



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Part Of An Old, Old Story

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 4:16-30
Psalm 119:97-105

September 11, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I was in seminary and serving a summer internship in western Virginia. Three small congregations shared one pastor named Steve. I was his helper for the summer. Steve called and asked me to go visit a guy named Clemmer Byer. I was happy to, but I didn't know where Clemmer lived. Steve said, "I can't talk right now, but ask Mr. Armentrout. He can tell you how to get to the Byer place." Mr. Armentrout ran the gas station, grocery store and bait shop that was at the end of the church's driveway. When I arrived, there were a few retirees sitting in the corner, passing time playing checkers. I asked Mr. Armentrout. He said, "To get to the Byer place, you go down 220 past the bridge, turn right up toward the holler. When you get to the place Dewey Martin puts up his hay, turn left. It's a mile down the road. You'll see Clemmer's blue Ford truck in the driveway." I said, "220, past the bridge, turn right toward the holler, whatever that is. When I see the hay bales, turn left?" Mr. Armentrout said, "There aren't any hay bales there now, son. It's not baling season. It's where he puts the hay when he bails it."

Realizing this was as helpful as the directions were going to get, I thanked him and left. As I walked out, I overheard Mr. Armentrout say to the fellows playing checkers, "You don't have to be too bright to be a preacher nowadays—thinking now's the time to bail hay." By a miracle, I found the Byer place. We had a good visit.

When it comes to any journey, sometimes we need directions. To find the Byer place today, I could just ask Siri, that is, if we could get connection back in the hollers. For a spiritual journey, however, a life of faith that grows, we need to ask for directions as well—and not from Siri—but from the tradition. From those who have walked the path before us. How

do we grow in our faith? How do we get where we want to be? Or perhaps where we need to be? Where do we find God in this world?

A spiritual journey is often fed by experiences we don't plan or anticipate, like falling in love or the birth of a child. Sometimes just a meaningful conversation with a friend can be a window into the workings of God in our lives. Sometimes it happens when we see the beauty of creation.

Two weeks ago, Carol and I took a trip to Alaska. It is stunningly beautiful. One evening we took an excursion to watch for whales. They didn't disappoint. We watched for about an hour as a mother humpback whale and her calf played on the surface. It was a spiritual experience that I didn't anticipate. Sometimes, God just shows up, unexpected.

But a meaningful spiritual life seldom blossoms from unexpected experiences alone. No, a life of faith that grows requires an intentionality—a pursuit of the holy. So, we look to the tradition to ask for directions. We look to those who have gone before and ask, "Where have you seen God? Where do we look? What do we do?"

In this series, Rodger and I want to share some of the wisdom that the tradition gives us. The first and most obvious direction is scripture. The strange and familiar stories in scripture provide us insight into the working of God in our lives.

It's not a magical book. It was actually written by men and women just like you and me. But through the generations, people of faith have gathered around these words and their testimony has been that these words inspire and instruct. They point us to God.

To put it simply, scripture shows us that we belong to God. That there is a love in the world that claims us. That our lives matter. And secondly,

scripture shows us that we are not home yet. God is always ahead of us, leading us, pushing us, wooing us toward a promised day.

Jesus himself, as spiritually vibrant as he was, rehearsed scripture to shape his life and faith. He goes to the synagogue and the first thing he does is read scripture: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.” In the old words from the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus finds the words that define him. He reads those words and declares: This is what God is doing in my life. This story is my story. Scripture works like that.

The stories we carry with us, they shape us. It’s not just a source of insight; it’s what happens in us that matters.

I read about Sadiya Abid, a student at Blue Valley West High School. She started a club at her school called The Future is Female. What began as a club in 2020, has now grown into a nonprofit that sponsors similar chapters in other schools in six states.

When asked why she started this club, Sadiya said she grew up in a household that taught her that she mattered. She said her mother treated her with dignity and taught her to believe in herself.¹ She discovered that many of her female friends did not have those same experiences and struggled with self-doubt. So, she started The Future is Female to create a narrative of worth and value among her girlfriends at school.

Although she didn’t use these words, Sadiya Abid knows that the stories you carry with you shape how you live. They influence what you see in the world and in yourself.

We need to no more than remember today’s date, Sept. 11, to remind us that every day there are confusing voices and evil ways. We live in a world of chaos and while scripture does not give us a map to follow on our journey, it does give us the story of God to teach us who to be in a chaotic world.

