

As we come to the end of our series of ‘Words with Baggage,’ it was commented to me that this is a series that we can visit and revisit over and over, because there are so many words that carry baggage in the Christian walk of life. I think they’re right, I have a 310-page dictionary of theological terms on my bookshelf; I’m sure we could find a few more. This exercise I think, is helpful in reviewing and re-viewing some of these words that we may occasionally take for granted or assume a meaning.

Today’s word, Gospel, I don’t think has too much baggage, but I think it is one of those words that we use without thinking too much about its meaning. I would imagine if I looked over my shoulder at the word cloud, I would see Good News as one of the words that comes to mind when we hear the word Gospel. And you wouldn’t be wrong.

The Greek word for Gospel, *euaggelion*, roughly translates to good news. What really caught my attention as I did a little word work this week was to find that the word Gospel also has origins in the Anglo-Saxon, specifically the word godspell, and if your mind went to a certain 1970s Broadway musical, I wouldn’t blame you. However, when translating the Anglo-Saxon, to more familiar English, we get a good story. And I don’t know about you, but I like it and it that makes my imagination soar.

To think about what we read in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the Good Story certainly makes me think differently about these books of the Bible; these stories of Jesus. The story of Jesus is certainly a Good Story. But that’s not all. Jesus also claims that he is on earth; dwelling with creation; to preach, to share, to teach *the* Good Story.

So what is this Good Story that Jesus is talking about? As I read the Luke passage, Jesus is quite specific about what the Good Story is. He says in vs. 43 “I must preach the good news [i.e. gospel, Good Story] about God’s kingdom...” What I find refreshing is that Jesus is sent to inspire, Jesus is sent to give us something to strive for, something to capture our imaginations, Jesus wants to share with us a picture of what God intends creation to be, to coin a phrase I’ve used before, Jesus wants to share with us God’s dream.

And we’ve had several descriptions of what folk in scripture imagine God’s dream to be like.

While we often consider the story presented in the book of Genesis to be our creation story, I think it’s also a story about God’s dream. In it, we’re presented with an idyllic setting. God walks and wanders among humankind, in fellowship with *all* of God’s creation. I love the intimate image that is presented of how God and creation interact; of how God and humanity. Eden was, God was not a disembodied voice. God walked with and talked with humanity in the Garden of Eden. In some respects, Eden was heaven on earth. And in some ways, I imagine God’s dream, the kingdom of God, to be a desire to return to this pastoral setting. To return creation to what God originally intended.

Moving on, Isaiah is most notable for his vivid images. In one instance, Isaiah describes it as residing on the highest of mountains, high enough for all to see, and people will stream to it. There they will find God, present to everyone. God will help settle disputes, and ultimately, it will be a kingdom of peace, because swords will be turned into iron plows, spears into pruning tools, and war will be no more. This is Isaiah’s vision of the Mountain of God.

Later on, Isaiah describes for us God’s dream as the peaceable kingdom. Made famous by the many paintings of Quaker artist, Edward Hicks, the Peaceable Kingdom describes an upsetting of the rules of creation, the wolf and the lamb lay down together, the child plays by the hole of the snake. The

cow and the bear graze side by side, and the lion eats straw. God's dream is a place without the violence and destruction that the misplaced love of Sin creates.

And in the New Testament, the apostle John of Patmos, at the end of his vision in the book of Revelation, offers us a picture of the New Jerusalem. A time and place where heaven descends and unites with Creation. There is life, and it is for all people, it is a place where humankind and God dwell side-by-side, face-to-face. Sorrow has no place here, and it is the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenant, "I will be their God, and they will be my people."

As I think of these images of God's Dream, I see a common thread. That in God's dream that I see is that it is an image of creation and God reunited. It's an image of God and creation dwelling together. That the divide between God and creation doesn't exist.

The Good Story that Jesus is telling is about God's dream, showing us how to live, to help bring that dream into reality. The story that Jesus tells is one of God's abounding love, a love that goes so far that God is willing to die for God's creation. The story that Jesus is telling is that God's dream is one where war, conflict, turmoil, and agony, where worry and loss, where the chains, literal and figurative, that bind humankind, are no more. The story that Jesus is telling is that God's dream is for all who will listen and follow God's way. This is a Good Story, a *tov* story, *tov* being the Hebrew for good, a good that only God can be. This is God's story that Jesus is telling. And the Good story that we tell is that we have seen this in Jesus, in his life, in his teachings, in his death, and in his resurrection, and we see what difference it can make.

