
Our Stories in Gospel Time

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 8 – Year B

There are so many connections today between our own stories and our Bible stories! And there are so many convergences between the chronological time of our stories, and the grace-filled time of the Gospel! Let's explore a few of these connections and convergences in this brief time we have together just now!

There's the gospel story about Jesus resurrecting that dead daughter of the synagogue leader. And as we heard in the gospel reading, he proceeded to raise her after first healing the woman with a 12 year hemorrhage. So we have two stories in one, really.

And there's always a challenge with stories about resurrection! In such stories we're confronted by the same old issue of faith; whether or not we're going to believe in a resurrection from the dead when you were not there to witness it for yourself. Moreover this story harbors a special challenge for those of us who have lost a child or a loved one who was *not* raised from the dead—however devoutly we may have wished or prayed for the resurrection power of Jesus to be available and at work in our own time and place. In any case: There are so many connections today between our own stories and our Bible stories! And again: so many convergences between the chronological time of our stories, and the grace-filled time of the Gospel!

For example:

"Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease"?

It's right after that, "while he was still speaking," the story says, that some people came from the synagogue leader's house to say, "*Your* daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" (Mark 5:25, 34-35; emphasis mine). And it's here we see that this is really the story of the two daughters: the unnamed woman whom Jesus calls, "daughter" in the first story, and the leader's daughter whom Jesus raises in the second story. Moreover in these stories we have two daughters living 12 years of chronological time; the entire lifetime of the young girl, and the 12 years of suffering of the woman healed of her disease. And these two segments of chronological time converge in one, unified gospel story of grace-filled time.

Now I too have recently experienced such a convergence of chronological time and grace-filled time; albeit less dramatically and also more lightheartedly. My wife, Vida, and I have been married for 5 chronological years—*thanks be to God!* And this summer we are renewing and living-out our grace-filled commitment to raise our *granddaughter*, Ahmirah. As it happens, Ahmirah has also been alive and growing for those 5 chronological years. During those years we joined our faith community in going beyond our wedding vows. We went beyond our wedding vows in order to baptize Ahmirah and make some familiar baptismal vows about her upbringing. Along with her parents, and her other grandparents and godparents we committed right here in this sacred space to (quote):

be responsible for seeing that the child . . .
is brought up in the Christian faith and life.

We further committed that 'by our prayers and witness' we would 'help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ.'

Finally we joined the priest and the congregation in asking God to grant that the child, along with “all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ . . . may live in the power of his resurrection . . .” (“Holy Baptism,” *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979; pp. 302, 306). So we see here how the scripture themes of death and resurrection have also featured in our Christian lives; those grace-filled themes of death and resurrection featuring in our chronological time. Regardless of whether we ourselves are adept at *raisings from the dead* it’s through our baptism and the renewal of baptismal vows that we recapitulate dying and rising with Christ—that is, through the sacrament and living-out its covenant in our chronological time.

So Vida and I are now—God-willing—now living-out two stories in one. On the one hand, the chronological time of our marriage to one another and the chronological time of co-parenting this five-year-old grandchild—it’s our double story, if you will, like the double story in our gospel today. On the other hand we’re living-out the gospel framework of our life together; a re-framing of those two chronological stories into the one grace-filled time of our baptismal covenant of commitment and care.

Of course there are times when my beloved and I do not fully experience the commitment as *grace-filled*. There we are! As you can imagine, a five-year-old needs many occasions to explore experiences of independence and free-will; occasions that result in misunderstandings, for example, or conflicts of will as a matter of course; downright tantrums on her part or even, to be more transparent here, on our part many moments of excessive behavior and regrettable attitudes. That’s when we need to reclaim such experiences as graced under our covenant to God and to one another.

But there are also many grace-filled moments of living-out our covenant. Among my favorite occasions in that regard are reading Ahmirah bedtime stories. A couple of weeks ago, to choose a lighthearted example, I was reading her one of the Curious George stories. Curious George is a young monkey who typically gets into trouble by being *too* curious. But just before George makes the decision that results in his getting into trouble there always occurs that story line that reads: “George was curious.” And I can never resist reading that line with parental authority in my tone of voice by saying, “George was *curious!*” For her part, Ahmirah automatically responds in a five-year-old’s defensive tone of voice, “*I’m* not curious!” And every time she says *that* I re-experience a grace-filled moment of parental repentance and insight. Of course we really *want* our children to enjoy a healthy measure of curiosity and, therefore, to live-out this provision found in our final prayers for all baptized Christians:

Give them [O Lord] an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere . . . and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works (“Holy Baptism,” *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979; pp. 308).

And so we actually want our five year-old to acquire “the courage to will and to persevere” even in certain behaviors and attitudes that challenge us as her custodians and caregivers, and that stretch us beyond our own comfort zones so that the grace-filled prayers invoked in baptism may be fulfilled throughout the long arc of her life—as God wills.

