

### *The Beginning of the Good News*

On my office wall, just to the right of my desk hangs an embroidery given to me a number of years ago by a dear friend. Barbara was a member of my first congregation and a mentor to me as I learned the art of pastoral care for those who are terminally ill.

It is a small piece of textile art, a cream-colored field with a circle in the middle with a shimmering dove carrying a red cord. Around the dove in Hebrew and in English is the word *shalom*. Barbara had given it to me because I had gotten in the habit of signing my name with the sign off, *shalom*.

I have drifted away from that practice, but it did, and does signify something deeper than our usual greetings. The rabbi of a neighboring congregation and I had appeared together on a radio program regarding the Iraq war and she had spoken so movingly of *shalom* being more than the mere absence of violence that I was moved to adopt it as a practice of greeting.

While we most often translate *shalom* as *peace*, it actually goes much deeper than that. *shalom* is the *deep peace* on which all of creation rests. It is so much more than the mere absence of violence. It is the presence of God's desired "balanced well-being" of creation.

So, Barbara, a great lover of all things antique and unusual, had taken note of my new-found practice and on her annual trip to Maine where she spent her summers she was poking around a shop, and she spotted this embroidery.

She went to the shop owner, because, like any good antiquer, she loved the story behind things, and asked about it.

She said to the shopkeeper, "This is for my pastor, because he signs his name *shalom*, but how did you come to have it here in this shop?"

"Well, what did he say," I asked her.

"First," she said, "It didn't look like this when I got it. It was terribly damaged, but the *shalom* was in pretty good condition. It had what appeared to be fire damage around the edges, and so I had to take to a textile restorer in Greensboro and they cleaned it and they had to trim off the damaged portions and stretched it into the frame and preserved it."

I was already deeply touched by the gift, but she went on, "The textile preserver told me it wasn't worth very much – that really value of it would reside in the frame because it wasn't from a known maker and it is most certainly less than a hundred years old."

"It's beautiful, but why did you go to so much effort?" I asked.

“I’m getting there,” she continued. “So, the shopkeeper said, ‘I got it by way of an estate sale. I can’t really keep everything that I find of sentimental value in my business, so I’m just selling it for what it’s worth, which isn’t very much. But what you need know about it is that it came from the estate of a rabbi who had come here to retire, and that particular scrap was part of a much larger banner that had hung in the synagogue he served. The synagogue was burned and most of the banner was destroyed, but the dove and the surrounding area survived. The rabbi salvaged it and carried it into the new synagogue when it was rebuilt. They gave it to him when he retired. He had no heirs, and I couldn’t bear for it to be sold for rag.’”

So, Barbara concluded, “Because of the story behind it, I knew I had to preserve it.”

How quickly scraps become important because of stories.

How quickly something insignificant becomes significant because of *stories*.

Stories enrich our lives and enrich our relationships.

We are not a huge church, but we’re not a small church either, so I’m sure that all of our members don’t know one another, and to be honest, the pandemic has certainly thrown a wrench into our efforts to get to know one another. I miss the easy ways we would encounter one another on a Sunday morning, or even throughout the week, just by being in the building together, because the more we intentionally engage one another, the deeper and richer our relationships become.

That is true of churches.

That is true of marriages and partnerships.

That is true of friendship.

That is true of communities.

That is true of the world.

How much deeper and richer life is when we engage the fullness of each other’s stories!

I’ve thought of that quite a bit over the past year with all of the experiences that we’ve all shared together this year: The pandemic, the protests, the election.

I’ve observed through media and social media a broad disagreement that seems to be wedged into culture.

There are, to my eye, folks who look at what is happening and are quite sure that there is something deeply wrong and they know exactly what needs to change.

There, again, to my eye, a great number of folks who simply do not know what to believe, not out a lack of empathy, but because the way we consume news has created sides. Many folks have a deep sense that something is wrong with where we are, but they are not sure what to do about it.

And finally, to my eye, there are those who are quite certain of their views and see nothing wrong, and anyone who does see something wrong as an obstacle to be overcome.

But we're not meant to divide into camps. That's not שלום.

But stories make the difference, don't they?

