

“What Story Will We Live By?”

Exodus 5:1-9, 5:22-6:9

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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After the catastrophic flooding of the Guadalupe River this summer, a writer named Aaron Parsley wrote an article for *Texas Monthly*. It's one of the finest pieces of journalism that I've ever read.

It was a first-hand account of what it was like to be caught in that catastrophe, as he and his family were awakened in the early morning hours on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Aaron and his husband, Patrick, were staying at the river house that belonged to Aaron's parents...Aaron's father was there, as well as Aaron's sister, Alissa, her husband, and their two little children, Rosemary and Clay.

At 4:30 in the morning, when they all were awake and together and the danger of the situation was just starting to become apparent, it was Patrick who exclaimed, “We're moving. We're moving.”

*The rushing, still-rising water had lifted the house off its pillars, Parsley writes. [The house] was afloat. And then it wasn't.*

The deck ripped away.

Windows were breaking.

It took maybe 10 or 15 seconds for the entire house to come apart.

Aaron writes that his sister, Alissa, managed to keep both of her kids on the countertop [of the kitchen], one hand on each...before the house was lifted off its pillars. And then, as the house came apart, she grabbed one child in each arm.

*This, writes Parsley, is the part that will forever haunt me.*

*If I or anyone else had been closer to them, we would have helped her. We would have grabbed one of the kids. But we didn't know that we were about to be plunged into the water.*

*We simply didn't know.*

The family was separated in the raging waters, none of them knowing for a period of time, who else—if any—had survived. In the end, it was the youngest child, Clay—20 months old—who didn't make it.

Now, I have no idea how Aaron Parsley managed to write this story less than a week after those terrible events took place. But one of the most brilliant strokes of the piece is that he addresses the end of the article to his niece—to his sister's oldest child, 4-year-old Rosemary.

He writes to her as if she'll read the article later, when she's older. He explains to her what happened that morning.

He writes to tell her that her courageous mother, Alissa, saved her life that day by somehow hanging on to her in the raging river.

But what also makes the story so compelling is that even though he doesn't say so directly, it's as if he's writing to his entire family. It's as if he's reminding all of them that it wasn't their fault, and it certainly wasn't his sister's fault, that his nephew died that day.

*...we told [Alissa] over and over that saving Clay was impossible, that she did all she could. That the flood was in control.<sup>1</sup>*

In other words, Aaron Parsley doesn't just write an article.

He told a story.

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Parsley, "The River House Broke. We Rushed in the River." *Texas Monthly*, August, 2025.

An important story.  
 A painful story.  
 A necessary story.

Why?

Because I suspect he knows that his family will need it, that narrative of courage and love in the face of a tragedy that changed their lives forever.

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“We live our life in stories,” writes Sam Wells, the former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University.<sup>2</sup>

“We live our life in stories, but it often takes a clash of stories, or a dramatic event that we can’t reconcile with our [current] sense of story, to realize [the story that we live by].”

This is what we encounter in our texts for today.  
 A clash of stories.  
 Those stories are in the mind of Moses.

Moses has done what God told Moses to do.  
 He’s gone to Pharaoh.  
 He’s told Pharaoh that the Lord says: “Let my people go.”  
 And Pharaoh’s response?

Who is the Lord?  
 I’m not letting anyone go.

And what does Moses do?

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Wells, “Humbler Faith, Bigger God: Finding a Story to Live By,” Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022.

Does he laugh in Pharaoh's face, and say, "Oh, Pharaoh, you just wait...I know the Lord, I know what God will do!"

Not at all.

Far from proclaiming his faith, Moses starts to question his faith.

Moses turns to God and says:

"O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name...you have done nothing at all to deliver your people."

Do you hear the two stories that are colliding in the mind of Moses?

On the one hand, Moses believed that God can be trusted.

The One who came to him in the burning bush is the One who will do whatever God promises to do.

But now Moses is experiencing another story.

The evidence on the ground is telling a different story.

And there's this collision between the two stories...

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**We live our lives in stories...**I think Sam Wells had it right.

You've got a story in your mind about who you are and how your life is supposed to go...and then a curveball comes your way...and you're facing a different story.

It's not always a bad thing.

Sometimes, a different story can be a helpful thing.

For example, I've told you before that I can't sing.

Speaking in public? No problem.  
Singing in public? Not a chance.

So, when I was serving another congregation years ago, I was preaching on spiritual disciplines, and I mentioned that singing in the choir is a spiritual discipline. It's not like our choir members just show up each Sunday and Marlon waves a magic wand and presto: beautiful music.

They have to practice what they sing, right?  
It's a discipline.  
It's why you and I get to enjoy the gifts of our wonderful choir.

In any event, during the course of that sermon years ago in my former church, I told that congregation what I've told you:

Ben Dorr does not sing.  
It is not my spiritual gift, nor is it one of my disciplines.

What I forgot was that in my congregation at that time was a retired voice teacher...and she came up to me after worship that day, and she asked what afternoon I'd be coming by her house that week.

I was confused.  
"Do we have an appointment?"  
"You bet we do!" she replied. "I'm going to teach you how to sing."

Clearly, the Holy Spirit was not at work in her heart during my sermon!

