

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Force is Awakening: Tell”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:39-45

I want to begin with a poll this morning. How many of you have ever seen the same movie more than once? How many of you have seen the same movie more than twice. How many of you have seen the same movie so many times you can almost repeat the dialogue? If I were answering those questions I would have to include myself in each of those categories. Early on in movie going life the one movie I had seen more than any other was Star Wars...the original Star Wars. I saw it on opening night and then seven or eight more times within a couple of months. Part of that was I saw it most of those time when I was in the Philippines and movie theatres were the only air conditioned buildings...so I had an ulterior motive...none the less, I saw it then and have continued to watch it over the years. More recently however I think the movie that I have seen possibly more than Star Wars is It's a Wonderful Life. Even though it is not my favorite movie there is something about Jimmy Stewart finding Zuzu's flower petals in his pockets that just gets to me.

Anyway, my question then is, have you ever asked yourself why you can watch the same movie over and over, even when you know exactly what is going to happen? The answer I would like to offer is that the writers, the directors and the actors know how to tell a good story. I believe that the ability to tell and to listen to stories is somehow a hard wired capacity in our brains, just as is language. I say this because virtually every civilization we know of, or have ever studied have stories; they are stories of heroes, of founding myths, of the animals. Stories shape who we are, what we believe, and how we make sense of life. Stories, well told stories, then touch us in ways that nothing else can. They make us laugh. They make us cry. They inspire us. They give us courage. This is why we can watch the same movie over and over again because in its telling, it does something to us and in us that changes us. It tells a story that we need to hear.

This is why I believe that the Bible has endured over the last several millennia. It has survived not because it is simply a sacred text. It has survived not because it is simply a set of rules. It has survived because it tells, for us Christians, the story; the story of God and people. It tells the story of a loving God who creates a world in which life can thrive. It tells the story of this same God who creates human beings in God's own image. It tells the story of human beings refusing to listen to or obey this loving God and thereby messing everything up. It tells the story of this loving God not giving up on humanity but instead making a promise that God would one day redeem the world. It tells the story of God giving rules and laws in order that societies can thrive and the vulnerable be protected. It tells the story of human beings continuing to mess up. It tells the story of God coming to this world in the form of human being in order to show us the way to God through his life, his death and his resurrection. It tells the story of God sending the Spirit into the world in order to empower people to love others as they have been loved. It tells the story of God's final victory over evil and the remaking of the world. It tells the story that has shaped the lives of more than a billion people and changed the world. It tells the story.

Like any great story though, this story has endured because the stories within it reflect and enhance the greater story; shorter stories that we can tell and retell in times of need. Like those movies we can watch over and over again, we turn to these stories to touch our lives; to change us; to encourage us. And it is to two of those stories that we turn this morning. The first is a story of hope. The second is a story of joy.

The Micah story is a story of hope. Micah was a prophet who lived at the same time as the great prophet Isaiah. He was a rural prophet, someone who had seen how the powerful were abusing the powerless, stealing land, virtually enslaving the people. Here is how he put it, “Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.” (Micah 2:1-2) These actions were in direct opposition to the Torah, the Law of God. And Micah warns the people that unless they change their ways, really bad things are going to happen. I know, I said that this was a message of hope...and here’s how. The people did not change and the bad things happened. But the hope of Micah was that God would still not give up on them. Instead God would send a new ruler, a messiah, a chosen one who shall bring ultimate justice and peace. This is the word of hope, that regardless of how bad things get, God still has a plan for the good.

Our Luke story is a story of joy. Joy is one of those wonderful Biblical words that we often overlook, even at this season when it is used so often. Joy is not just happiness. Joy is hope realized. Let me say that again. Joy, in the scriptures, is hope realized. The story of two women, who are part of a marginalized class and a marginalized people. They are Jews whose people had lived under occupation for more than six-hundred years. The people had been promised through the words of Micah, remember him, a savior, a messiah, one in the lineage of David who would save the people. This was the hope to which the Jewish people had clung for all of those centuries. And then suddenly there is this realization that the moment of liberation is at hand; that the messiah is on his way; that in this unplanned pregnancy of Mary, the promise of hope given through Micah is being realized. And because of that there is joy. As Elizabeth says, “For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” The hope is realized. God has not given up on the people. God is still at work...and so there is joy.

These two stories, and dozens like them, have been told and retold for more than two-thousand years. They have been told because people need hope. They were told by people whose loves had been torn apart by war and oppression. They were told by people enslaved by others and whose future looked grim. They were told by people who were fearful of the future. They were told by people who were overwhelmed by sadness and grief. And if there in one time when we need to tell these stories it is in this moment in our history. When as Amy Butler, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City puts it, “I’ve heard instead politicians threatening unconstitutional bans on immigration, American Christians spouting a call to arms directly counter to the teachings of Jesus, hate crimes and racial profiling, talk of registering people because of their race and religion. With news like this filling the airwaves, our hearts don’t fill with pride — they’re pulled away instead, toward fear.”¹ This is why we tell stories of hope and joy over and over again; because without them there is only fear...and God’s people are not to be people of fear. We are to be people of hope and joy because that is what God in Jesus Christ gives us. That is what our story tells us.

¹ <https://baptistnews.com/opinion/columns/item/30757-from-pride-to-fear>

The challenge then for all of us is to ask ourselves, to what kind of stories are we listening? What kind of stories are we telling? We are to ask ourselves this because in the end our story and the stories that it contains are all stories of hope and joy; even in the face of overwhelming odds and our own mistakes, we are to remember that God is not done with us yet. So here is the question I would like you to ask yourselves this week, “How am I telling stories of hope and joy to those around me so that our story might become their story?”