

Genesis 9: 8-17
Mark 1: 9-15
February 22, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The headline of today's message is this: we don't find ourselves. Our lives only begin to make sense when they are part of a larger story—*God's story*.

In my life I have experienced two panic attacks. The first was as a teenager when I became separated from my group in Rome, Italy at night. I zigged when the group zagged and suddenly I was alone on a strange street. Nothing was familiar. I couldn't ask for help because I didn't speak Italian. I began to breathe quickly and shallowly. I began to run in different direction, getting more lost with every attempt. It was literally terrifying. By the grace of God I ran into my group. As often happens, I had only been a block away. I truly had not been lost. I felt like I had been gone for half an hour; but I had really only been separated from the group for a few minutes.

The second episode was pretty silly. The local supermarket chain in Rochester had just opened up a massive superstore complete with restaurants and fifty kinds of everything. I was in need of a half-gallon of milk and a loaf of bread. I was curious so I thought I would drop in. After a long walk to the store I entered. Within thirty seconds a similar thing happened. I began breathing quickly and shallowly. In that same period of time I forgot what I came for. Fortunately this time I did run around. I calmly turned, left the store and went to the smaller store a mile away, breathing a sigh of relief. For people who suffer acute anxiety and panic attacks these stories are familiar but hardly scratch the surface of the suffering experienced by the one who is subject to these attacks.

I propose this morning that, whether we suffer from acute anxiety or not, we all have a major challenge. How do we find and keep our bearings in this often overwhelming world. Life in the United States is like entering a massive superstore. God has created us with very simple needs—food, shelter and love. Everything else is extra. The vast majority of the world gets along with these three things. Yet in our culture there is no such thing enough. There is always to have more and better. In the megalopolis store of American culture we are presented with fifty kinds of everything each claiming that it is the best. How easy it is to forget what we are here for. Novelist John Barth called this being “lost in the fun house.”

Of course you know this. You are here. God created one day a week for rest and remembrance. It was and is a day to get our bearings and regain perspective. Part of what God wants us to do is come to places like this and be reminded that there is a much bigger life than the one we are living. God wants us to be reminded that our lives take place in a wider and deeper context than the culture in which we live. There are abiding truths which have guided humanity for thousands of years which help us to move through the demands and confusion of life with our eyes lifted to something higher. This is the function of *religion*. The word means literally to re-connect. The practice of religion is what re-connects us with the life that is bigger than any one life. The practice of religion returns us to our true home which is the loving heart of God. It reminds us that our lives have purpose because our stories are part of *God's story*.

If nothing else, this is the function and purpose of the reading and reflection on scripture which takes place at gatherings like this. The reading of scripture reminds us that we are part of an ongoing story that is not only bigger than one person; it is bigger than all human history. The purpose of scripture is to awaken us to the fact that the Bible is not some dusty

rule book, or a collection of ancient stories of quaint but not serious interest. The Bible reveals God's storyline which did not end with the death of the last apostle of Jesus. The Bible reveals that God's storyline continues to this very day. As a friend of mine said many years ago, "We live in biblical times."

Therefore the purpose of spiritual and biblically based communities is to help us to come to live *within* the biblical story. The storyline of scripture is meant to become the storyline of our lives. We come to be re-grounded in the story so that when we go out into the world the story goes with us. Our daily lives carry forward God's story. The deeper we grow within God's story the less likely we are to lose our bearings in the fun house of life.

When we live within the biblical story a transformation takes place. The stories don't just happen to people long ago. They happen to us.

So it is that the promise made by God to Noah. "Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood." *Never again. Never gain. Never again!* These words tell us at least two things. The rising waters of climate change are not God's doing. The destabilization of the earth with consequent earthquakes and tsunamis due to drilling for fossil fuels is not God's doing. Whether we believe there is such a thing as climate change and destabilization we can be clear that if there is a God, it is not his doing.

But there is a much deeper message. God makes this promise to address the deepest human need: the need to feel safe in God's heart. Many years ago, psychiatrist Albert Ellis defined anxiety as "the terrible fear of the 'what-if'." The two words "*never again*" provide a massive dose of reassurance. In the heart of God *there is no "what if!"*

One of the reasons we get lost in life is because we are so busy trying to anticipate and prepare for potentially fearful futures. We are so afraid of what might happen in the future that we do not enjoy the gift of today. We keep waiting for “the other shoe to drop.” We may be ok now but we can’t really enjoy the moment because in our experience nothing good lasts for long. Rather than enjoy the good thing while we have it we prepare for the inevitable disappointment or loss. In so doing we import the worry of an as yet unmaterialized future into the good present and ruin it. We become more impressed with the bad thing that might happen than with the good thing which actually is happening.

The story of the rainbow provides an orientation marker. What belief will guide our lives? The trust that God means that *never again* will he destroy us? Or the expectation that this is just a nice story that history and our own experience refutes? Christians seek to grow in trust that God’s promise is true, to become people of the rainbow.

In the same way, how do we approach the person of Jesus? This morning’s story has Jesus tempted by all the most seductions of worldly culture: power, wealth and security. Jesus resists and shows that he trusts in God more than all things. Talk about a signpost! Which leads me to realize this: that in finding our bearings in life God has made it simple. We do not need to memorize a lot of rules or scriptures, helpful as that may be. We have only to look to Jesus and follow him through the wilderness of life. Jesus orients us. Jesus is our guide. It is he that restores us to the things that matter most. It is he that helps us find ourselves in God’s story, God’s heart. Amen.