

"Growing Strong" based on Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

A mentor once told me, "Every crisis is an identity crisis." In case that isn't an obvious platitude for you, I have taken it to mean that whenever a group or an individual is in crisis, they no longer know who they are. That is, the stories that explain them to themselves don't make sense out of things any longer.

It does seem that we form identity in the stories we tell of ourselves. Our stories are sometimes called myths, and that reminds us that they're both meaningful and inherently biased. They tell us where we came from, why we are here, what we are supposed to be doing, and how we most often mess it up! (Again, this is true both individually and collectively.)

The problem is, things keep changing on us! And that means we have to either tell different stories or change the ways we tell the same ones! In normal circumstances we change things in little ways as we go, and all is well. We add new stories that make sense of things, we tell some stories more, some less, and adapt details here and there. Normally we can keep up with ourselves. However, when radical change occurs and our stories haven't caught up with our reality, we land in identity crisis.

Isaiah 40 speaks to a people in an identity crisis, and an epic one at that. The stories of the ancient Israelite people told of a trustworthy God who had chosen them, took care of them, who helped them overcome their adversaries, and who freed them from oppression. They WERE the people who were in relationship with that God. God was their identity, and God's strength and steadfastness were the core of how they understood God.

And then ... they lost. The Babylonian empire defeated them in battle, destroyed their city and society, and left them without leadership, hope, or defenses. (Interestingly, the Hebrew Bible was written down during the aftermath of this defeat, as if the people needed to work with the stories to try to make sense of their new reality. They may also have been afraid that their identity would be forever lost if they didn't firm it up.) It was into this void of identity and meaning that the prophet Isaiah spoke in chapter 40.

The prophet reminded them of their stories, and of their God in whom their identity was formed. The prophet ALSO reflected on the stories and adapted them a bit to meet the circumstances, as was desperately needed. Isaiah connected the ancient to the present. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the

beginning?” and then reminded the people of who God is. In doing so, Isaiah reminded the people that God is ETERNAL and POWERFUL, and the rules of the earth are NOT, “ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.” This served to acknowledge that a ruler of the earth HAS bested the people, but not God.

Isaiah acknowledges that the people feel abandoned by God, but then brings them back to their own stories. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” Then Isaiah adapts a bit more, reminding the people that God never runs out of energy, and that the people can pull from God's energy and strength when theirs seems lacking. Sure, Isaiah says, humans get weary, “ but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

It was, even then, an old, old story, but it was also a story retold to fit the time frame, to give the people back their identity while acknowledging their reality. In many ways, the Gospels are doing the same work. The crisis when Isaiah wrote was the Babylonian defeat and the exile of the leaders. The crisis when Jesus started his ministry was the Roman Empire and its dominance over the territories that were the Jewish homeland. Ched Myers, whose outstanding book *Binding the Strong Man* offers GREAT insights on the Gospel of Mark, wrote:

“Economic and political deterioration, especially in the decade prior to the upheavals of the Roman-Jewish war, had dispossessed significant portions of the Palestinian population, especially in the densely populated rural areas of Galilee. Disease and physical disability were an inseparable part of the cycle of poverty (a phenomenon still true today despite the advent of modern medicine). For the day laborer, illness meant unemployment and instant impoverishment.”¹

Our gospel passage today includes the first healing in the Gospel of Mark. Healing passages can make some of us squirm uncomfortably, they remind us that the Bible is an ancient text from a very different worldview, and sometimes that leads us to reasonable questions about how useful the Bible is to our formative identity stories anyway! Meyers proposes a helpful perspective on Biblical healings.

He thinks they're subversive! In Mark, this is the first one and it takes place on the Sabbath, so Jesus is starting trouble right from the get go. The last section of Mark 1, last week's Gospel, included exclamations of Jesus' authority. People were noticing that Jesus was wielding power usually held by the scribes. This is continuous in

today's passage. The scribes would have been part of the system of authority that called for the strict observance of the Sabbath, including refraining from healing. Jesus seems to care more about the people needing the healing than the authority of the scribes.

