a child even though he himself was a doctor and a preacher! It was his belief that the more you study the basics of the faith contained in the catechism the more you realize how much you actually don't know! So we take his advice, going back to catechism class as it were, to remain rooted and grounded in the basics of our faith.

This morning, then, we take up the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed which shows us how the story of salvation continues on through Christ's church here on earth and on into eternity. This morning, as we take up those two things, Christ's church on earth and eternity, we're going to take them in reverse order for one very important reason. How we view the end of the story, so to speak, directly affects how we live out the Christian life as members of Jesus' Church on earth.

How Does the Story End?

There seems to be some confusion among Christians about how God's story of salvation ends and what, exactly, constitutes the final goal of our Christian faith. For many, it seems to me, that the end of our Christian faith was a bit like how I talked about it at the beginning of this series. I talked in that sermon about how I used to see my faith as a sort of fire insurance. That is, I had faith in Christ simply so that when I died I could go to heaven. That was the end of it. And frankly, the more I thought about it, the more I came to see that that version of Christianity just wasn't very compelling.

Why? Because it made Christianity all about me. I was at the center of my faith. What I could get from God was the main point. And I don't think I'm the only one to ever do that. Over and over again I hear people boil down Christianity and its goal as dying and going to heaven. This puts us at the center of the story of salvation. But we've already seen that the Bible's narrative of salvation isn't about us. It's a story about God.

But in our system, a system where we're the center of the story, death is the end of the story. Death is the portal, so to speak, into the afterlife and therefore the physical creation put into place by God himself is seen as something that ought to be, indeed *needs to be*, escaped. Our bodies are something that we need to get rid of. The whole creation, even, is seen as a sick dog that just needs to be put down. A creation that needs to be put out of its misery.

But what if there's more to our faith than dying and going to heaven? What if it's even better than that? What if there's more to the story? What if our Christian faith is more than fire insurance? What if, instead, we're caught up in the middle of the greatest story ever told. *The* story of God's salvation for us, and for the entire world.

Our Confession

You see, our confession of faith which we speak every single week tells us that there is more to the story. Our confession of faith recognizes that the story doesn't end with death. Death is bad. Death is the enemy. Death wasn't part of God's original, grand design. Death came as a result of the fall into sin.

Death shatters God's good creation, tearing our soul from our body and separating friends and family from one another. Death leaves us with a pit in our stomach and lifetime of longing to see our father or mother or husband, wife, or friend just one more time. Death leaves us full of sorrow and regrets. Death is bad. Death is the enemy.

Which is precisely why our confession of faith is that we believe in the resurrection of the body. This is our ultimate Christian hope. The end, or the goal of Christianity, is not the individual dying and going to heaven. Being in the presence of Christ after we die is but an interim state. It's not the end. Rather the end, the goal, of the work of God in Christ is the redemption and restoration of the entire creation. The goal of God's work in Christ, it's culmination, it's grand finale, if you will, is the resurrection of the body. This comes when Jesus, himself the crucified and risen One, returns in glory to raise us up.

The Christian hope is bigger than dying and going to heaven. In certain instances death feels like a release from pain and suffering. Certainly after my grandmother suffered from Alzheimer's Disease for many years, after her mind had been ravaged by illness for such a long time, death came as a relief to my family. You have probably had similar experiences, as well. But that does not negate the fact that death is bad or that death was not part of God's original plan or design. Think of the whole package, the illness itself, the suffering itself and death. It's altogether a result of the fall into sin. That we have to experience any of it is proof that God's good creation was tainted by sin.

But we confess in both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed that this thing called death doesn't have the last word. We believe in the resurrection of the body. Not just the resurrection of *Jesus'* body, which Paul says is the firstfruits, a preview, of what is to come for us. We believe in the resurrection of the body for all people. We confess our faith, our hope, our trust, in the fact that God's plan of redemption isn't just to get my puny little soul to heaven after I die. Our trust is that God is taking this broken, this sinful, this groaning world and He's putting it all back together again. He's making this creation *new* again.

And in this new creation all of our pain, all of our suffering, all of our groaning and crying and weeping will be washed away. You see, the story of salvation isn't just about salvation of our souls. The incarnation of Jesus...God coming into this world in human flesh...God being crucified for us...and Jesus rising again *bodily*, really, actually, physically on the third day well it demonstrates precisely what we're talking about this morning. Salvation isn't just for our souls as if that's the only part of us that matters. Salvation is for our bodies, our souls, indeed for all of creation. In Christ, God will bring it all to healing and wholeness on that day when Jesus returns.

This, I believe, is a much more compelling vision of our faith. Not only because it's biblical, but because it resonates even with those who do not know Christ. Every human on earth has experienced the brokenness, the pain, the guilt, the shame, the hurt of living in a sinful world. Every human longs for *that* story to end and be replaced by the newness brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Every human longs for a day when there will be no more hurt. This is the compelling story narrated by scripture.

The Christian Life

And this is what the Christian church points to every time sins are forgiven. This is what the Christian Church points to every time a hungry belly is fed or a cold body is clothed. Remember, the Creed isn't just boxes that we check. The Creed isn't just intellectual. It's a story. It's a narrative. It's a life lived following Jesus. So our hope in the resurrection of the body shapes our lives here and now. Thus our work in the world as people who comfort and feed and clothe and teach and heal it's not just to be nice. These are all signs pointing to our ultimate hope in the resurrection of the body. Because if Jesus thinks the physical creation is important enough to redeem and restore through his own suffering and death, then you better believe the physical creation, the environment, creatures, other humans alike, deserve our attention, too.

So the work of the Holy Spirit draws us into fellowship here as a Church, forgives our sins, and then sends us out into the world as redeemed and forgiven people to love and serve our neighbors and the world in real, concrete, physical ways. Christians care for the *whole person* because that's what God created and that's what God redeemed in Jesus.

It's why Jesus healed the sick, it's why Jesus cast out the demon, it's why Jesus fed the hungry, it's why Jesus raised the dead, it's why Jesus forgave sins, it's why Jesus ate and drank with unrighteous sinners. And it's why we do the same thing. As Jesus served the whole person, body and soul, so too do we. That's what God created and that's what God redeemed in Christ. That's what the Spirit sends us out into the world to do, too.

Conclusion

So what makes a good story? It's a character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it. We confess in the Creed that God our Heavenly Father who created us longs to restore this lost and broken world from the grip of sin, death, and the devil. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord - 100% God and 100% man, to live, suffer, and die for us and for the brokenness of the world.

But, our confession doesn't end there. Our confession ends with the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Indeed, God the Father overcomes the Enemy, *our enemies*, as he raises us Jesus from the dead. But there is still more to come. One day Christ will return and raise *us* from the dead, restoring this creation with waits and groans in expectation.

But until then, the Church is called out to proclaim the Gospel of forgiveness, healing, restoration, in Jesus Christ. This is good news. This is hope. This is the true and beautiful story of our salvation which we speak together each week as we confess, "I Believe..."

Amen.