



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road
roswell, georgia 30076

11-Jun-2006 Trinity Sunday

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 6:1-8 Romans 8:12-17

SERMON: Our Story (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

We don't need much convincing that it's a big, bad world out there with myriad problems, many of which seem so intractable. We see them on the TV news and we read about them in the newspaper. We ask ourselves and one another somewhat despairing questions: "What will it take to solve these conflicts? Will we ever learn that ethnicity and nationhood are no reason to hate? Why, when there are plenty of natural resources to go around, do so many still have nothing?"

And being honest, when we zoom into our own lives, we have to admit that we too have our problems. Even the best of marriages have minefields; those places where if we tread, we risk an explosion. Even the warmest parent-child relationships are strained in one way or another over feelings of being denied having our way or not being the favorite child. Even healthy congregations have weak links that diffuse vitality and hope. Even our community has cracks through which people fall. Faced with all this, a person can get discouraged. There is just so much to do and so few resources. *Can one person make a difference?* Sure, we confess that God has called us, and blessed us, and God guides us, and works through us. But on a day-to-day basis, it is sometimes impossible to imagine that we can really make a difference.

I know all of you well enough to know that even as you do the right thing today and gather together to worship God, you are well aware not just of your strengths, but of your inadequacies when it comes to being instruments of God's peace. How can we possibly share the story of God's love for the world, when we grumble over the choice of Sunday school curriculum? How can we possibly share the story of God's reconciling love when we squabble over the color of the Sanctuary carpet?

I want to encourage all of us to make two revisions to *Our Story* – the story we have about God so that we might be better able to share God's love in the world.

Revision Number 1 is about gaining a better view of the diversity and complexity of God's world in which we live. I am grateful to J.B. Queen for emailing me a reminder of some figures I had seen before about our world: If we could reduce the world's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all existing human ratios remaining the same, the demographics would look something like this: 60 Asians, 12 Europeans, five US Americans and Canadians, eight Latin Americans, 14 Africans and one person from the South Pacific. 49 would be female and 51 would be male. 30 would be children and 70 would be adults. 82 would be non-white and 18 white. 89 heterosexual and 11 homosexual. 33 would be Christians, 21 would be Moslem, 15 would be Hindu, six would be Buddhist, five would be Animist, six would believe in other religions and 14 would be without any religion or atheist. 15 would speak Mandarin Chinese, seven English, six Hindi, six Spanish, five Russian, four Arabic, three Bengali and three Portuguese. The other would speak Indonesian, Japanese, German, French or some other language. Five would control 32% of the entire world's wealth, and all of them would be US citizens. 80 would live in substandard housing. 24 would not have any electricity, And of the 76 that do have electricity, most would only use it for light at night. 20 are undernourished and one is dying of starvation, while 15 are overweight. Of the energy of this village, 20 people consume 80%, and 80 people share the remaining 20%. 20 have no clean, safe water to drink. 56 have access to sanitation, which means 44 do not! 67 would be unable to read. One (only one) would have a college education. One would have HIV, one near death and two would be near birth.

The first Revision we need to make to *Our Story* requires that we come to a different and a more accurate view of the changed and changing world in which we live. The real world, the world God made and sees, is very different from our immediate locality. The world in which we are called to serve God is a world where power and opportunity belong only to the few, including all of us, while there is a great and growing disparity in people's economic and educational opportunities. The world God sees is full of hurt and pain, yet also chock full of lasting potential. No, we cannot fix every problem in the world today, but we must embrace the world as it is, *not as we might wish it was*.

Revision Number 2 requires us to have a clearer appreciation of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ and the consequences of this for how we are to live. To do this, we need to pay close attention to one of the verses we heard in Romans 8 today where we read that God has called us, named us, claimed us and now asks us to live so that we make a difference in God's world. "*You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.*" (15)

As Saul the persecutor, and Paul the Apostle, this man lived passionately, but the aims and the meaning and the trajectory of these two passionate lives were very different. As Saul, he knew the spirit of slavery. Thinking he was about God's work, Saul worked to eliminate the upstart Christian faith, to see it destroyed. As Saul, he was a slave to his masters' stories. He did not see himself in the story. He saw no way in which he could or would influence the story. Expressing the fear and prejudice and hatred of his masters' story, Saul imprisoned and murdered.

As Paul, he knew the spirit of adoption. On the Damascus Road, Saul becomes Paul and adopts a whole new perspective, a new set of priorities and a new outlook on life. Paul is claimed by a new story all together, the story of love and grace in Jesus Christ – a story in which he realizes that he, but not only he, has been adopted and welcomed into the fellowship of. Paul is a changed person, and he does not withdraw in embarrassment to the edges and live out his life in anonymity. Instead, Paul becomes as vigorous a proponent of his new "home" as he had been of his old ideology.

On that road to Damascus, in the vision that both blinded him and opened his eyes, Paul discovered that fear is not the response of faith. He came to see that faith in God is not about protecting ourselves or our favored standing. That we do not have to fight for our place in the family of God, that there is no need for us to elbow each other out of the road so we can get to the front of the line, that we should never seek to exclude anyone to make be room for us. The spirit of adoption, the offer of God's grace, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus means that God, God has room for all God calls, all God calls. "*You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.*" (15).

Saul knew that slaves had no place other than the one given to them by their masters. They had no family, no family name, no family history, no family future; no heirs, nothing to leave or pass on. Their only story was the story of their masters, not their own. And so Saul acted out of fear. Paul came to see what it meant to belong, to be part of a family. He came to see that he did not need to grasp for or contend for the story. Rather, he had to let the story, the promise of God's grace and goodness, fill him. And as he did this, he found the freedom that God had intended for God's people all along. In doing so, the story became his story, and he gained a family name, a history, and a future. In doing so, the story lived on. *This story can not be lost.*

Now, then what about us, you and me, in our intractable times? Do we live in fear that the story will be lost? Are there times when we imagine that if we fail the whole thing will come crashing down around us? If we are honest with ourselves, then *yes, we do*. But need we? Honestly? *No!*

For *this* story, God's story, *is our story*. We have been adopted. Our God has embraced us and named us and claimed us. In our yearning to be God's, our spirit joins God's yearning for us, we are adopted. Signed, sealed, delivered – "God we're yours!" It is done already. We belong to God. We have a place, a name, a history and a future.

From our place in this story we can go forth to challenge and change the world that it might better reflect God's story. As characters in God's story, we are expected to care deeply about God's world, doing what we can and all we can, using all the insight and all the gifts we have been

given, to make a difference in the world. Since this story lives in each and all of us, we are asked to make our contribution. Each and every one of us will influence the story and give it that twist which will enable more and more people to come to see that they too can have a share in this story for themselves.

When we do this, you will sometimes look odd, different, out of step from many others as you live out God's story. When you practice hope in an intractable world, some will think you are crazy! When you are passionate about beauty and truth and justice in a world that seems so much more interested in profit and getting ahead and end-of-the-year bonuses, some will say that you are out of touch or unrealistic! When you offer love and share forgiveness when you see hate or indifference, some will say you are a loser! When you offer your life in whole or even in part for the sale of another person, some will say there is no place for you in this winner take all world and they will nail you to a tree. When you devote your time to Angel Food, or Safe Havens, or Bible Study or Worship, when you speak up for the weak and the oppressed, when you volunteer your time to work with children or youth, when you sing in the choir, when you accept the call to serve as an Officer, when you live for Jesus Christ, it does not matter what other people do or say. You are living God's story. *The story is Yours!*

God's story is yours and it is mine – the story of God's redemption through Jesus; the story of limitless love and acceptance; the story of life overcoming death. This is a story worth telling no matter what distracts us. This is a story that confirms our worth and worthiness. This is a story that invites us into life. Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are welcome to this family, and as part of the family we have a life to live as we share *Our Story, our newly revised story!* **Amen.**

Isaiah 6:1-8

1In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" 6Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." 8Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Romans 8:12-17

12So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

The New Revised Standard Version, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.