Meyer's thesis is this: "Jesus healing ministry is thus portrayed as an essential part of his struggle to bring concrete liberation to the oppressed and marginal of Palestinian society."² His insights are profound, but his language is often obscure so I'm going to try to summarize his perspective in my own words. This is an exercise that will result in a terrible lack of nuance and subtlety. I've footnoted his work so you can find it for yourself and regain that nuance. (His ideas are in this font.)

After Simon Peter's mother-in-law was healed and as soon as the sun went down, the masses arrived at the the door seeking healing. Jesus as healer was in high demand because many needed healing. Those many who needed healing were the poor and vulnerable. Often, those in need of healing had always been the poor and vulnerable, at times the need for healing itself had made people poor and vulnerable.

If we, as people of faith, try to focus on those needing healing from our 21st century eyes, we will look at the symptoms and the disease, and get distracted by our theories of healing. In doing so we can miss the symbolism that brings the greatest meaning. Illness isn't actually as simple as we moderns like to think of it. It is more than physical symptoms. Illness itself is perceived culturally and has cultural impacts. Of course, it impacts those around the one who is ill (family, friends, neighborhood, village) but it is also understood within the stories of the time and place. Stories form around particular illnesses, often quite potent ones. Worse yet, illness serves to distance the individual from their community!!

Understanding the stories of Jesus' healing requires us to enter into the perspective of illness from that time, and what it meant then. In that time and in that place, when a person was healed, their capacity to rejoin society was healed, which means those around them were also healed. This also meant that

those who had been considered “sick” or “impure” and thus on the bottom of the hierarchy of society were pulled up. The whole body of the community was healed and brought to wholeness, AND the hierarchy was disrupted when Jesus healed! In his healing, as in his teaching, the social order was ignored and messed with! :)

Furthermore, Meyers says that in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' healings are connected to the faith and action of the healed, the healing itself empowers and acknowledges the humanity of the healed! Healing empowers the disempowered, both culturally and through affirmation of their power.

Jesus healing is consistent with the rest of his ministry. It brings up the downtrodden, it diminishes the power of those who hold power, and it reverses the dominant social code!³

Thus, the stories of healings of Jesus served to reclaim God's identity, to disrupt the narratives of the Empire, and thus to restore the identity of the Palestinian people!

This all leads me to think about our stories, particularly our collective ones. We have stories of our communal identity as part of the United States, and as New Yorkers (actually I'm not sure how strong those are), as part of the Capital Region, and as part of Schenectady. We also have collective stories as monotheists, as followers of Jesus, as United Methodists (gee, that one is certainly undergoing crisis), as a part of Upper New York, and as First UMC Schenectady.

I'm wondering which sets of these stories are in good shape, helping us make sense of who we are and why it matters, giving us direction and hope! I'm wondering which sets of these stories are a bit outdated, needing minor edits to make a bit more sense of things. I'm also wondering which sets of stories are wildly out of wack, reflecting a bygone era and not helping us at all anymore.

Certainly in the recent past I've realized that the myths I held to be true of the United States as a place that welcomes and celebrates many kinds of people, and cares about the vulnerable and marginalized have been shaken to the core! So to have the stories of The United Methodist church following John Wesley's advice “if your heart is with my heart, give me your hand.” New stories are forming, even by their own power, to replace the ones that have lost their power.

We are in the midst of significant cultural and religious shifts, possibly seismic ones. Even the internet itself has changed reality so deeply that those of us who remember it coming into our lives are shocked! And that's only one piece. Many of our social and religious institutions are in crisis, which means they're in identity crisis. Their stories aren't up to date, their myths don't make sense of things anymore. It is time to let go of what isn't working, and that can be REALLY hard. It is also unsettling to be between functional myths!

I invite us all into reflection: What stories do you still find yourself telling? What do they mean to you? What stories have you recently let go of? Why? What stories are we adapting? Are we adapting well?

Our stories not only tell us who we are, they tell us who we think God is. Like Isaiah's brilliant work in chapter 40, we need to connect the stories to the past AND help them respond to our present. May we pay attention so that we might do so with grace. Amen

1Meyers, 144.

2Meyers, 144.

3Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1988, 2008), page 144-150.

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Rev. Sara E. Baron

First United Methodist Church of Schenectady

603 State St. Schenectady, NY 12305

Pronouns: she/her/hers

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