

“Getting the Story Straight” 2015
Judges 2:6-13 Luke 1:1-4

In less than half a second a Google search can identify
396 million websites of “man on the street” interviews,
and to be honest, I didn’t have time to check them all out.

We’ve all seen them on TV or YouTube,
where people are stopped at random and asked questions like,
who won the Civil War?,
where was the Viet Nam War fought?
or who is buried in Grant’s tomb?

On camera, clearly some interviewees
are totally clueless and have no sense of American history,
as they stare blankly or guess a ridiculously wrong answer.
But then when asked about pop culture they respond immediately
to any question about Justin Bieber or Taylor Swift.

And it’s not that these are stupid people,
they just don’t know the stories of our American heritage.
The problem is, so much of who we are as a people
is built on the foundation of our national heritage
on the events and values passed on by our ancestors ----
-- which means that painful and costly lessons of the past,
the next generation may have to relearn by experience ...
... as George Santayana wrote in “The Life of Reason”,
“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

The truth of that statement characterizes the book of Judges,
which is a sad retelling about human failure and folly.

With amazing and mighty acts God had fulfilled his promises
that went all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
With grace and wisdom, with commandments and warnings
at last the people were moving into the Promised Land.

But before entering the land, they were given the “schema”,
which religious Jews recite every morning and night, Deut. 6:4-8
Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am
commanding you today in your heart. **Recite them to your children** and talk about them when you are
at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Then they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land,
and through Joshua, God had each of the 12 tribes of Israel
carry a stone they picked-up from the riverbed,

and at the end of their 1st day of travel into the land, use it to
build a monument that would serve as a constant reminder
to pass along to their children and future generations
their stories about their experiences with God
during the Exodus and their wilderness journey.

The Lord's plan was for the people, as they had been blessed by God to be intentional about teaching children about their heritage by retelling the wonderful stories of God's mighty acts.

The point is, the beloved and blessed people of God are called to pass on the stories of God's truth, faithfulness and mercy down through the ages from one generation to the next,
* **like runners in a relay race each passing the baton to the next.**

For that generation first in the Promised Land all went well, they were faithful and prospered in the promised land, vs. 6-7

When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land. The people worshipped the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, **who had seen** all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel.

All was well, except that they had not retold and taught the stories of their experiences with God to their children...

... who in their clueless ignorance turned aside from the Lord, toward compromise and accommodation with the surrounding pagan culture of idolatry.

Having not heard or learned the faith stories of the past, that next generation did not know about God's mighty acts, and having no sense of gratitude or relationship with God, they were susceptible to other claims on their lives.

vs. 10, 13

Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who **did not know** the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. They abandoned the Lord, and worshipped Baal and the Astartes.

* **Here's where the book of Judges becomes sad and troubling.**

According to Judges, when Israel turned aside from the Lord, then God turned aside and allowed their enemies to plunder the land...

... and in effect, the Israelites were back to suffering in bondage, and it was like struggling in Egypt all over again.

In the next chapter of Judges the people again cry out to God in their distress and misery, who graciously hears their cry with grace and compassion, and once again the Lord responds and rescues them by raising up judges like Deborah and Gideon, who lead Israel to victory over its enemies.

Sadly those victories were short lived, a generation or so later they would once again turn aside from God, with even greater apostasy, depravity and corruption.

That pattern of being crushed by an enemy, crying to God for help,

who faithfully hears, responds and rescues;
but then a generation or so later they abandon God
and are defeated and crushed by an enemy again ...
...cycles through the book of Judges 7 times in a downward spiral.

The lesson of Judges is that
a generation that doesn't know God through the stories of faith
also doesn't know of God's gracious love and blessings,
**and so they are susceptible to false gods and corruptions
of the world and culture and to the media influence around them.**

**Moving ahead a few centuries,
the early Christian Church faced that same challenge.**

When Jesus had not returned as quickly as they had expected,
and the original disciples
who had actually known and walked with Jesus
were getting older and starting to die off...
**... how could they be sure
the true Gospel would be passed down to the next generation?**

Eye-witnesses of the events began writing down individual stories,
and that's what early evangelists and preachers
used to proclaim the Good News and spread the Gospel.

Those individual accounts and collections of Jesus sayings
were then gathered and compiled over time
just as the author of Luke describes, Luke 1:1-4

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events
that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning
were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,

I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an
orderly account ...
so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been
instructed.

The point was not to gather facts and dates for a history book,
but to tell the stories and truths
that help explain, strengthen and deepen our faith.

It is in hearing and sharing these stories of our faith,
that binds us into a community of believers, the Church,
as we read in 1 John 1:1-4 and John 19:35

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we
have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of
life-- this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it,

... we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have **fellowship with us**;
... We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete ... He who saw this has testified so
that you also may believe. ...

The book of Judges powerfully illustrates what happens
when the people of God neglect to pass on to future generations
a true knowledge of God; stories and experiences of faith...
... which is why the four Gospels were written,
and how the Good News has made its way down to us...
... which is also why we give out Bibles to our children and youth.

I have been your pastor long enough that I have known and watched
your children and youth grow and their faith develop...
... and each year it is my pleasure to select
a particular Scripture passage for each one
which I hope will help
shape and guide their spiritual journey.

**It is the power of God's word,
the stories and truths found in Scripture that lead us to faith,
to a living knowledge of God's gracious love and mercy.**

* But if we just hand out Bibles that sit on shelf collecting dust,
against the force and allure of culture and its enticements
our children and youth don't stand a chance ...

... for the stories that will define and inform their lives and values
will come from TV and movies, the Internet and their friends,
rather than the faith stories and truths of God's word.

Also, Bible reading is not just a solitary activity,
but is intended to be shared in the company of others.

Parents and grandparents, especially those who have families,
please try to find time for reading Scripture **together**,
and talking about what it teaches and means to you.

Tell your children about your own faith experiences and insights,
about the events where God has touched your life,
and how the stories and truths of the Bible,
God's word has influenced and guided your life.
Please, explore Scripture together, see me if you need help.

Stories of faith are a wonderful gift of most amazing power,
and the most natural way we can communicate truth and faith
that helps us learn to recognize God's presence and grace.

Our call as the people of God is to find voice and inclination
to talk about how our life-stories connect with Bible stories
and with intention to pass on those stories
like planting seeds of faith for future generations.

Our call is to sow seeds of faith, which by God's grace will grow
and become faithful branches where others can find support.

Maybe it's no accident, but a sign God's sovereign wisdom
that when we prepared for students going back to school this year
at the blessing of the backpacks **we gave out flashlights...**

... which connects to Bibles we gave out today as in Psalm 119:104, 9:1

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

**I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will tell of all your
wonderful deeds.**