

A Word for Sheepdogs

AMID THE WRECKAGE that life has become for far too many people in our time, perhaps the most grievous development of all is that corporately our world has lost its sense of meaning. Each person is forced to forge ahead, trying to make sense of life in the midst of the frightening chaos of terrorism, rising secularism, and unfettered hedonism. Those who are called to preach and teach in the throes of this cultural ruin face a daunting task. How can we even gain a hearing above the cacophony of confused and confusing voices? How can we teach people to live soberly and confidently in Christ amid the growing lunacy?

Pastor David Fleming contends the answer lies in the power of the Biblical narrative presented imaginatively and compellingly in preaching, worship, catechesis, and the cure of souls. In other words, the pastor's chief task is storytelling in a world that has sadly and tragically lost its story — it knows no origin, no plot/meaning, or goal. But this story is not fiction. For every broken prodigal in this twisted and depraved world there remains in Christ Jesus the Father's warm embrace and an honored seat at His right hand. And so we preachers continue to call all broken hearts to turn from sin and come on home to take their place within the Father's house where they belong.

– *Dr. H. L. Senkbeil*



The Use of Story in Pastoral Care

Pastor David C. Fleming

The Lord's redeemed have always been told the story and have always been offered a cherished place within that story. Yahweh taught His post-Passover people to remember the annual festival of freedom as *their* deliverance. "And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the Lord did *for me* when *I* came up from Egypt'" (Ex. 13:8 NKJV *emphasis mine*). Also "So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' that you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'" (Ex. 13:14 NKJV *emphasis mine*). The Lord is the narrator of the story yet it is the story of our deliverance by Him.

At Our Savior Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the nave is surrounded by a painting and carving of the *Te Deum Laudamus*. In a similar way to stained glass that wraps many congregations, the *Te Deum Polyptych* surrounds the viewer and places him within the sweeping narrative of the community gathered by the saving birth, suffering,

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death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus. Through the assembled apostles, prophets, martyrs and the heavenly host the art envelopes and draws each viewer to look to Christ Jesus, whose cross has become the Tree of Life. Each redeemed sinner-saint finds his place in Jesus' rescue and in living his daily vocation — farmer, builder, mother, architect, artist, soldier, father, doctor, lawyer, pastor — as a welcomed child of our heavenly Father's family.

The Loss of Story

Tragically, many don't know the story or their place within it. In 1993, Robert W. Jenson called to our attention the loss of a meaningful narrative for many lives in our world in an essay "How the World Lost Its Story."¹ It's a clear-minded and insightful essay that accurately diagnoses the apathy and loss of hope and future that characterizes our age. With the fall of modernity, any sense of order and purpose has been lost by many. Jenson argues that modernity's collapse was inevitable because of its flawed foundation. Modernity assumed a realistic narrative, but without a divine narrator.

The realistic narrative has two key components. "First, the sequential events are understood jointly to make a certain kind of sense — a dramatic kind of sense. Aristotle provided the classic specification of dramatically coherent narrative. In a dramatically good story, he said, each decisive event is unpredictable until it happens, but immediately upon taking place is seen to be exactly what 'had' to happen."² "Second, the sequential dramatic coherence is of a sort that could 'really' happen, i.e., happen in a presumed factual world 'out there,' external to the text." Jenson observes that such an understanding of life, causes us to believe that we "'ought' to be able to make dramatic sense of our lives."³

This sense of dramatic coherence

used to be the way nearly everyone thought about life and history. Jenson observes:

