

## Getting a New Story

*When ego traps us in old stories and we think life is all about us, Jesus invites us to know we live in a web of relationships on a vast, cosmic canvas.*

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It's hard to get past old stories. We can stay caught in them for decades. I know personally because I've been locked in the vise of one of the first stories I can remember hearing. I heard it early and I heard it often. It was my mother's story of going to the GYN doctor for her 6-week checkup after my older sister's birth. During the exam, Dr. Gainy informed my mother that she was pregnant with me. Mother responded, "Oh, Dr. Gainy, you must have made a mistake". "No, Mrs. Miner", he replied, "you made a mistake." Yes, I knew you would laugh - everyone always did when my mother repeated the scene. However, to a young child, the story wasn't funny. What I heard was that I was a mistake. Never intended to hurt me or make me feel small, but that story did. Sometimes it's hard to get passed old stories.

James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, are having a hard time getting passed a story from their past. You know the story - it's about how being at the top, having the most power, associating with important people makes you important. It's an old story and James and John are caught in it. So, alone with Jesus, they make a request. Hey, Jesus, we want that story to be our story. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Apparently, those brothers have grown to be impressed with Jesus. His healing powers are incredible. His parables - profound. His transforming fish and bread into a feast for thousands - memorable. His courage standing up to the religious leaders - awesome. They're not exactly clear who he is, but he surely is headed to important and powerful places. And they want in on that story, as close to him as they can get. They know the story and they want it to be theirs.

"But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" In other words, you're stuck in the wrong story. To have those seats reserved for you isn't going to take you where I'm inviting you to go. You need to get passed that old story. I know you have grown up believing life has to do with being important, being independent, being set apart as special. No wonder you believe that story. That's what you see around you. It's the pushy merchant who gets his stall set up close to the busiest city gates. It's the rude woman coming to the well for water who shoves ahead in line. It's the loud voice in the crowd who gets attention. It's the lowest Roman soldier with armor and a sword who takes what isn't his and feels bigger by making others feel small. No wonder you imagine my glory to be like that story. Surely, there must be a throne above others with room for my favorites. Isn't that the way life goes - from the playground to the board room. I understand your asking for seats beside me.

But, James and John, you are caught in an old story. It's a story based on ego. It's about paying attention to that voice inside you that being important, first, smart, right, and powerful is what makes you who you are. Yet, I've called you to follow me so you will experience and believe another story. In a few words, it's a story of the kingdom of God. It's the story I've been talking about and living in for as long as I can remember.

Jesus goes on. Since you've made this request and set off the others' anger, it's a good time to tell you my story in yet another way. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all..." In these few words, Jesus flips the story. No longer is the point to arrive at a place of power, apart and above others. Jesus' story is about relationships and he uses the example of slave and servant. Life is about being in a web with others, committed to the wellbeing of the whole. There is no "arrival", "making it", "individual accomplishment". To follow me is to be grounded in relationships of mutual care and compassion, not a life perched on a throne. It's a state of vulnerability, not control. It's a journey of learning and growing in the simple, daily tasks of life, not an ego trip.

Whoah - Jesus never would have said "ego trip". Those are words belonging to our time and culture. But they popped into my mind with today's readings. Visions of being seated on a throne at the right and left hand of Jesus seems pretty egoistical to me. How about you? And with ego in mind, the conversation between God and Job in the first reading shifts for me. I've always heard God's questions to Job as kind of put downs and patronizing, like God reminding Job of who's on the throne and who isn't. Yet, through the lens of the ego, maybe God is simply challenging Job's self-absorption.

Not that Job hasn't been in a difficult stretch of life for the entire story. Yet, maybe Job's ego is keeping him from seeing his life painted on a larger canvas, as having being part of a vast, cosmic gift of life. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?... On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" In other words, the gift of life is not all about Job. In other words, the gift of life is not all about James and John. And it's not all me either. I now see my mother learning about being pregnant with me as really a story of two egos: the doctor who didn't like any one to suggest he had "made a mistake" and my mother who prided herself on always doing the "right thing." And in all those examples, it's hard to get passed old stories when the ego is the star.

Recently, PBS launched a FaceBook Watch show called "The Moment When", featuring "successful people at a pivotal moment in their lives." One episode features Civil Rights Lawyer, Bryan Stevenson's, story as a law student. I see his story as a moment when his ego gets small enough for long enough to move him into relationship. Listen to his words:

"I took a course that required me to spend the month with an organization providing legal services to people on death row. And that's what got me to death row. And I was completely unprepared. But they asked me to explain to somebody that he's not at risk of execution anytime in the next year. That was my task. And I went to Georgia's death row. And I was so nervous and distraught, that when this man walked in, I was a bit overwhelmed.

And what I remembered about him is just how burdened with chains he was. He had handcuffs on his wrists. He had a chain around his waist. He had shackles on his ankles. It took them 10 minutes to unchain him. And when they did, he walked over.

And I began to apologize. I said, "I'm sorry. I'm just a law student. I don't know much about the death penalty. I don't know much about criminal appeals and procedure." I then said, "They sent me down here to tell you that you're not at risk of execution anytime in the next year." And I was surprised that,

when I said that, the man said, "Wait, wait, wait. Say that again." I said, "You're not at risk of execution anytime in the next year."

And the man said, "Wait, wait. Say that again." I said, "You're not at risk of execution anytime in the next year." And that's when this man grabbed my hands. And he said, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

He said, "You're the first person I have met in the two years I have been on death row who's not a death row prisoner or death row guard."

He said, "I have been talking to my wife and kids on the phone. But I haven't let them come and visit, because I was afraid they would show up, and I would have an execution date." He said, "Now, because of you, I'm going to see my wife and I'm going to see my kids."

And here is the point in Bryan's story that caused me to tell it to you:

I couldn't believe how, even in my ignorance, being approximate to someone, showing up for someone, I couldn't believe the difference that could make in someone's life."

That's the kind of story Jesus wants for us. Amen