

Theology for Thinking People: The Bible
From Hebrews 11

One Labor Day weekend, maybe six or seven years ago, I decided to spend the day doing an urban hike in San Francisco. I walked some miles around the city, and I ended up in a diner somewhere south of Market Street for lunch. The restaurant was full of people, and the jukebox (or whatever acts like a jukebox these days) was playing, and a familiar song started. (*Don't Stop Believin'*) Pretty soon, everyone in the whole restaurant was singing this song along with the recording. How lovely, I thought. It's such a rare thing in our culture these days for everyone to know the same song, much less to break out in singing together in a restaurant.

It took me a while to realize that there were an awful lot of people in that restaurant wearing orange shirts. In fact (and this is the really embarrassing part) I didn't realize until sometime after I got home that day that that song by the group Journey—which I knew—was the anthem of Giants fans. No one told me!

And now you know how sports illiterate I am. (Sorry, Pastor Mark.)

But here's the point. It's a great song, and it is indeed a remarkable thing for people in a public place to spontaneously burst into song. But I missed the real point of that moment—the hopeful (and that year, as I recall, rather stubbornly hopeful) gathering of hundreds of SF Giants fans--because I didn't know the story that went with that song. The song, and the singing that day, had meaning because this was the soundtrack to a story of a community coming together around a baseball team, and its quest for a baseball championship.

Every community, every *people*, has a story that brings them together, glues them together. In the U.S. we tell a story about a feisty little revolution against a monarchy that had been an imperial power for hundreds of years. Your family, your ancestors, have a story that *your people* know. It might be about your birth, or how your parents met, how your people got to this place, something that happened one time on a summer vacation. It might make you laugh together, or it might draw you together around the memory of a particularly painful moment. Whatever it is, there is something powerful about your *shared* story. You tell it again and again to remind you of who you are, that no matter who you are as individuals, you are *this* together.

The Bible is our story. This is the story that binds Christians to one another. It tells us who we are in the world. Different kinds of Christians might understand the story differently. Sometimes we take even conflicting lessons from it. We identify with different characters, read into it different motivations, highlight some parts and ignore or explain away others—like we do with every story. But this is our story.

When you live inside the story, as most church people do, it's easy to lose sight of the story's larger contours. When we gather here for worship, we focus on a snapshot of a single moment, one small piece of the whole text. We rarely stand back and take in a larger perspective.

So in case you've forgotten, or maybe you've never heard it, let me remind you of how powerful—astounding, really—the arc of this narrative is.

This story is about a powerful, mystical being, a god, who created the universe as an act of self-expression, tender-hearted artistry. The Artist was pleased with everything about this creation, pronounced every part good—excellent even—at every step in the process. As a final act in the creative process, this god created living beings, capable of thinking for themselves. They resembled the Artist, but not entirely. They had their own creativity, made their own independent decisions. And generously, without calculation, this God gave his masterpiece to them. 'I'm leaving the work of my life in your hands,' God said. 'Take good care of it. I'll stay with you, but I trust you.'

Well, that was kind of a good decision, kind of not. Those humans kept getting in trouble, bolluxing things up. Sometimes they treated the earth badly. They often treated each other badly. And like a mother, their God stayed with them, never left them alone. When they got in a situation where others treated them like slaves, God created an escape path. When they enslaved other people with rigid rules and membership requirements and big sweeping statements about racial and ethnic and gender superiority, God sent messengers with human voices to say 'Stop it.' They got lost in the wilderness and God sent them food, one day at a time, to remind them to stay connected.

It was easy to forget the Artist was there, still creating, still believing that even with some spills and slashes, this thing he and the humans were working on was good, full of promise. God kept finding small ways to remind them: a burning bush, a dream, miracles like a meal for thousands cobbled out of a little bit of bread and a few fish. When they got lost, God found them and brought them home. Sometimes the humans argued with God and it felt like a wrestling match; one or the other of them would come out limping. God never gave up on them, never stopped seeing them through eyes focused on the goodness that was possible.

At one point God felt like he'd run out of ways to say 'I love you.' So God shrunk himself down into a being who looked just like the humans. Took a name like one of theirs; *Jesus* they called him. Jesus did what they do, lived like they live, felt the things they feel. Died just like they die. Absorbed the whole experience of being human, the full set of dangers we know: fear, sadness, worry, conflict that we just can't find our way around.

'Watch me,' Jesus said. And then he went straight into the hardships that human life is full of. He let anger and poverty and injustice come right up to him, do the worst they could do to him. Felt fear and pain and sadness and aloneness. And somehow, none of those things crushed him. In all the ways death and wrongness and ugliness seemed like they were going to be the end of the story, they weren't. Life surged through all of it, poked its head back up through every layer of wreckage. Life will always do that, the story says. In the end, all shall be well. Love will always win.

That's the cliff notes version of this book. The people in this story are *our people*. There are lots of chapters that make the story sharper and clearer than the way I just told it to you. There are other chapters that wander off in a different direction before they circle back to the main theme.

There are pieces of the story we don't talk about much, just like there are parts of my family's history I'm not so proud of.

Every religion has its own story. When you choose to be part of a particular tradition, or you hold onto the one you were born into, you find your place in *that story*.

I choose to be Christian, and to *stay* Christian, because *this* is the story I want my life to be attached to. My life is an extension of *this* story. I read this book because it helps me make sense of the things that happen to me: that little voice that keeps badgering me to love people I find it hard to understand, the course corrections that sting my pride and leave me limping, the improbable moments that might be resurrection. We internalize this story, take it in—sometimes through our heads and sometimes like bread and wine we simply swallow—and let this story re-describe the world to us. Let it shape us with its own wisdom, which is sometimes very different from the messages our culture takes for granted:

That bigger and more is always better.

That life is a series of transactions; you have to keep trading up.

That you are not enough as you are; you have to make something of yourself.

That there is never enough time.

Premature babies are often born with an irregular heartbeat. In an adult, an irregular heartbeat is treated with electric shock, but that treatment is too risky for a tiny baby. So for those infants, doctors sometimes prescribe something called *kangaroo care*, because it's based on what they've learned from kangaroos who carry their young close to their bodies. The baby, dressed only in a diaper, is placed tummy-to-tummy on the mother's or father's chest. The baby's head is turned so that an ear is just above the parent's heart. And then something magical happens. The less powerful vibrations of the child's heart begin to echo the rhythm of the parent's heart. When the baby gets cold, the parent's body temperature goes up, as if to warm the baby. What they've found is that babies get lots of long-term benefits from doing this: not only does their heartbeat regularize, but they sleep better, gain more weight, breathe better.

This phenomenon is called *entrainment*. It was discovered in 1665, by a Dutch physicist (Christopher Huygens). He put a whole bunch of grandfather clocks together in the same room and started their pendulums at different times. By the time he returned the next day, all the pendulums were swinging together. It was as if each of them had locked into the rhythm of the other clocks.

That's what we're doing when we read the Bible, and especially when we know by heart the stories that beat with the heart of God. We're putting our untrained ears up next to the rhythm, the soundtrack, of a story. Sometimes it will bring us comfort, and sometimes it will unsettle us. It will always turn us toward more love. It will remind us of who we are, and *whose* we are, until we become all that we were created to be.