

“Our World in Stories: Which Story Are You Living By?”

Acts 12:11-16

We have been journeying through this sermon series and looking at how stories help to connect us in a world of divisions and pain. We are even sometimes divided within our own selves. Mark Yaconelli writes, “We are trained to live in a state of disconnection. We are trained to live in fear. The number of new apocalyptic, end-of-the-world movies keeps increasing. Are we meditating on these stories because we believe the only possible future is chaos, isolation, and death?”

We have been guided by stories both from our human experience and the experience of our ancestors in faith in the Bible to move beyond the illusion of disconnection and to let stories connect us back to our souls, to our families, friends, and even our world.

Yaconelli, “What are the images, the moments, the stories on which your soul meditates? What are the stories that remind you to unlearn hatred and receive love? Nigerian author Ben Okri declared, ‘We live by stories. We also live in them. One way or another, we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted –knowingly or unknowingly -in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly, we change our lives.’ Are the stories that shape you death dealing or life giving? Do the stories you hold as sacred heal or do they exacerbate the suffering?”

Let’s watch a clip from Ben Okri’s Ted Talk about stories:

<https://youtu.be/TwZwAloBjR0>

Our Bible story for today is about the choice of stories to believe in and live in. It is the story of Peter after he was imprisoned. One of the other disciples had already been arrested and executed by Herod and now Peter was about to face the same fate. So the church prayed for him earnestly. And then Peter was delivered from prison by an angel of God. He went to the gathered church to let them know. Let’s see how they responded according to Acts 12:11-16:

¹¹ It was only then that Peter recovered his senses. “Now I know,” he said, “that all of this is true--that our God really did send an angel to rescue me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were so certain would happen to me.”

When Peter realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. A number of people were gathered there praying. Peter knocked at the gateway door and an attendant named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed that she raced back without opening it and announced that Peter was at the gate.

“You’re out of your mind,” they said, but she kept insisting it was so.

“Then it must be his angel,” they said.

Meanwhile, Peter continued to knock. When they opened the door and saw that it was really him, they were amazed.”

What an interesting reaction that the people had to the good news which Rhoda brought them! She told them that their prayers were answered, and that Peter was at the door. The very thing they were praying for happened, but they had a hard time believing it. The story they were living in was that of fear and persecution. They were being persecuted by Herod and things looked bleak to them. And here Peter, the rock upon which the church was going to be built was facing a certain death in the morning. That is the story they believed and lived in. Even though the good news of the Gospel was so compelling for them, the fears of the world have a way of seeping into our human frailties.

How many times when faced with the good news of love, or the possibility of good news, do we find ourselves say, “You are out of your mind.” What can help us get out of that loop of fear?

Yaconelli writes, “Our world is in crisis. It’s clear the stories we’ve been telling ourselves as a civilization are killing us. Fear is wisdom. Greed is responsible. Vanity is virtuous. Violence is peacemaking.”

We need to believe the Rhodas of our world who proclaim the good news for us. A couple of weeks ago, I was with a couple of parents who have a 12-year-old son who is very smart and an amazing kid. But he is full of negative self-talk. He does not believe the good news about himself. His is just one of the many examples where the negative stories of the world change the way we see reality.

We will end by listening to the words of Jesus from John 16:33 as a brief Lectio Divina practice where we will listen to the verse three times with silence between each reading. The invitation is to listen at first to a word or phrase that shimmers for you. The second time, the invitation is to pay attention to a feeling that arises in you. The third time, the invitation is to listen to a message for you from the Spirit of God. “Jesus says in the world you will have trouble but take heart, I have overcome the world!” (John16:33)
Amen.