The way in which the modern West has talked about human life supposes that an omniscient historian could write a *universal* history, and that this is so because the universe with inclusion of our lives is in fact a story written by a sort of omnipotent novelist. That is to say, modernity has supposed we inhabit what I will call a 'narratable world.' Modernity has supposed that the world 'out there' is such that stories can be told that are true to *it*. And modernity has supposed that the reason narratives can be true to the world is that the world somehow 'has' its own true story, antecedent to, and enabling of, the stories we tell about ourselves in it. There's no mystery about how Western modernity came by this supposition. The supposition is straightforwardly a secularization of Jewish and Christian practice — as indeed these are the source of most key suppositions of Western intellectual and moral life. The archetypal body of realistic narrative is precisely the Bible; and the realistic narratives of Western modernity have every one been composed in, typically quite conscious, imitation of biblical narrative. ... Postmodernism is characterized by the loss of this supposition in all of its aspects.⁴

To help us to recognize the loss of the suppositions of realistic narrative, Jenson shows how the visual arts — especially in what ironically was called modernism — have built on the shifting sands of what is aimless, meaningless and futureless. Consequently, modernist art has no meaning, no form, and no correspondence to any narrative depiction of reality. Admittedly, some modernist art is very realistic, but it depicts one tiny piece of reality isolated from any sense of connection to a whole. Jenson

¹ Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story" *First Things*, October 1993, p. 19-24.

² Jenson, p. 20.

³ Jenson, p. 20.

⁴ Jenson, p. 20-21.

explains how we got here:

If there is little mystery about where the West got its faith in a narratable world, neither is there much mystery about how the West has lost this faith. The entire project of the Enlightenment was to maintain realist faith while declaring disallegiance from the God who was that faith's object. The story the Bible tells is asserted to be the story of God with His creatures; that is, it is both assumed and explicitly asserted that there is a true story about the universe because there is a universal novelist/historian. Modernity was defined by the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller. The experiment has failed. It is, after the fact, obvious that it had to: If there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line. Neither you nor I nor all of us together can so shape the world that it can make narrative sense; if God does not invent the world's story, then it has none, then the world has no narrative that is its own. If there is no God, or indeed if there is some other God than the God of the Bible, there is no narratable world.⁵

If there is no universal novelist and no narratable world, then there is no unshakeable foundation for us to be able to make promises. Consequently the loss of the narratable world will lead, Jenson argued prophetically in 1993, to the loss of relationships of promise, especially marriage. Indeed, the vows of marriage are ridiculously radical and wholeheartedly foolish if there is not a divine narrator in whose story we live and move and have our being.

Gary Furnell finds this trend in much recent literature. "It is no surprise that a despairing view of life almost defines the artistic and intellectual history of the past century." He traces it to "some form of nihilism".

⁵ Jenson, p. 21.

In their world, as opposed to the real world, man's condition is one of ultimate futility. Their humour is black rather than joyous; their tone is melancholy rather than thankful: dancing is idiotic and love is transient. But in most pubs on a Saturday night and in every kindergarten on any day the dancing is happily sane and spontaneous. And every night untold millions of old couples drift off to sleep with their flabby arms gloriously around one another.

The present intellectual fashion is a sad cult of despair; it doesn't reflect the reality of the world but the poverty of a particular world view. A world view in which ordinary goodness, if it is portrayed at all, is soon overwhelmed. Cynicism, selfishness, greed for power, pleasure or money are everywhere portrayed, and so they should be, but where are the characters enlivened, at least to some extent, by integrity, honesty, fidelity, love and considered thought?⁶

Furnell contrasts this clear view of what's dark and blurred vision of what's good with Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. While the dark and villainous characters inhabit Dickens' writing, still there are good and honorable though flawed characters, too. Oliver himself is depicted with long suffering and goodness in the face of terrible evil. Dickens isn't afraid to show what is evil and also what is good. But the dark literature of our age, Furnell notes, "issues from a section of society that is certain about what is bad but agnostic about what is good."⁷ There is faith at work here, a faith that trusts in evil to work its destruction, but does not know a good and gracious Father, much less His saving Son.

Pastoral Care in Our Story-less Time

Jenson offers encouragement for the faithful Christian Church, for the Lord has equipped His Church precisely for

⁶ Gary Furnell, "Modern fiction: Grim visions in a world of goodness," *The Australian*, August 22, 2015.

⁷ Furnell.

