"We Are All Storytellers"
Baptism of Christ A (January 12, 2020)
Scriptures: Psalm 29; Romans 6:3-4; Matthew 3:13-17
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

Emily Esfahani Smith researches storytelling, in particular, how we tell our own personal stories. She invites us to think of the interaction we have when meeting a new person. "What do you do," we might ask? "Where are you from," we might ask? And if the conversation goes deeper, we might ask about families, music or reading interests, hobbies, education, etc. etc. Answering each of these questions involves storytelling, she writes. We sift through our pasts to create a narrative. "We are all storytellers," she says.[1] "We've all created our own personal histories, marked by highs and lows, that we share with the world." "Storytelling," she says, "is how we make sense of" our lives." Esfahani Smith draws on the research of Dan McAdams, a psychologist at Northwestern University. McAdams calls the stories we tell about ourselves our "narrative identity." It's "[our] own personal myth. [And] like [many] myths," he says, "our narrative identity contains heroes and villains that help us or hold us back, major events that determine the plot, challenges overcome and suffering we have endured. When we want people to understand us, we share our story or parts of it with them; when we want to know who another person is, we ask them to share part of their story." "Our stories," he says, "tend to focus on the most extraordinary events, good and bad … , but our interpretations may differ. For one person, for example, a childhood experience like learning how to swim by being thrown into the water by a parent might explain his sense of himself today as a hardy entrepreneur who learns by taking risks. For another, that experience might explain why he hates boats and does not trust authority figures. A third might leave the experience out of his story altogether, deeming it unimportant."

"McAdams has been studying narrative identity for over 30 years. In his [research], he asks [people] to divide their lives into chapters and to recount key scenes, … [and] he asks them to reflect on their story's central theme." He's found an interesting pattern. "People who are driven to contribute to society and to future generations, he found, are more likely to tell redemptive stories about their lives, or stories that transition from bad to good. There was the man who grew up in dire poverty but told McAdams that his hard circumstances brought him and his family closer together. There was the woman who told him that caring for a close friend as the friend was dying was a harrowing experience, but one that ultimately renewed her commitment to being a nurse … . These people," says McAdams, "rate their lives as more meaningful than those who tell stories that have either no or fewer redemptive [parts]."

There some challenges with such research - how do race or trauma factor in? But the idea of redemptive stories did make me wonder whether narrative identity could be mapped onto how we tell the story of transitioning from the 2010s to the 2020s. January 1st marked this shift in time. When looking back over the past year or past decade, do we tell a redemptive story - a story of how things have gotten better - or, do we tell, as Dan McAdams calls it, a contamination story - a negative story of decline? Which events do we highlight to create such a story? At the end of last month, just before the decade changed from the 2010s to the

[1] https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/. I am freely borrowing from Esfahani Smith's article, some in her words, some in mine, and some in the words of McAdams.

2020s - I read a bunch of articles that scanned the recent past. There was the piece by Ross Douthat titled "The Decade of Disillusionment"[2] - clearly a contamination story, in which Douthat calls the 2010s "psychologically traumatic," filled with "the feeling of crisis, … paranoia, … mistrust, … and hysteria." He even calls the 2010s a "deranged" decade. Then there's the article by Michiko Kakutani titled "The 2010s Were the End of Normal"[3] - another contamination story. The 2010s, she writes, were "a dark and divisive new era." "The biggest casualty of the decade," she says, "was trust." A PEW survey found that only 17% of Americans trust the government to do what is right. Trust in staid institutions - religious, educational, the media - has declined across the board. And, she writes, the 2010s were the era when "the indigenous American berserk" became normalized. Yes, contamination stories - stories about decline - could be told. But so could redemptive stories - stories about things getting better. Nicholas Kristof wrote that 2019 was "the best year ever [in human history]."[4] "Every single day [across the world in 2019]," he writes, "another 325,000 [people got] their first access to electricity … , 200,000 [people got] piped water for the first time, and some 650,000 [people] went online for the first time … ." Today, he says, less than 10% of the world's population lives in extreme poverty, a number that has dropped 75% since the late 20th century. Infectious diseases have declined significantly, and the literacy rate across the world is close to 90% up from a mere 20% in 1900. "The most important trend in the world in the early 21st century," he says, is "our progress toward [the] elimination of hideous diseases, illiteracy, and the most extreme poverty." Kristof tells a redemptive story. Clearly there are different ways to tell the story of our recent past, just like there are different ways to tell our personal stories.

One personal, redemptive story we might tell is the story of our baptism. Today is Baptism of Christ Sunday on the liturgical calendar - a day when we engage in a healthy surrealism. We take a Christmas bough, dip it in the baptismal font, and spray ourselves with water. And this entire dance of liturgy is accompanied by the surreal words, "remember your baptism and be thankful." Surreal words, because *most* of us don't *remember* our baptism at all. The UCC comes from a tradition of infant baptism, or *paedobaptism* to borrow a theological term. Many, maybe most of us were baptized long before we could walk or talk, long before we could do anything but cry or look cute as our parents held us and a minister applied water to our foreheads. Yet today we say, "*remember* your baptism." It's a liturgical form of storytelling. We may not *remember* when our heads were moistened, but we *can* tell the story of its meaning - a redemptive story. A skeleton story that St. Paul in today's reading from his Letter to the Romans adds sinews and flesh to. Paul likens baptism to a story of new beginnings, new birth, new creation. Baptism he says identifies us with the buried and raised Christ. Our old selves are buried with Christ on Good Friday, and our new selves are raised with Christ on Easter Sunday. It's a purely symbolic gesture - no baby is aware of the symbolism when their head gets wet. Thus the call to *remember* - to retell the symbolic story. It's a story with roots in creation itself - out of the watery chaos, says the Book of Genesis, God brings forth life. It's a story with roots in Noah's flood - out of the deluge of water, God saved a people. It's a story with roots in the Exodus - out of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom. And it's a story that looks ahead in hope to that great promise in the last book of the Bible when the churning waters of

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[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/opinion/sunday/2010s-decade-disillusionment.html

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/27/opinion/sunday/2010s-america-trump.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article

[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/opinion/sunday/2019-best-year-poverty.html

humanity will finally be at peace, like a sea of glass, says Revelation. Baptism remembers and recalls all of these redemptive stories. But unlike *mere* physical water, which freezes and evaporates and boils and falls from the sky and chills our drinks and washes our bodies, our clothes, our cars, and our dishes - unlike *mere* physical water - baptismal water is permanent. We can't be unbaptized. It wets our foreheads, but it soaks through our skin into our souls - it's a symbol that says we are claimed by God's love forever. And once this water soaks in, we will never get dry. Baptismal water never evaporates; it can't be wiped off. We are all, as one preacher once put it, soaking wet. And the call to remember this baptism, is a call to tell, retell, proclaim: that newness of life is always possible; that life's deaths and crosses and tombs, can always become new life and empty tombs and resurrections. Baptism announces that life's Good Fridays can become Easter Sundays. Or, to put this differently, no matter what we're facing in our daily lives, there is always hope. Baptism is a redemptive story.

In her new book *For Small Creatures Such as We*, Sasha Sagan, the late Carl Sagan's daughter, writes about the miracle that is birth. Sasha Sagan is nonreligious, but her words about the miracle that is birth remind me of baptism, which is, as St. Paul suggests, a form of rebirth. "After our daughter was born," she writes, my husband "Jon and I said to each other a thousand times a day, 'I can't believe she's here!' 'I can't believe we have a kid!' … Every day for months and months we said it out loud … . We struggled to wrap our minds around it. I actually don't suppose I'll ever truly get over this idea. My mother never has. She sometimes still joyfully says to my brother Sam and me, 'You don't understand, you didn't exist … ! And now you're here!' We roll our eyes and say, 'Yes, Mom, that's how [birth] works.' Which is true, but no less astonishing, beautiful, or thrilling. Being born at all is amazing. It's easy to lose sight of this. But when a baby comes into the world," she writes, "when a new human appears from inside of another, in the accompanying rush of emotion, we experience a little bit of the immense brazen beauty of life." Sagan makes me think that birth itself is a redemptive story - a story of joy-filled parents holding their new baby, full of wonder and awe and possibility. A story about how they speak the new child's name for the first time with voices of love.