But I was caught, so I agreed, and I spent one hour each week with this retired voice teacher for the rest of that fall ...

And by the time Thanksgiving rolled around, much to my astonishment, I could make it through a few of my favorite hymns with most of the notes intact.

Please, don't misunderstand.

If there are voice teachers in this room, we DO NOT have an appointment this week.

But I had a story about myself, Ben cannot sing—  
and I had held it fast for over 40 years—  
and this kind, retired teacher—she changed my story.

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**We live our life in stories.**

Sam Wells was right.

And sometimes, we don't even know the ways that our story affects someone else's story.

The Presbyterian church in which I grew up had about 500 members. Full of upwardly mobile people, full of professionals, high-achieving types.

After I left for college, something happened at that church.

It wasn't anything that fit the narrative that my home church had about itself.

A member of the church committed a crime.

He was white-collar, professional.

Not an arrogant guy, a good guy, a good person.

He was in the dairy business, and the business was failing.

So he took some short cuts—not for his own personal gain, but in order to keep the dairy afloat.

The short cuts went against regulations.  
 The FDA found out.  
 They prosecuted their case against him.

He went to prison for something like 3-4 years. But there was a period of time BEFORE THAT, when the details of his punishment were being worked out...a time when the news of his crime was public, and he wasn't yet in prison, and of course, many people in the church knew all about what had happened.

If you're that guy and his wife, what do you do?  
 Do you still go to church?

The pastor counseled this man and his wife to go to worship.  
 His friends in the congregation said, "Come. We want you with us in worship."

And they came.  
 And they were supported by their faith community.  
 They showed up Sunday after Sunday.

All this happened shortly before I went to seminary, and unbeknownst to them, their story...it helped teach me something about what it means to be God's church.

Because they knew a grace that they had never experienced before.  
 They knew a sense of belonging—what it means to belong to God and to one another—that perhaps they never knew they needed before.

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**We live our lives in stories...**

Do you remember how God responds to Moses today?

Not with a miracle or a sign.

God responds by telling Moses a story.  
It's a story...of belonging.

"I will redeem you with an outstretched arm," God tells Moses.  
"I will take you as my people, and I will be your God."

Do you know what a story of belonging can do?  
What it means when someone claims you?  
When they say "You belong to me, and I belong to you?"

I believe that the story of BELONGING told in the Exodus had a profound effect—not just on those who went through it, but on a particular carpenter from Nazareth, over a thousand years later.

Who did Jesus reach out to in his life?  
People on the fringes.  
People who were afraid they didn't belong!

People like Levi the tax collector.  
Or the woman caught in adultery.  
Or his own disciple, Peter, who denied him and ran from him.

People whom Jesus claimed and forgave and said, "You belong."

Of course, belonging doesn't just run like a ribbon from Exodus to Jesus. It's also at the heart of what it means to be God's church.

May I submit to you that there is no more important story the Bible tells us, no more important story that God's church is called to embody, than the story of belonging...



**We live our lives in stories.**

And I wonder if there's anyone here today who's afraid that they don't belong?

For example, I wonder if there is someone in our pews today who is questioning your faith, having your own doubts about God?

You thought your life would look like THIS, and now it looks like THIS...and you're wondering, God, what are you up to?

I hope you know that wavering faith is no barrier to being here at Westminster. I hope you experience our church as a faith community that promises to walk along your journey with you, NOT providing trite or tired answers to the questions that are GRIPPING you...

but accepting you for where you are.

I hope you know THIS church...is a place where you belong.

I wonder if there is anyone in our pews today who has always played by the rules, and on the outside, it looks like you have your life together...but there's a secret that you harbor in your heart, it's a mistake that you made that almost no one knows about, and you still beat yourself up for that mistake? You wonder what your friends and fellow church members would think of you if they knew of your mistake?

If you're here at worship today, I hope you know that Westminster is FULL of people who have made mistakes in our lives, things we did that we wish we hadn't done...and the forgiveness and fresh start God offers here isn't for those with perfect records...it's for you, whatever your track record.

I hope you know that this church...is a place where you belong.

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But it can be hard to remember sometimes.  
We live our lives in stories.  
And we start telling ourselves FALSE stories.

Stories that say...  
    you are your past,  
    you are your pain,  
    you are your fear...

These aren't true stories, but sometimes it's hard to remember that they're not true. Sometimes we forget that the story God tells each of us, every Sunday is:

“You are my precious child, my delight! You belong to me.”

That's the story God tells us, but it's easy to forget.  
So I had an idea.

How many of you have ever heard the expression, “A picture is worth a thousand words”??

Well, I figured that might even be true with sermons.  
So, I drew a picture for you.  
It's a picture of this morning's sermon.

Just in case you forget the sermon when you wake up in the morning...I created a picture with every child of God who does NOT belong to God. Every person whom God will not chase down, whom God will not go to any length to find.

It's a drawing of all the people for whom this story of belonging to God...does not apply. And it's going to take all your effort not to OOH and AHH...this is a stellar picture...here it is.

Those of you in the choir loft—it looks like you're squinting.  
Like you're thinking to yourself, that's a blank piece of paper.  
No worries.  
Your eyesight is just fine.

(Amen.)