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this postmodernist challenge. Our neighbors are floundering in a disconnected, story-less world, but the church has *the* realistic narrative for all in the creating, saving, and enlivening work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is precisely in our Lord's revealed Name that the story rescues us. In that Name we began our new lives in Holy Baptism and in that Name we are called back together as our Lord's family at each Divine Service.

There *is* one slogan-like phrase that is precisely a maximally compressed version of the one God's particular story. This is the revealed name, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It is thus no accident at all that in our postmodern situation, the struggle between realistic faith and religious wool-gathering settles into a struggle over this name. The triune name evokes God as the three actors of His one story, and places the three in their actual narrative relation. Substitutes do not and cannot do this; "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier," for example, neither narrates nor specifically names, for creating, redeeming, and sanctifying are timelessly actual aspects of the biblical God's activity, and are moreover things that all putative gods somehow do. In the postmodern situation, we will easily recognize congregations and agencies that know what world they inhabit by their love and fidelity to the triune name; and will recognize antiquated Protestantism by its uneasiness with the triune name.⁸

The death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, is not just a good story with a joyful reversal that makes order of all the seeming chaos of His suffering and death. It is our story, too. It is the narrative of our rescue. It is the guarantee of our Lord's reversal of all the suffering, death, sin and chaos now in our inclusion into this narrative and finally at the joyful, eternal fulfillment of the promise in the marriage

feast of the Lamb, which has no end.

In our pastoral care of souls living in this disconnected, story-less age, the Biblical story in all its rich particularity and reality, is a priceless aid in reframing lives under a merciful and gracious Divine narrator. He is drawing all the seemingly dark, accidental and unrelated threads of our lives into the rich and purposeful tapestry of His gracious deliverance. The proclaiming of our Lord's story into ears and hearts serves as the breaking in of the new creation with its solid and eternal foundation into the lives of harassed and helpless people.

Hearing Our Lord's Story

Hearing and taking to heart the Father, Son and Holy Spirit's Word to us is critical. We cannot see the kingdom of God unless we have been born from above. In a tangible way, Baptism yanks us out of meaninglessness and failure, death and despair, sin and damnation into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit's family. Jesus' death and resurrection become our own.

Then, as the Lord's family, we're gathered at His table. A feature of healthy family life is gathering at the dinner table where the family's stories are recounted and the children's experiences are drawn into these. In the Divine Service, we as children are placed at our Father's table, hearing our family story — both the full, big picture (as in the Creed and *Te Deum*) and some small particular parts of that story (as in the readings) — all for the purpose of drawing us into that story. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer teaches, "The fellowship of believers is woven into the Christmas story, the baptism, miracles and teaching, the suffering, dying, and rising again of Jesus Christ. It participates in the very events that occurred on this earth for the salvation of the world, and in doing so receives salvation in Jesus Christ."⁹

⁸ Jensen, p. 23.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, 53.

Participating in the Divine Service and daily taking to heart and meditating on our Lord's narrative is a delightful breaking in of His saving order and peace into the seeming chaos of our hectic lives. Our Lord's presence with Joseph in slavery, prison, leadership, and reconciliation; with Moses, David, Ruth, Elijah, Elisha and Jonah throughout their days; and with the apostles and others throughout Jesus' ministry is written for us. Bonhoeffer describes how we are placed by hearing the story of Holy Scripture.