I have learned through the years that you cannot hijack someone else's story. Only they can tell it.

Your experiences are not mine, and vice versa. But we can tell one another.

There's something redemptive, I expect, about the sharing of stories.

Think of our text from Isaiah today. *Comfort, O comfort my people, says the Lord. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.*

What music, what art, has been inspired by these words!

They stand at a pivot point in Isaiah's prophecy. As Megan reminded us last week, Isaiah is really three different books, they can be caricatured "bad things are going to happen, bad things are happening, and bad things happened."

Right here in the fortieth chapter, we've moved from "bad things are going to happen" into "bad things happening are happening."

It is to that moment that the Israelites need a word of hope. They need to remember their *story* in order to know that God is with them.

It is only within that story of their whole life together and God's constancy with the Hebrews in slavery in Egypt, God's constancy with the Israelites in the Wilderness, God's covenant constancy to David and his people that these words really make much sense at all.

But within that story of God's providing care, these words come: *he will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

That's שלום.

I don't know about you, but I could stand to see some שלום.

In the middle of the broken שלום comes the reminder that God's ongoing story with us isn't over. Surely that's good news?

But it can't be good news for just some folks. It has to be good news for everyone. Otherwise, it's not good news.

As I was musing over these things and thinking about שלום, what a difference it would make when our stories are shared?

Do you remember the so-called *beer summit* at the White House a number of years ago? It was a meeting between Professor Henry Louis Gates, Sergeant James Crowley and the former president and vice president.

I remember that it largely came about because of an off-hand remark about sharing a beer and I also remember that the media either gave it positive press or considered it an utter fiasco, depending on which news source one consulted, but that's not where I'm going with this.

I really am not concerned about what the president and the vice-president had to say at the event or really even that it was held at the White House. What strikes me about it is that two people who could have stayed at odds with one another, neither of whom looks back on their first interaction with gladness, heard something more of each other's story.

That is not easy.

Honestly, that takes an intentional change of heart.

The beginning of Mark's gospel account has always struck me as abrupt. He starts simply, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ."

No verbs, just a declarative statement.

But then Mark moves immediately into a story of honesty and change. John the Baptist appears inviting people to repent – well, more hollering at them – but the point remains that how they are isn't how they're stuck. They can change. The Greek word for repentance means changing your mind. The Hebrew word is simpler, it just means turn around.

John is standing out in the water inviting all who will come to let the story change.

The story can change.

Sometimes I wonder if that isn't what Mark is driving at when he tells the Gospel story. You see, John starts it off with a promise of a baptism of the Holy Spirit which we never see, and then the Gospel ends abruptly with women leaving the empty tomb and going and telling no one – I wonder if, between the lines of the gospel, Mark is fairly yelling, "The story can change." In God's power, the story can change. The lame can be healed, the demons can be cast out, the dead can rise, and broken *שְׁלוֹם* can be restored.

God's good *שְׁלוֹם* can be restored. Indeed, by the sharing of stories and lives, we begin the repair of God's *שְׁלוֹם*, of which Christ has already assured us the final outcome.

Once again, this time of year, we can hear the beginning of the good news. But let it not be then, the *end* of the good news.

Once again, we hear a familiar story. Even folks that come to church only twice a year know this story really well. I suppose if you're only hearing two bible stories, it *is* pretty easy to remember them.

But think of it: the whole sweep of redemption history is wrapped up in those two bible stories: of God becoming incarnate and entering our story, and of Jesus's resurrection and our invitation into God's ongoing story of redemption.

We are all invited into the story of redemption and restoration of broken *שְׁלוֹמ*.

It starts where confession ends. It starts when we commit to be the body of Christ. It starts anywhere stories are shared and breaches are healed.

Isn't that the better story, the one where we come to understand one another more, the one where forgiveness heals estrangement?

Because in this beloved community, to which our savior calls us, all our stories are known by God, all our stories are valued by God, and all our stories are loved by God.

Mark tells us this is the beginning of the good news. God has set the stage for us in the great redemption drama that plays out year after year, decade after decade, Advent to Easter and back again, every year, over and over, as long as it takes.

It's the beginning of the good news. God has drawn near to us.

The next step is ours.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.