

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler
The Fifth Sunday of Easter (C)
Sunday, May 19, 2019

Acts 11:1-18
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35
Psalm 148

I wonder if you can remember a favorite bedtime story you were told as a child or that you once read to a child. Any poll of the best-known and most-cherished bedtime stories includes “Goodnight Moon” at the top of the list. Margaret Wise Brown’s classic bedtime story features a bunny preparing for sleep in its bedroom. The bunny’s great green room holds many symbolic elements from both the natural and the material world and the bunny works through saying goodnight to all of these treasures. A balloon, a telephone, mittens and kittens, a quite old lady whispering hush, and, of course, the moon itself – whose luminous presence shines throughout the entire lullaby narrative. Stories are important and we are reminded of this when we recall classic, enduring bedtime stories.

Today’s reading from Acts includes a story that was evidently so important to the early church that it’s told in Acts chapter ten and then retold in chapter eleven. The story is significant because it recounts a critical issue debated by first century Christians - whether their newfound faith was intended only for Jews or could also include Gentiles who had no intention of following Jewish laws and customs. Some of the most pressing tensions were around circumcision and dietary restrictions. Today we hear how Peter responds to the rising friction by telling his own story – one he experienced in a dream. In essence we’re given a story within a story: the repeated story of Peter and the Apostles explaining that their mission, the original Jesus movement, must be available to and inclusive of all believers - Gentiles included. And the story of how persuasive and successful Peter is by telling a personal story about his dream.

This morning’s particular story from Acts serves as a reminder that stories are important, and that stories can change lives. We cannot fail to notice that the hearts and minds of people were changed not just because Peter told a story about his dream relating to particular debate, but chiefly because the Apostles told stories over and over again about their experience with Jesus Christ. How he walked and talked with them, how he ate and fished and healed with them. How he showed them a new way of living and a new reality of God.

You may have noticed that every year throughout the great fifty days of Easter our lessons come from The Acts of the Apostles in lieu of an Old Testament reading. It’s the one time of year we hear from this important book of the Bible that tells the extraordinary story about the early Church. It’s been argued, quite persuasively, that The Acts of the Apostles is actually the most important storybook in the New Testament because apart from what we could deduce from Paul’s letters, we would know absolutely nothing about the precarious, critical time of the early Church without the book of Acts.

Now there are two ways to recount history, to tell the story of an important time. One traces events very methodically, week to month to year to decade. The other way is through glimpses, or windows into the great moments and personalities of a period in history. This second way is how Acts is written. Its is not an exhaustive, systematic account of the Acts of the Apostles – but it does offer us glimpses of the heroic, remarkable, faithful acts that were taken to sow the seeds of the faith we are privileged with today. Acts tells the story of friendships and rivalries, of sacrifice and adventure, and just plain old hard-work evangelism. The story of the Acts of the Apostles inspires us with the tremendous faith and belief the Apostles had in Jesus and what his life and death meant for them and the world. Acts allows us to understand and yet be amazed by how a tiny band of rag-tag followers of a executed prophet in Palestine – became a movement that would quickly change the course of history reaching Rome, in barely thirty years. In short, Acts is one of the most important stories of our faith and we hear the stories of the Apostles every Eastertide because we need to be reminded of, and inspired by, the heroes of our faith.

Stories do inspire and they have the power to change hearts and lives. Peter and the Apostles were inspired of course by Jesus and the stories he told as well. Jesus knew that stories invite people into relationship, softening hearts and opening minds. We refer to Jesus's stories as parables. And the Gospels are full of these powerful stories about vineyards and seeds, robbers and lost pearls, lost sheep and lilies of the field. Jesus's parable stories retain truths and lessons for us today around humanities timeless struggles with jealousy, greed, forgiveness and familial love.

What we can notice today is that very fabric of our Christian faith is woven of the threads of all these stories. Stories about the acts of the Apostles, and stories told by one of the Apostles like Peter, parable stories told by Jesus himself – story after story that our ancestors, and now we, tell and retell. And the most essential feature of all these stories is that they are believable – that they could be told by us, or be about us.

Our stories are important too - yours and mine. And we are, of course, just in the midst of writing our particular stories. But, but they get their real meaning and direction when we can see our stories in the larger context of God and God's unfolding love for us and for the world. That's the real story that we are a part of – God's story. And the more closely we can see our lives and our stories intertwined with God's the more meaningful and important and powerful our stories become.

So remember and tell stories - your own story and your family's story. But do remember to tell the story of your faith as well. How you came to the Christian life, how you are drawn to and loved by God, how and what you are challenged to believe. We Christians are born story tellers and our stories are compelling. And I can't help but believe, with all my heart, that their telling is pleasing to God's holy ears. Amen.