Consecutive reading of Bible books forces everyone who wants to hear to put himself, or allow himself to be found, where God has acted once and for all for the salvation of men. We become a part of what once took place for our salvation. Forgetting and losing ourselves, we, too, pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God's help and faithfulness. All this is not mere reverie but holy, godly reality. We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth. There God dealt with us, and there He still deals with us, our needs and our sins, in judgment and grace. It is not that God is the spectator and sharer of our present life, howsoever important that is; but rather that we are the reverent listeners and participants in God's action in the sacred story, the history of the Christ on earth. And only in so far as we are *there*, is God with us today also.¹⁰

What's critical to engender true faith and confidence is hearing the salvation history of Jesus of Nazareth and receiving this story as my story. "The fact that Jesus Christ died is more important than the fact that I shall die, and the fact that

Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the sole ground of my hope that I, too, shall be raised on the Last Day. Our salvation is 'external to ourselves.' I find no salvation in my life history, but only in the history of Jesus Christ. Only he who allows himself to be found in Jesus Christ, in his incarnation, his cross, and his resurrection is with God and God with him."¹¹

Preaching the Story

While the use of narrative preaching is somewhat popular in our day and the use of individual stories as illustrations is often encouraged, such ideas are beyond the scope of this paper. However, the answer to our story-less age isn't to create stories or manipulate with stories; it is to proclaim and enact the story of our Lord Jesus and His saving work as the story for each hearer. As Jenson warns, "the story is not your story or my story or 'his-story' or 'her-story' or some neat story someone read or made up. The story of the sermon and of the hymns and of the processions and of the sacramental acts and of the readings is to be God's story, the story of the Bible. Preachers are the greatest sinners here: the text already is and belongs to the one true story".¹² So Luther urged readers of the Holy Scriptures to hear and receive the stories as happening to them.

When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of

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¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, 53-54.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, 54

¹² Jenson, p. 22.

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help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. The Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.¹³

In preparing to proclaim a text to a congregation, the preacher will first want to read the Gospel account on which he is to preach with care to notice the details of the account. Reading the account out loud can often stimulate the imaginative hearing of the text better than silent reading. The preacher will want to imagine the situation as the text presents it. What can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and felt? What is Jesus doing for the preacher as he reads and meditates on this text? Especially what help, comfort, or deliverance is Jesus bringing? Then the preacher will want to consider the needs of his hearers. He'll ask what challenges, sins, attacks, or burdens might Jesus be addressing through this text?¹⁴ In fashioning a sermon on the text the preacher will want to tell the story of the text in a vivid but objective way. Bonhoeffer encourages a kind of objectivity in telling the story of our Lord's Word.

Therefore, spiritual love proves itself in that everything it says and does commends Christ. It will not seek to move others by all too personal, direct influence, by impure interference in the life of another. It will not take pleasure in pious, human fervor and excitement. It will rather meet the other person with the clear Word of God and be ready to leave him alone with this Word for a long time, willing to release him again in order that Christ may deal with him. It will respect the line that has been drawn between him and us by Christ, and it will find full fellowship with him in the Christ who alone binds us together.¹⁵

¹³ LW 35:121.

¹⁴ Critical in knowing what these might be is the visitation work of the pastor. See Tyler C. Arnold's "Pastoral Visitation: Reflections on Paul's Work and Wisdom for the Church Today," *Seelsorger*, August 2015, pp 5-24.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, 36. This seems to match an insight in Michael Brothers' book *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014. Brothers argues that by giving the hearer some opportunity to "overhear" the story, rather than being directly addressed, the congregant is counterintuitively given a greater opportunity to be drawn in to participate. Brothers notes, "the counterpart of distance is also its goal: 'free participation' on the part of the hearer" (p. 9). By not directly overwhelming the listener, the hearer is called into the sermon.

Brothers gives an example of distance in theatre, the stage directions for *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. These propose very sparse staging and props so the audience's imagination may be engaged. Perhaps a prophetic example of distance is Nathan's indirect confrontation of King David through a story about a stolen ewe lamb and then, following David's engagement to this text, a direct indictment.

Hearing Our Parishioners' Stories

As John Kleinig has demonstrated throughout his pastoral work, the pastor has a listening heart. He demonstrates care for his parishioners by hearing their stories. One of the unique privileges of the pastoral office is being let in to the lives of others in a close and unvarnished way that few get to experience. Being with a family in their tragedy requires a listening heart that bears with them in pain. Visiting with members in joyful times, heartbreak, uncertainty, pain, and grief requires respect for this dear lamb of our Lord's flock and a careful hearing of this soul's story. What has happened to this soul? How does this soul understand the circumstances? How has this soul framed these events? Does this soul have an understanding of the Lord's presence and work in the midst of this?

