

“Sacred Stories: A Dance in Four Acts”
a sermon by Zachary Helton
concerning Exodus 32:1-14
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on October 15, 2017

A Prelude

The stories we tell as a community are vitally important. They shape our identity, inform our ethics, and form our imaginations for what our future can look like. Sacred stories have served this purpose for thousands of years. Something, though, in the past two hundred or so years, has gone awry. In the inspired dance between our sacred texts and ourselves, you can think of it as a four-act performance. But, something in the past couple of centuries has flattened it to one, maybe two, and you can hardly describe the relationship as a dance anymore as well as you could describe it as an exchange between a shop owner and a consumer. My adolescent dance recitals would go something like this:

Act I: Take up your Bible, or be seated in the pew, and take in the story, the letter, or the poem objectively, as it is: the Word of God.

Act II: Go and do what it said. Go emulate the hero or learn the lesson from the villain. Go obey Paul’s instruction, however strangely it may fall on modern minds.

I would propose, however, that there should be a bit more depth, a bit more play in this rhythmic relationship between the people of God and the stories of their ancestors. With our well-known and troubling story this morning, I’d like to try, as best I can, to name the acts of this divine, mixed-genre ballet as we ourselves get caught up into it.

So I’ll begin with...

Act I: Their World, Or The World Behind the Story

It was Babylon, 2,600 years ago, and another long work day had just come to a close. Israelites shuffled back to their ramshackle homes, carrying with them wages that they knew would have to be stretched thin to feed their families. They didn’t dare remember the days only a few years prior when they seldom had to worry about where their next meal was coming from. They dared not remember being surrounded by the glorious walls in a city, and with a magnificent temple that their ancestors built. They dared not spend time thinking about the day when they could gather at the end of the week to rest and hear stories of their superheroes and sing songs of praise to their good God. It was the end of the week now, and families prepared to make their way to meet together to hear a story and to sing to their God, but their songs had turned to wails of lament. See, they had been defeated, destroyed, exiled. They had hung up their instruments, for how could they sing God’s songs in a foreign land?

The teacher, the keeper of the stories, saw the people approach. As they grew closer, he saw faces heavy with defeat, and he again felt the weight of his vocational responsibility. It was

his job to make meaning. The prophets, bless their hearts, had tried their best. And sure, the people heard their warnings, saw their bizarre protest art, but privilege is blinding.

Their prophets had warned them, over and over, that their tribe had lost their integrity. They were to be a people that represented God in the world. They existed to put hands and feet to God's love, God's justice, but time proved that they were far too easily pleased with comfort and routine. They would stretch out on their couches, ignoring the reality that those couches were resting on the backs of the poor and oppressed. They had forgotten that they were all once oppressed in Egypt, forgotten their common beloved-ness. The prophets warned that the people's religion, their songs, their stories had been emptied, mindless repetition that made them feel satisfied, but having nothing to do anymore with a God who called them to mercy rather than ritual. The prophets called people out on worshipping not God, but the objects that were meant to point them towards God, that they were absurdly praising their own creation rather than remembering the living and uncontrollable force that had created them. The prophets warned that if the people didn't stop acting out of fear, putting all of their trust in their military and wit, if they didn't start believing in the power of justice and love, they would be overcome. And that is what happened. Now everyone struggled to come to terms with the meaning of their suffering, to imagine some way, any way forward.

And this is where the storyteller comes in, stretching their imagination, their capacity for hope. It was on him to remind the people through his stories that God's justice is not about retribution, but restoration. It was on him to simultaneously call them to integrity while offering them grace. And so he set to work. He gathered everyone around. He led them in their songs of lament, gave voice and melody to the pain of their existence, and when the howls died down, he assembled his cast of ancestors and superheroes, and wove together a new story. He drew in a deep breath of God's Spirit and began what we now recognize as...

Act II: The Story Itself

The people of God waited anxiously at the bottom of the mountain. They had seen Moses ascend, disappearing into the thick blackness of the foreboding smoke. They waited. Hours passed. They waited. Days passed. They went back to their work, still looking over their shoulders, waiting. Weeks passed. Daily rhythms resumed, though still uncomfortable. As they waited they started to feel the absence of their leader, started to feel their own vulnerability. They became afraid. Fear grew. Forty days passed. The fear took over. They exchanged integrity for survival.

The people gathered around Aaron, the brother of their late leader, and gave voice to their fear. "This Moses we once called our leader has been gone for forty days! That's forty days without leadership, without protection from the tribes that threaten us at every side, without any word from this invisible God that *supposedly* rescued us!" Their fear was contagious and reasonable, and it quickly infected even Aaron. "You are our best hope!" they cried. "We need a God with us, to protect us, to go before us and show us what to do! Make us something strong, something impressive, something we can believe in, something to make us great!"

Aaron knew they were right. He knew they needed something they could see, touch, be inspired by, so he asked for all of the gold they had plundered from the Egyptians, and cast them into a calf, a symbol of strength and fertility. “This is Yahweh, O Israel, the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Aaron announced this, holding the calf high. He had done it with the best of intentions, of course, but as they say, the road to Sheol is paved with good intentions. The crowd roared. Aaron felt the adrenaline, the confidence that came with cheers, so he went on. “Tomorrow will be a festival to God!” he proclaimed, so all of the people rose up early the next day to offer sacrifices to their golden god, they feasted, and celebrated, and their festival quickly transitioned into a tangled mass of licentious revelry. The people finally felt good about themselves. They had a leader, a god, and they were serving both and felt great about it, and isn’t that what religion is all about?