Today's reading from the Psalms is all about the voice of God. And today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew ends with the voice of God. The voice of a divine parent. Psalm 29 says God's voice is filled with power. It's like thunder. It's filled with majesty. It can shatter cedars, kindle flames of fire, convulse a wilderness, strip forests bare. In Matthew's story about the baptism of Jesus, the voice of God is filled with love, "this is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased," says God the divine parent. It's not clear from Matthew's story whether this voice booms or whether it whispers. Does every bystander hear the voice or only Jesus? Does it crash upon them all like thunder? Or, is it a mere exhale, a whisper, a still small voice, like the cooing of a mother to her beloved child? Baptism, like birth, is a watery sign when Mother God, who births and nurtures us, speaks the words, "*you* are my beloved child; in *you* I am well pleased." And like the waters themselves - which can't evaporate or get wiped off - the words are permanent. "You will *always* be my beloved child. I am pleased with you." We baptize in our tradition to remind ourselves that God is the parent of all people - baptized or not. And we baptize to remind ourselves that at the core of our tradition is love: *For God so loved the world*, says one New Testament writer; *God is love*, says another; *As I have loved you*, says Jesus, *so you should love one another*. The story of God's parental love is a redemptive story.

Let me close today with another redemptive story of love told by Israeli graphic designer Ronny Edry.[5] Back in 2012 he created a poster, which he circulated on Facebook. In the poster, he was holding his little daughter. In her hand was an Israeli flag. And the caption of the poster read, "Iranians, we love you. We will never bomb your country." "In Israel, says Edry, "we have [had a] war with Iran coming for 10 years now, and … people [are] … afraid. It's like every year it's the last minute that we can do something about the war with Iran. It's like, if we don't act now, it's too late forever … . I'm a graphic designer," he says, and "most of the time [when] I make posters, I post them on Facebook, my friends like [them], don't like [them], … don't share [them], don't [do anything], and it's another day. So I went to sleep [after posting the image of my daughter with the Israeli flag, and the caption "Iranians, we love you."] … . And later on in the night, I woke up … and I went by the computer and I see all these red dots … [on my] Facebook [account], which I've never seen before. And I was like, 'What's going on?' So I [sat at] the computer and I start looking … , and suddenly I see many people talking to me, … and a few of them [were] from Iran … . [Y]ou have to understand," he says, "in Israel we don't talk with people from Iran. We don't know people from Iran. … So I start answering this [Iranian] girl [on Facebook], and she's telling me she saw the poster and she asked her family to come [look at it], … and they [were] all sitting in the living room crying." "So … I ask my wife to come, and I tell her, you have to see [this] … , and she started to cry. And everybody's crying now. So I don't know what to do, so my first reflex, as a graphic designer, is … to show everybody what I'd just seen, and people started to see [the image] and to share [it], and that's how it started. … [I decided to gather pictures of] all the people I know … [and] put them in [new] posters … . I went to my neighbors and friends and students and I just asked them, give me a picture, I will make you a poster. … [T]hey start sending me pictures and [saying], 'Make me a poster. Post it. Tell the Iranians we from Israel love you too.' … [S]o many pictures [came in that] I asked friends to come, graphic designers most of them, to make posters with me, because I didn't have the time. It was a huge amount of pictures." And Iranian graphic designers began responding with their own posters with messages like "'You are my first Israeli friend. I wish we [could] both get rid of our idiot politicians, anyway nice to see you!'" And one message commenting on the Israeli flag read, "'I love that blue. I love that star. I love that flag.'" Another read, "'My Israeli Friends. I don't hate you. I don't want War.'" … The moment I really understood that something was happening," says Edry, "[was when] a friend of mine told me, 'Google the word "Israel".' … Those [messages of love] were the first images … that popped up from Google when you typ[ed], 'Israel' or 'Iran.' … We were showing a new reality by just making images … ." It started with one message of love. Then we became "friends on Facebook, and [then] became friends in life." We now travel to meet each other and we talk in person.

When we say today, "*remember* your baptism," we are doing a little redemptive storytelling - a dance of liturgy with a Christmas bough and a spray of water - reminding ourselves that we are loved by a Divine Parent - a Divine Parent who fills us with love, so we can, as Jesus says, go out and *love one another*. Amen.

[5] https://www.ted.com/talks/ronny_edry_israel_and_iran_a_love_story/transcript#t-15880