Bonhoeffer argues that careful listening to our fellow Christian is vital to our serving as true ministers. Failure to listen to the souls near us will eventually lead to failing to listen to our Lord Himself.

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his

brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

Brotherly pastoral care is essentially distinguished from preaching by the fact that, added to the task of speaking the Word, there is the obligation of listening. There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person. This is no fulfillment of our obligation, and it is certain that here too our attitude toward our brother only reflects our relationship to God. It is little wonder that we are no longer capable of the greatest service of listening that God has committed to us, that of hearing our brother's confession, if we refuse to give ear to our brother on lesser subjects.¹⁶

Where is the Soul's Story "Stuck"

Rev. Dr. James Nestingen teaches that, while listening to the stories of our brother or sister, we are to listen carefully for where the story gets "stuck" or where the story repeats itself and cannot move forward. He compares these stuck stories to skips in old fashioned records in which the needle would bounce back to an earlier track and repeat a section

of the record. Some examples of recurrent statements that give insight into where a soul might be trapped: "My dad said I'd never amount to anything." "My child is a failure. I must have done something wrong." "Just one more drink wouldn't hurt." Providing the troubled soul a safe place, a carefully listening ear, and a slowness to speak is especially important to enable the burdened person to tell his story — especially his story of repetitive or habitual sin — to be able to hear where the story breaks down. In our busy and rushed age it's a challenge to provide such an environment, but it can bear great dividends in knowing the burdens of our neighbor and in applying our Lord's Word precisely to the place where the story is stuck.

After hearing where the soul's story is stuck, the aim is to connect Jesus' story to the broken story at the point where it is broken. Ultimately each unfinished story, each failed effort, and each brokenness is brought to its completion in Jesus' triumphant proclamation, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Each thorn of the flesh is drawn into the crown that Jesus bears. Bonhoeffer directs that it is necessary for us to hear the Word of the Lord from another.

Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.¹⁷

A rich resource of Luther's application of the Lord's Word particularly where a story is stuck or broken is found in Theo-

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¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, 97-98.

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dore G. Tappert's *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*. One example of Luther applying our Lord's completed work to the wound of the soul is in his letter of November 3, 1532 to Lawrence Zoch. He was a professor of law in Wittenberg who had been imprisoned for confessing Luther's teaching on the Lord's Supper. His wife, Clara, died in 1532. Luther wrote him, "It is with heartfelt sorrow that I learn of the great misfortune and grief that has come to you." He turns to the burden our Lord endured from the devil and the world, but worst of all from God Himself. "So it must be with us Christians too. What must distress us most is that God himself seems to be smiting us; yet it is from him that all our comfort is to come." Luther then insightfully includes the secondary assaults that might be tormenting the dear widower and connects this suffering directly with Christ.

Thus it appears as if God himself has now attacked you, and your enemies can boast and say, "So fare these Christians; this is the reward of your new gospel." This is more than suffering and dying; it is being buried and descending into hell.

But, my dear doctor, be steadfast. This is the time for firmness. Remember that Christ also had this experience, and even worse. But God, who seemed to be assailing him, did not forsake him, but raised him up in honor. So God will also raise us up with him.

It is, indeed, a great comfort that your good wife died with all her senses and in such a Christian way, and that she is undoubtedly gone to Christ, her Master, whom she confessed here. But it is a far greater comfort that Christ has made you a type of himself and that you are suffering as he suffered—that is, punished and confounded not only at the devil's hand, but also as if by God himself, who is and wishes to

be your comfort.

Therefore, although your flesh murmurs and cries out, as Christ also cried out in his weakness, your spirit ought to be ready and willing and ought to cry with groanings that cannot be uttered, "Abba, dear Father," that is to say, "Thy rod is sharp, but thou wilt always be Father; that I know very well."

