

One of my favorite genres in literature, theology, and entertainment is the origin story. Sometimes called backstories or pourquoi stories, they explain how a character like a superhero or villain came to be, what motivates them, and how they developed their unique perspective through which they experience the world and other people. Origin stories also explain the relationship between people and the earth, like the creation stories in the Bible and the stories of Indigenous people of every tribe. Origin stories are important because they ground a character or group to their intended purpose while providing guidance and direction on how to move forward. One could argue the Bible is comprised of many origin stories that could help us understand our relationship with God and with each other.

The two creation stories in Genesis highlight our fragility and dependence on the earth, each other, and God, revealing when humanity rebels against God we are harming the earth, each other, and our relationship with God. The story Exodus in the Bible – when Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt into the promised land where they were free to worship God - explains the origins of traditions in both the Jewish religion and Christianity because it is a story about how God liberates people and reveals God is not the oppressor we humans so often mistake God to be.

That story is especially important today for two reasons. One is because we are going to be baptizing Kailey this morning. In just a little while we will be blessing water, and the prayer I will say recalls how water played an important part in God liberating people from pharaoh when they passed through the Red Sea unharmed. This is why John the Baptist invited people to participate in a ritual where they went into a river and came out renewed when he was preaching about being prepared for the arrival of the Messiah. These origin stories influence our own tradition where we will bless water and pour it over Kailey's head because Baptism is liberation from the power of sin and death into new life in Jesus Christ.

The other reason the story of Exodus is important today is because it is tied to the origin of Pentecost. In Jewish tradition, Pentecost is 50 days after the Passover, which is part of the Exodus story. 50 days after leaving Egypt, Moses went up a mountain, and returned carrying the tool intended to help the newly liberated people live the way God wanted and intended them to live: closer to God and each other and to show the world what God is like. That tool is the 10 Commandments.

Today marks 50 days after Easter Sunday, and is the origin story for the church. In our first reading from the New Testament book in the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles, we heard about an amazing event that happened on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, when they were celebrating the gift of the law, which was intended to give structure and guidance to help them make choices that reflected God's love. It is not a coincidence that on that very day, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to his followers who were in a house together. Instead of new rules or a laws, Jesus sent his followers his own Spirit so they could go into the world and show the world God's love as they experienced it through Jesus Christ.

In the reading from Acts this was described as a dramatic event with rushing wind and flames. The Gospel reading this morning described the same event without the drama. Jesus appeared and breathed upon each disciple while wishing them peace and forgiveness. Which means everyone is going to experience receiving the Holy Spirit differently. Sometimes it might feel like wind and flame. Sometimes more like peace and forgiveness. But whether the Holy Spirit is experienced dramatically or gently, one of the main points of the church's origin story is the Holy Spirit was given to everyone who was there.

Everyone received the Holy Spirit: people of all ages, all abilities, genders, races, class, status, education, maturity, and yes even political affiliation. Together, through the Holy Spirit this diverse group was transformed into the Body of Christ. Not a literal biological body. No one is a toe or a nose or a finger, but body in the sense of a whole group. Christ is now in the world not as a biological man walking around doing wonders, but as a whole group called the church.

Origin stories aren't just for entertainment. They are intended to help us remember where we come from, why we became who we are, what motivates us, why we make the choices we do and how we make decisions. Not only as individuals, but as a whole group. Origin stories tie us to reality, especially when we are faced with challenges and difficulties, by reminding us of our purpose so we can find our way through.

I know churches are struggling these days. Pew studies reveal all religions are experiencing decline in participation and membership. In a culture that preaches bigger is better, getting smaller can feel like a punishment. When we feel like we are being punished, we will often revert to blaming ourselves, leaders, or whatever we can, just like the first man and woman did in the second creation story. That origin story teaches humanity's fallback behavior is blaming others for our suffering, which has never actually helped make us or relationships or the world better, but we do it anyway.

Fortunately, we also have the origin story of the church to remind us, we all have the gift of the Holy Spirit which both empowers and enables us to go out into the world and live like Jesus. That is how the church grew, and how it will always grow no matter the time period we are living in. The church grows whenever it goes out into its community and lives like Jesus by noticing and talking to the people others pass by. When share peace. When we forgive. When we care for each other by showing respect for each other, especially people we disagree with. That is the intention and purpose of all churches, including Church of the Good Shepherd.

I understand this might sound overwhelming right now because I only have one more Sunday with you after today before I leave for the next parish the Holy Spirit is calling me to. And you might be feeling anxious about who is going to be your next priest and what the process for finding a new priest is going to look like. Maybe you are even worried about how to afford a priest.

I hope you can take comfort in knowing on June 11 the Rev. Michael Spencer who is Canon for Transitional Ministry will be here with you and he will talk to you about the process you will start then. I hope and pray it will be as life giving for you as the search process I have been experiencing.

I also hope and pray you will take inspiration from the church's origin story that the Holy Spirit is given to everyone, including people who are not ordained. You don't need to have a priest to fulfill the purpose of the church. You already have everything you need. You have the Holy Spirit. You have each other. Just as I am being called to the next chapter of my ministry, you are being called to the next chapter of your life and ministry as a parish. I don't know what it will be, but whatever it is, I believe it will be drenched in the new life of the Holy Spirit who simultaneously grounds you in your origin so you can grow even closer to God, each other and your community.