So once again: There are so many connections today between our own stories and our Bible stories! And there are so many convergences between the chronological time of our stories, and the grace-filled time of the Gospel!

There’s another example in our Old Testament reading today about the death of Saul and Jonathan. The combined death of father and son, king and prince, who die together while defending their country against the Philistines, has always provided a poignant story for Bible readers. And King David’s lament over their combined death in battle has provided Western literature that classic refrain:

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished! (2 Samuel 1:27)

But what teases me about David’s lament is his celebration of *both* father and son—the grace he extends beyond his beloved friend, Jonathan. It was Saul, Bible readers recall, who plotted and carried out devious efforts to kill David on account of rivalry and jealousy. And yet David grants him also the grace of lamentation, as if he were mourning the loss not only of a beloved brother, Jonathan, but also the loss of an erring father. “Saul *and* Jonathan,” he intones over them both—

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your

apparel.

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished! (2 Samuel 1:23-24, 27)

And so here again, Christian friends, here again we have the convergence of chronological time with grace-filled time. On the one hand we have the preceding years of David's youth and maturity as a warrior in his own right, from the time of his defeating that giant Philistine, Goliath, to his becoming a celebrity leader throughout all Israel. On the other hand we have the simultaneous story of King Saul's growing jealousy, madness and rage as he experienced David becoming his nemesis or chief rival. And yet these two stories in chronological time converge in the one biblical story of God's covenant with David, as the scripture says:

"for the Lord has promised David: Through my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from all their enemies" (2 Samuel 3:18).

Elsewhere in the Bible this divine promise to David climaxes with that awesome expression in the old King James translation, "the sure mercies of David." It's an awesome expression because it links chronological time with the time of gospel fulfillment. And it does this by linking Old Testament and New Testament by way of two verses of scripture. First, in Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Come to Me . . . And I will make an everlasting covenant with you—The sure mercies of David (Isaiah 55:3; NKJV).

And then, in the Acts of the Apostles—the New Testament:

Concerning [God raising Jesus] up from the dead . . . He has spoken thus: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David' (Acts 13:34; NKJV).

Here we have the connection with our Collect appointed for today—the opening prayer for this Sunday in Pentecost season:

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone . . .

The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 230; www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp8_RCL.htm

Ever since New Testament times we Christians have found a prophetic framework in that expression, "the sure mercies of David." For us it refers to the Christian covenant as:

that "new covenant" (Hebrews 9:15) . . . the promise that the Messiah should come of [David's] seed, and sit on his throne, and establish an everlasting kingdom (Psalm 89:2-5, 19-37), and triumph over death and hell (Psalm 16:9, 10), and give peace and happiness to Israel (Psalm 132:15-18).

One commentary even declares that:

The promises made to David, rightly understood, involve all the essential points of the Christian covenant.

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So here we are, once again, church friends, living out a grace-filled covenant. And this covenant encompasses, as the commentary affirms, "all the essential points" of our Christian life. We may even dare to include in that covenant of promises the recent events in our past few weeks as church people. I mean explicitly here this month's killing of nine of our fellow Christians at our sister church in Charleston, S.C. If we were looking for a contemporary application of today's scriptures we would see in the travail of Emmanuel A.M.E. Church on June 17 not just two or even nine but ten or more stories in chronological time; at least ten stories that converged when ordinary Christian people faithfully welcomed the stranger and found, instead of a prospective brother, a young Philistine full of rivalry, madness and rage. But even here we may affirm our millennial experience as a Christian people; the tried-and-tested and proven experience of finding again and again convergences between our chronological time and grace-filled time.

A kind of icon of this for me is our leader of our nation lamenting; as King David lamented over Jonathan and Saul our

President Obama lamenting at Emmanuel Church, and singing that classic hymn of our heritage, Amazing Grace! I invite you to take a look at it on YouTube: the icon of the president of the nation singing—not performing; singing in authentic lament, Amazing Grace.

And so we can continue to invoke a long arc of church experience; the arc that we rehearsed even earlier today in that opening hymn, Christ is Made the Sure Foundation (*The Hymnal 1982* No. 518; NY: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985) We are still in that regard harvesting Easter resurrection, because it's by his rising from the dead that Christ was made "our sure foundation." And on that foundation he vouchsafes to us renewal of faith, hope and love again and again and again—marvelously, amazingly, no matter what happens: the renewal of faith, hope and love. That is our resurrection promise in life; that is our sure foundation. Christ is made that for us, and it fulfills in us "the sure mercies of David."

So many rich connections between our chronological time and the grace-filled time of the Gospel! And so, Christian friends, I invite you to pray with me again our Collect of the Day as we affirm these connections. Please join me in your service booklet (p. 3).

The Lord be with you . . .

Let us pray together:

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 230; www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp8_RCL.htm