Our dear Lord and Saviour, who is also the model of all our sufferings, comfort you and stamp himself upon your heart that you may offer him this sacrifice of a broken spirit and give him your Isaac willingly. Amen.¹⁸

The art of pastoral care includes showing how the individual's story is the story of Christ dealing with this child of God personally. My favorite example of this art was when Dr. John Kleinig taught a Bible class at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids. He began by asking how many in attendance knew of a child, grandchild, relative, or friend who no longer comes to church. Practically every hand of the rather good-sized group was raised. I remember hearing an audible sigh from the group. I think it sounded like a sigh of relief that this issue was going to be addressed. Kleinig then led us in a study of Mark's account of the healing of the paralytic. He also drew our attention to the pleas of several parents to Jesus, such as the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman in Matt. 15:21-28 and the plea of the father at Cana in John 4:46-54. He told each of these Biblical stories with vivid detail. For example, he taught how the crowd with Jesus began to make room for the paralytic to be lowered in front of Jesus when the dust and debris from the roof fell as the tiles were being removed. He called the class' attention to what the believing friends said to Jesus as they lowered their friend to Him: nothing. They knew that the Great Physician knew exactly what was wrong and He would

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, Translator and Editor Theodore G. Tappert, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, p. 66-67.

know what to do. They simply brought him to Jesus and trusted Jesus to do what was needed.

Kleinig wove this together to then speak directly about what to do for our delinquent loved ones. Don't nag. Don't pester. Don't trick them into coming to Church. Pray for them and specifically carry them "piggy back" when you come to Jesus at the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. That is, carrying them with you in your prayers. So then, when you are in the presence of Jesus' Body and Blood, drop them at Jesus' feet. Just plop them there and leave them with Jesus. Let the Great Physician care for them. Kleinig suggested that each communicant make a shopping list of names of people who need Jesus' help, so that we in effect bring them to church with us as we drop them at the feet of Jesus. Even though this class was years ago, members at Our Savior Church still talk about how they dropped some folks at Jesus' feet as they receive His life-giving Body and Blood.

Using Narrative to Confess Christ and Reject the Alternatives

One great advantage of the telling of stories is that usually your audience will let its guard down. If you try to build a logical argument against abortion or same sex marriage, immediately those who oppose your position will be half-listening at best. They will be preparing arguments against your stance. But telling of an older couple cheerfully pointing to the ultrasound picture on their refrigerator saying, "That's our grandson!" has a greater chance of bringing light into the darkness.

Pastor Tim Pauls, a gifted author and pastor, wrote a wonderfully winsome and insightful defense for Biblical marriage through a carefully developed essay. In it he pictures for us Carl and Vera, an old couple both with limited mobility. Carl pushing Vera, his wife for more than sixty years, in her wheelchair is a beautiful

image of our Lord's relationship with us. "God gives marriage as a constant reminder of Christ and His bride. While they are *not* the Gospel and no substitute for the means of grace, the Lord's incarnations of marriage and family are given to remind us of His forgiveness, redemption and life in His Son."¹⁹

Pauls, having shown us in a picture, a mini-narrative, of the beauty, balance, and coherence of Biblical marriage, then works backwards to the narrative of non-Biblical marriage.

If marriage is to depict redemption, do the world's alternatives teach a different, false narrative? If marriage teaches of Christ's enduring love, then does divorce teach that God breaks His promises? Does cohabitation teach that God is unwilling to commit, but just wants to try out the relationship for a while? As same-sex marriage pairs equivalents with no hope of procreation, does the relationship teach that there is no God or future hope? Should society slide into polyamory, will the ensuing "families" suggest a pantheon of gods who sort of care for a community, but where none claim us as his own children?

