

Why Scripture?: This Is Our Story
Acts 13:17-38
Northminster Presbyterian Church
September 2, 2018
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

Barbara Brotman is a writer who grew up in New York City in the late '70s and early '80s. The house she grew up in backed up onto a plot of land owned by the power company who had allowed native trees to remain. She remembers it as a great forest at her back door. A place to explore, to see squirrels and rabbits and birds when the only other wildlife anyone else around them saw was rats and pigeons. Her favorite things to do with her best friend Barry were to sneak through a hole in the fence and go pick wild blackberries where they sometimes actually saw pheasants who had probably escaped from somewhere and found a home in this little urban wilderness. And then the day came. The power company was finally going to build a transfer station and they came to bulldoze the entire forest. Barbara was devastated. She and Barry decided to save a part of their forest, so they quickly dug up what looked like a shrub and carried it over to Barry's apartment building next door where they planted it. Within a year it was clear, they had not transplanted a shrub but a tree, an oak tree, that now towers over that apartment complex all these decades later.

Just a few years later in Barbara's life (her love affair with nature not having been destroyed by the loss of her forest), she was visiting the Grand Canyon with a friend. They were trying to get creative photos of the impending sunset light, so she plopped down on a boulder hoping it would give her a good view. But then it began to move. It rolled over onto Barbara, breaking her hip and cracking her pelvis. But more importantly, it trapped her leg as it rolled and slid ever closer to the rim of the canyon. It was headed for the bottom, but for a lone picon tree, a scrubby little desert pine tree, the boulder rolled against it, straining the branches a bit, but ultimately it stopped.

Barbara, who now lives with her husband and two daughters in Oak Park and writes for the *Tribune* and sometimes for the *Rotarian*, says that these two stories inspired a thought within her: What if nature knew that she had saved that one great tree and so another tree saved her life? Now, I'm not suggesting that Barbara actually believes that, but it does show us what can happen when we put two stories alongside one another, joining one story with another creates the possibility for a new meaning, a new story to be born.

That can happen when we join two stories in our own lives or especially when we join a story from our life with a story from someone else's life. It can create connections we can never imagine. I had such an experience this morning when I woke up to discover that I was a meme. Sometime yesterday, as the Nebraska Cornhuskers football game dragged on and on, someone posted a meme on Facebook, a picture of a pastor standing in a pulpit with a caption printed across the top and bottom announcing that church has been cancelled because the Cornhuskers game is still going on. The picture of the pastor is a picture of me on our Northminster website. It was the picture from the original announcement that I was becoming your new pastor over three years ago. Someone linked our story with the Cornhuskers story yesterday. Now that story didn't create a

whole lot of meaning because someone else did it, we didn't. We didn't join our story with someone else's, unlike Paul in today's text.

Today's scripture passage is a part of a sermon the Apostle Paul delivered in the chief synagogue of the City of Antioch in Turkey sometime in the first half of the first century. At the time, Antioch was among the four or five most important metropolises on the Mediterranean. This was Paul's first missionary journey when he traveled across Turkey teaching people about the good news of Jesus and establishing new churches. Peter had been to Antioch once, but Paul and Barnabas' visit, where this sermon took place, was the most important. Antioch would become for the next 500 years one of the centers of Christianity. What is now the Syrian Orthodox Church was once known as the Antiochan Orthodox Church to mark the importance of this city. It was in Antioch that those who chose to follow Jesus would first be called Christians.

But when Paul arrived, Jesus was virtually unheard of, even to the devout participants in the synagogue where this sermon was preached. The New Testament was still at least 200 years from being formed and the written gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had not yet been put down on paper — and would probably not appear in this community for at least 30 or 40 years. But the people did know their own history. As diaspora Jews, we can imagine that they had listened with great interest, sabbath after sabbath, as they heard the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Israel, and Joseph, who would save the family in Egypt. They would already know the stories recorded in Exodus and the later books of the Old Testament that Paul summarizes in his sermon all the way down to verse 22, when he shifted to a new story — a the story of Jesus and John the Baptist — stories he links to the story of the great king David, an almost legendary figure for the Hebrew People, who was now more than 800 years in the past.

Paul does what the best story tellers do, what Barbara Brotman does. He links their ancient stories to this new story, their ancient narratives of Yahweh and the matriarchs and patriarchs and the glory days of David. He links these stories of deliverance and divine favor and devotion to Yahweh with the founding stories of the Christian narrative, telling them of John the Baptist, the rebel prophet who, like the prophet's Elijah and Elisha hundreds of years before, proclaimed God doing a new thing. This John announces the coming of the Messiah and Paul continues with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the grace born of this wondrous act when God and grace conquered sin and death.

Paul invites the people of Antioch to join their common story, their own faith and beliefs that had already joined them to the narratives of Yahweh's faithfulness to the Hebrew people. He now suggests they join together with this new story of God's faithfulness in the person, ministry, and saving grace of Jesus the Christ. And from that, he tells them they will be changed.

And it works, until natural disasters and political changes reduce Antioch's influence over half a millennium later. But before that, Christianity will flourish there; seminaries will grow up there, along with great churches and traditions, all born from this little sermon where one story is joined with another.

That is a large part of why we engage in what we call Christian formation, why we teach the Bible to our children, why we continue to read and study it as adults, why we center worship in the word read and then proclaimed. It's because those are all ways in which we are invited to join our story to the stories that have gone before. It's why we switched to the Narrative Lectionary for our worship texts two years ago – because that collection of texts, which we will start visiting next week again in worship and in just a few weeks with our new Living the Word Bible Study, take a narrative approach, showing the arc of the stories of the Old Testament leading to the New. That's why each year in September we are back in Genesis, so that by the time we reach Christmas, we've taken a fresh journey through the Old Testament to the Nativity. And it's why each late winter and spring we follow one gospel, one strand of memory, one strand of stories that we can link to our own story, and so find new meaning in our lives and in the world.

The Bible is not an answer book. It is not, strictly speaking, a history book. But, as I've said many times, it's a library – a collection of different ways of communicating people's desire to communicate how God's story and their own stories became intertwined. And it's a rich library, from a religious novella in Job to poetry and songs and biographies and mythic retellings of ancient origin stories.

There is so much here, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, each of us encounters each story, each poem, each narrative just a little differently. Our tradition tells that we need to explore this library together as we worship and learn together so that your insights and my insights and the insights of others might coalesce into truths by which we can seek to shape our lives and the lives of those around us.

Is it easy? Not very often, because we sometimes have to slog through a lot of context to find new meanings. We have to understand context and the worldview of the writers so that we find those kernels of truth, not facts so much as truths, that help us understand who God is and who we are in beloved relationship with the divine, and how God then calls us to live and love and serve and perhaps even how to die – in, with and for the One who inspired this library, the One who designed the universe, the One who is the author of you and me and all that is.

And spoiler alert – it's ultimately a love story, this new story that is made when we join our story with God's story. I know that. I know it's a love story and I, for one, can't wait to find out how it turns out. Let's all find out together, shall we? May God make it so.