But meanwhile, up on the mountain, past the curtain of black smoke, the God they thought they were celebrating shook with anger. God spoke to Moses, who was still alive and well. “Go back to camp immediately!” God ordered. “*Your people*, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt have listened to fear, have forgotten who they are meant to be, and have exchanged me for something they’ve created, something they get to control. In my name, they sacrifice without caring why and they treat one another as objects for their own exploitation and indulgence. I cannot allow them to do such evil in the name of ultimate good.”

“*My people?*” Moses asked, jumping up and preparing to head back down to camp. “That *I* brought up out of Egypt? Are these not *your* people?”

“Not anymore,” God said. “They would say they are, but they want little to do with me. Leave me alone now, so that I can destroy them. If they are not representing me, if they are not my hands and feet, a nation of priests showing all of humanity my love and justice, then they have no purpose. So I will start over, a new tribe, from your line, Moses.”

Moses dropped the staff he had just picked up. “No!” he cried.

“Excuse me?” asked the Almighty God.

“No! Please!” Moses implored, dropping to his knees. “You saved these people! They escaped Egypt to follow you, if you consume them, how are you any better than the Pharaoh that oppressed and tried to wipe them out for so long? What you’re proposing is... is evil, and you, God, are not evil! Repent, change your mind! Don’t do this! Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants who dedicated themselves to you, you promised them! God, I have to believe you’re better than this!”

There was a pause, a pause as thick and ominous as the smoke surrounding them, and God changed God’s mind. In the place of the promise of destruction now stood a new promise. Hope. Redemption.

The storyteller finished his tale, and looked around at the eyes fixed on him. Eyes that burned now not only with conviction, but with hope. He held out his hands, his palms facing the crowd. “So go,” he blessed them. “Go and remember who you are. Remember the purpose to which you’ve been called. And remember the chance you’ve been given to return to it.”

They dispersed. Some of the crowd forgot the story in the weeks and months ahead, but it still burned in the imaginations of many. Those would go on to tell their children, and some down the road thought it was important enough, true enough, inspired enough to write down. People throughout the centuries resonated with its symbols, its characters, its conflicts and tensions. They saw themselves in the rebellious tribe, in the interceding leader, in the conflicted but hopeful God. They were implicated by the story. Forgiven by the story. It would go on to be used and quoted by the Prophet Nehemiah, the composer of a Psalm, the community developer of Acts, and in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and the Romans. They kept telling the story, they kept preaching the story, they kept listening to the story on and on through history, which brings us to...

Act III: Our World, Or The World in Front of the Story

We hear the story now with different ears than we brought to Act I of the dance. Where as they may have assumed a violent God, quick to judgement, we might take issue with this portrait. But as one teacher suggests, in this Act, we have a responsibility to not read these stories asking, “Why did God do this?” but rather, “Why did this storyteller say that God did this? What was he or she saying about God?” And that is why we must do the work of dancing the first two acts before we can arrive at this one, the one in which we ask the question: Is this still a story worth telling?

It is always a temptation to say no. After all, crafting golden idols is no longer much of a fight in our churches. God sending disasters of judgment on our cities is not something I walk around worrying much about, though I suppose some do. It’s tempting to toss this story out, to say that it’s outdated, and the violence of it outweighs any good it could do.

But our responsibility is to say yes, of course this story is worth telling. To recognize that surely there is something deep and true to our experience at work in this story for it to have survived for so long, to have made it into our world. Could it still have something to say to our world, which one author describes as a world in which religion is therapy, doing whatever it takes to make people feel good about meeting their religious needs? Could it have something to say to our world in which we would far rather engage in fruitless acts of self-gratifying piety than follow the God of self-sacrificing Love revealed in Jesus? A world where it’s much easier to post something on social media than to have an actual, humanizing conversation with a brother or sister? A world that would rather send thoughts and prayers to victims of a disaster than take concrete action and stand with the survivors? A world that would rather go to church and talk about love, reciting the right words about reconciliation, than put in the work of reconciling ourselves to estranged family or neighbors that look different from us? A world that would rather wear a golden cross around its neck than stick its neck out in an act of sacrificial love that that

cross represents? A world that would rather act in fear and hoard up wealth than give it away to meet the immediate pain and suffering next door? A world that would rather act in fear and elect the most powerful-looking and impressive leader than confront and question that fear itself, asking God to replace it with love?

Yes, I think this is a story about our world after all, just as it was a story about theirs. It has not changed that humanity faces the daily temptation to exchange integrity for survival, that the people of God face the daily temptation to exchange fidelity and love for certainty and comfort. Our privilege still blinds us to the pain of the world. We may no longer fear the fiery wrath of a deity, or fear national exile, but the institutional church in our world is dying at a staggering rate. Across the western world, we are finally closing our doors after so many years of failing to do what God has called us to do, to be God's hands and feet in the world, a family of priests, instruments of God's love and justice. But as I said, the storyteller was not crafting a story of indictment to inspire guilt. This story ends with grace and hope, an invitation. This is a story that ends with a chance to make things right, which brings us to the most exciting and terrifying act of them all...

Act IV: Our New World, Or The New Story We Tell Now

But I can't preach this Act, because that's on you. This is a new Act, one that makes many uncomfortable, so many bow out before it begins. This is an Act of improvisation. The moves are not in the script or pre-decided choreography, but this ballet lacks an ending which you must now go and provide. What will it look like now for us to abandon the idols, to stop letting fear drive, and to choose something real? What will it look like to choose fidelity to love over success and safety? Go now and find out. Bring your stories back to us. This Act is yours.