It's speculative on my part, I suppose; but those who champion, or have suffered from, these alternatives are often unwilling to hear of sin and forgiveness. Maybe it's only that they don't want to hear about sin. But maybe it's more, that those lifestyles are teaching a false narrative that there is no forgiveness.²⁰

Clearly our Lord believes in the power of story. He tells His saving work to us not in mere factual statements but in a narrative. He did not rescue us apart from history, but He took on flesh and lived among us. He gathers us around His story and teaches us to recognize that our lives have their place within His sweeping narrative of life. ■

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*The Rev. David C. Fleming is Senior Pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids, MI
pastor@oursavior-gr.org
www.doxology.us*

¹⁹ Tim Pauls, "Marriage and the Gospel Story," blogs.lcms.org/2016/marriage-and-the-gospel-story

²⁰ Pauls.

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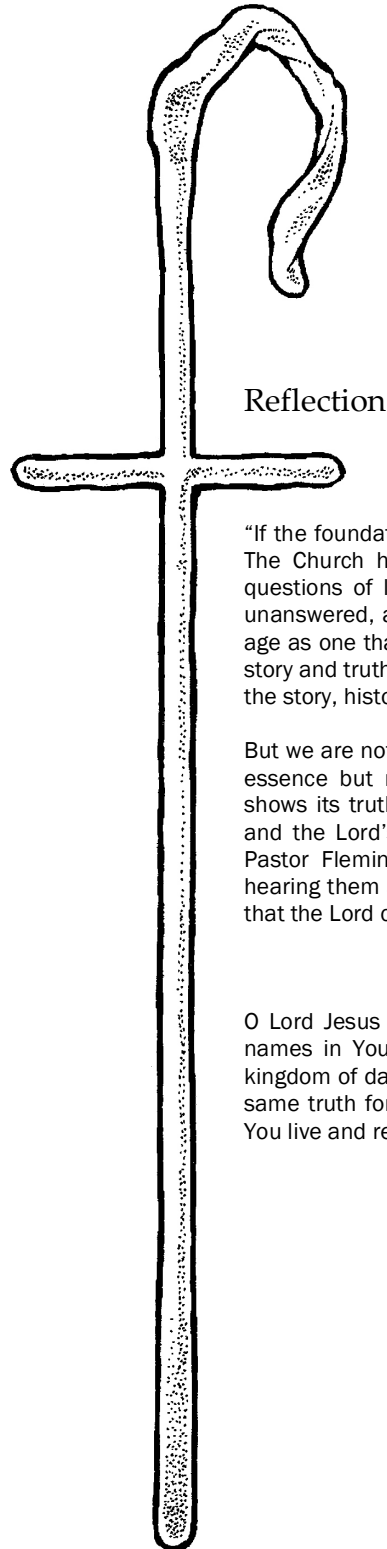
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Reflection

"If the foundation is destroyed," King David asks, "What will the righteous do?" (Ps. 11:3). The Church has found herself again in an era with no foundational truths. The basic questions of life, how we got here, who we are, where we are going, are all open and unanswered, and perhaps, as many suppose, unanswerable. Pastor Fleming identifies our age as one that has lost its story. We see the devil's hand in this. Not only is the attack on story and truth an attack on our person and the ordering of the world, it is also an attack on the story, history and work of Christ to save us.

But we are not without hope. "The abuse" Martin Luther reminds us, "does not destroy the essence but rather confirms the substance" (Large Catechism 5.59). The Lord's story shows its truthfulness under attack, and the Lord's Church will continue to tell the story, and the Lord's preachers will continue to declare His promises for the saving of souls. Pastor Fleming, with his typical gentleness, reminds us of the importance of story — hearing them as well as telling them — in pastoral care, and he hands us over to the hope that the Lord continues to speak, and His sheep continue to hear His voice and rejoice.



O Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Author and Finisher of our faith. You have written our names in Your book of life. Continue to publish Your truth through the world, that the kingdom of darkness and death would be overcome with Your light and truth, and may this same truth forgive our sins, and give shape to our thoughts, words, and actions, even as You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

- *Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller*