

A sermon preached at St. George's Anglican Church Calgary by the Rev. Clara King, November 5, 2017 (The Fest of All Saints)

Proper 31 - Year A

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, 17-20

Matthew 23:1-12

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

What story do you live in?

This sounds like an unimportant question; like something one of those conversation-starter games: “what’s your favourite fairy tale” or “what fictional character do you most identify with?”

But it’s a profoundly serious question: what story do you live in? What story gives shape and meaning to your life? What story do you live into when you’re at work? When you’re at the gym? When you’re driving the kids to practice?

It’s a good question to ask yourself, because your story shapes your world.

The movie *Arrival*, which came out last year, illustrates this point very beautifully. When *Arrival* begins, 12 enormous black discs have come from space to hover over various points on earth.

Immediately, army encampments are set up, surrounding the discs. Radiation detectors and full-body contamination suits are brought out; arsenals of weapons are aimed at the discs, and the world prepares for war. We know this story.

But the discs don’t move. They don’t attack. They just hover. And every day, a door opens in each disc, for the humans to come visit.

Inside the discs, the military men are anticipating ambushes, abductions, declarations of war. But nothing happens. There is a perfectly safe interior chamber, perfectly suited for humans, with a sheet of glass on one wall. And behind the glass, are the aliens, spurting odd ink marks on the glass, as if they’re writing.

Still convinced this represents a threat to all human civilization, the military men bring in translators, to decode the declarations of war - or whatever those ink marks are.

But the moment the translators get involved, they introduce a new story. This new story doesn't begin, "these powerful strangers came here to conquer us"; it begins, "they're putting so much work into communicating with us - why?"

In this new story, they want to understand and be understood. The translators and the aliens develop a mutual respect, as they work together to communicate, day after day. They form an odd kind of friendship. By changing the story from hostility to curiosity, the translators are finally able to understand the aliens' purpose in visiting earth. And for the rest, I'll just say: it's worth seeing the movie.

Stories matter. It matters what story we live in. If we live in a story of hostility and violence, we will facilitate hostility and violence in the world - we may not create it, but we will inevitably help hostility and violence to flourish. We will see it everywhere we go; we will seed it everywhere we go. After all, if all you've got is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail. That is the power of story.

Today, we gather around a certain story; a story that calls us to see one another and the world around us in certain ways.

From the very beginning, Jesus offered his followers a very different story to live into. They lived in a world dominated by the story of Rome: the story that Rome had all the power in the world: power to reward those who were friendly to the empire; and the power to terrorize and torture and slaughter those who opposed it.

Jesus' story challenged every part of Rome's claims. "Oh yes," Jesus said to Rome: "yes, you can oppress and tax and starve the people; oh yes, you can torture and murder and threaten - but God is with the people, and nothing you can do can separate them from the love of God! And compared to that, you have no power over us." And he not only lived this story, he lived it to the end, to the Cross, proclaiming until his death that Rome had no power over him; and by the grace of God, he was raised up to proclaim it evermore.

That is the story we tell ourselves every Sunday.

And then, we go from here back out into the world, and oh how easily the story gets swallowed up in all the competing stories out there. Oh how easily we forget

about our story, when we're faced with the daily struggles at work or at home or with the kids or with money; or when we're faced with immigration or racism or violence in the world, or our own desires for beauty or fitness or eternal life, or a good retirement - all those stories about what life is really all about, and what a good life really is, and what we really do want for ourselves in the world, and how to get there.

And it's easy to forget what story we've been called into; and to forget what story we're commissioned to live into.

Today we celebrate the feast of All Saints, when we're confronted by the idea, challenged by the idea that all of us are called to be saints; when we're reminded that saintliness isn't something for just some spiritual olympians: it is the call that God whispers in each of our ears, inviting us and gently challenging us to take another step forward.

We're reminded that there isn't a different journey that saints take, different from the journey that the rest of us take. Most of the saints struggled with all kinds of ordinary daily challenges, just like all of us do. The difference is how deeply they opened themselves to the story that guides our lives as Christians; the story that goes like this:

No matter what terror or struggle or hardship or spiritual battle we face, nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord. And more than that: nothing can separate our neighbour or a stranger from the love of God; nothing can separate an enemy from the love of God; nothing can separate a villain from the love of God.

Each of us is loved by God equally, and loved by God very, very deeply. Every person that we see, every day, every hour, every minute, is equally loved by God, accompanied by God, cherished by God – and God dreams of a world in which all his children are equally set free. God dreams of a world where there is no hunger, violence, terror, rape, despair, poverty, hatred; in which all his children live in harmony with each other and with him.

God has dreamed this dream since the beginning; and God has continued to dream this dream through all the terrible things we have done to one another down through the centuries; and God continues to dream this dream today, even as some have become rich while others are poor; even while some have more food than they need while others starve; even as we do to one another unspeakable violence and evil - God continues to love us; God continues to care

for us; and *God continues to call to us* - as God has called to us down through the centuries: calling us to draw close to him; to love our neighbour; and to work towards God's dream of the future, too.

That is the story read again and again. This is the story we retell from the beginning every time we pray the Eucharistic prayer. Every Sunday we recommit ourselves to this story, and remind ourselves what it's all about.

God calls us to take our place in the story, and be part of the dream that God holds out to us: a dream we can help to catalyze in tiny ways, every day of our lives, in every human interaction that we have. We are all part of this story: not merely on Sundays, but every waking moment of our lives.

God is calling to us, each and every one of us, longing for us to take our next step as saints of the Church.

Paul wrote, "to the saints in Ephesus" – so: to the saints in North East Calgary: on this our festival day, may this story take root in our hearts and in our lives. May the scales fall from our eyes as we go out from this place into the world: the world that God created, the world that God loves, filled with the people whom God cherishes - and may we look for our next step on our journeys of faith, and draw closer to God, and seed the world with goodness and mercy.

Amen.