Scripture is where Jesus found his story. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, I have come to preach and to bring good news, to minister to the poor, the oppressed, the outcast. I am here to lead you to a promised day. Jesus found a story for which he gave his life; he found that story in scripture.

There’s nothing magical about this book. And there are parts of it that are more than problematic, given that it was written centuries ago in a different culture for different people. Every writer and every reader through the generations has been limited by his or her time and place in history—in that sense, it is like any other writing. Nevertheless, the testimony and experience of the church is that by the providence of God, these ancient texts can change us. Even in rereading the same stories—gift-bearing magi, surprisingly good Samaritans, Jesus blessing and breaking bread, angels still sweating from rolling a tombstone away—as we rehearse these stories, they change us.

My friend, Rev. Scott Black Johnston, has recently published a wonderful book called “Elusive Grace.” In it, Scott tells a story about Rev. Craig Barnes. I know Craig, but I didn’t know this story.

Craig Barnes is the retiring president of Princeton Theological Seminary, and before that, he was the first professor to hold the Robert Meneilly Chair for Ministry and Leadership at Pittsburgh Seminary. Dr. Bob attended Pittsburgh Seminary and I suppose after Fred Rogers, he is their most well-known graduate. Craig Barnes held a chair named for Dr. Bob.

Craig Barnes’ father was a preacher and believed that his sons should memorize scripture. So, each Monday morning, his dad would provide the boys a verse to memorize. By Saturday night, when they sat down to eat dinner, he would ask them to recite from memory the verse of the week. If they couldn’t, they were dismissed from the table. Craig said by the time he was in high school, he had a lot of scripture memorized, not because of his love of scripture, but because of his love for Saturday night’s fried chicken. But the scripture was in him.

Then a dark time came in Craig’s life. His father left. The shock and grief of being abandoned was too much for his mother, who then also left. Craig’s older brother dropped out of college to come home and help Craig finish high school. They were alone and it was scary.

But then they took a big risk; they decided to hitchhike from New York to Texas to find their mother. One evening, while walking some back roads in

1 Sarah Ritter, “One-Time Student Club Now a Nonprofit Empowering Women.” *Kansas City Star* (July, 2022) A1.

West Virginia, the snow began to fall. They were cold and afraid and journeying to find a mother who had left them behind. Craig said he felt disposable, like he had no place in the world.

A few minutes later, Craig's brother said, "Romans 8:35." Craig responded, "Who can separate us from the love of Christ... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Then Craig said, "Psalm 119. Your word is a lamp unto my feet and light to my path." For the next hour, they recited the old words to one another.

Craig said he could not hold back the tears when he finally recited Isaiah 43. "Do not fear. I have called you by name. You are precious in my sight, I love you. You are mine."²

The bold claim of Christian faith is not that God exists, but that God in God's own ways has chosen to speak to us, to let us know that we are loved. The story of this book is a story of a holy love that calls you by name. And maybe you will sense that when you see whales or hold a newborn or fall in love... but scripture will reveal just who this God is that is meeting you in those moments.

That seems to be what happens for Jesus who said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... To preach, to release the captive, to set the prisoner free, to bring good news to the poor." As spiritually grounded as Jesus was, it was the gift of this book that gave him his

name and his calling. I think it's true with us as well.

I said scripture does one more thing. Scripture tells us that we belong to God, but scripture also shows us that we are not home yet. That's what Jesus told the folks when he read the text; he said: We are not home yet. They didn't like it. We don't either sometimes.

I'm not going to dwell on this today because I have talked long enough and we will have a chance to consider this later in this series. But the directions we get from the tradition, like reading these old stories, remind us that we belong, that we are loved. They will challenge us... because God is always ahead of us, calling us, wooing us, urging us to move closer to God's promised day, which is our home.

So today, as we begin a new program year, it's a good time to challenge yourself regarding your faith. If you would like to grow in your faith, find a time this year to study scripture. Take a class. Join a Village Connect group so that you can study with friends. You don't have to do it all the time, but we have opportunities all the time for you to go a little deeper into the story of God. For it is in that story that we find our own story.

And of course, come to worship because every week we will gather around these old words and rehearse them again and again and again... until they are in us. For the stories we carry shape us.

2 Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace* (2022) p. 120.