We've drawn on these images from scripture to try and inspire. And they offer us a macro image, the big picture image of what God dreams. Common themes include joy, celebration, and fellowship, justice, and peace, inclusion and a reversal of our human exceptions, that it's eternal. But I wonder, how might we talk about it today? How might we share this story today?

For some, the image of a place of peace and a place of justice is extremely attractive. For others, it's the sense of inclusion and welcome. And for others yet, it's that feeling of comfort and that connection with God is attractive. So how do we tell this story?

For me, when I think about God's dream, it's not something that I can figure out in my head; for me, it's a feeling. The sentiment that I often feel, the sentiment that excites me in these images of God's dream, is a sort of "everything is just right."

And I believe that we can catch glimpses of God's dream in our everyday lives. I believe that in these glimpses, we experience moments where God's dream seems attainable. We might talk about these as moments of closeness to god, liminal moments as our mystics might suggest. But I think these are glimpses of God's dream. I think for myself it's the times when I've been able to pause and say, "This might be what it feels like." That I've caught a glimpse of God's dream.

When I think about it, I've felt it in moments when I've found myself lost in a hymn at large church gatherings, surrounded by colleagues and friends. This is why songs like "My Soul Cries Out" and more recently "Mountain of God" sing to my soul.

It's felt it in moments when we've hosted friends and family around a dinner table, and hearing the laughter, joy and conversation. The food is abundant, the fellowship is rich, and the joy and celebration are palpable.

It's noticed it in quiet moments of sitting with Chloe on my lap, reading stories. Moments of tranquillity, moments of stillness and peace, feeling settled. It's been moments of zooming across a frozen snow snow-covered lake, released of worry.

One might say I've felt God in these times, but I'm more want to say that these, for me, have been moments where God's Dream feels closer. God's dream is both macro and micro. It is both a big picture and close to home. It is grand, and it can small and detailed, just like God's creation.

And so I want to introduce a second word with baggage briefly, this one may carry a lot more baggage, Evangelism. You may have noticed earlier when talking about the root word for God's Story, another word was feeling really close. Both God's story and Evangelism share the same root. It literally means *sharing* the Good Story, and I think it behooves us to ponder how it is that we are sharing this Good Story, how we are evangelizing this gospel. What are we doing to tell this story?

I think we can talk about it as literally using our words, like I did a few moments ago, sharing how I notice small glimpses of God's Good Story. That's one way. What are other ways that we might talk to both one another and to others about this Good Story that we're a part of? How might we share how we experience this? How might we talk about how it changes how we look at the world and what's happening in it?

Words are one way, but I would imagine that we're probably much more comfortable allowing our actions to speak louder than our words. We are, after all, the quiet in the land, so to speak. So, what are our actions saying about God's Good Story? How are our actions telling God's Good Story?

In my letter this past week, I wrote that the church is sometimes talked about as the light on the hill. That's in some ways we're called to be a place of inspiration and aspiration. However, more often than naught, rather than being that inspiration and aspiration, the church is reacting to what's happening in the world. How might we tell God's Good Story with our actions in a way that inspires others and offers a vision for others to aspire to? A vision that includes the elements of peace, justice, inclusion, hope, wholeness, restoration, healing, community and belonging that we experience in our walk with God. How might we become that light on the hill for others? I have a few ideas.

As Anabaptist Mennonites, we believe that this good story has implications for how we live our lives. We believe that God's Good Story is not just a story that has happened, but rather, believe that it's an ongoing story. One friend of mine suggested that perhaps we need to tear the back cover off of our Bibles because God's Good Story isn't finished. We believe that God's Good Story is still unfolding today, and we are participants in this chapter of God's Good Story.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good Story of Jesus Christ. The Gospel that Jesus shared is God's Good Story of God's dream. God's Good Story is a dream of God and humanity dwelling together. It's a story of peace, justice, hope, healing, and ultimately about love. Our calling is to live into this Good Story and to share it, evangelize it; to tell this Good Story, whether it be by word or deed. And our challenge is to decide how we tell this Good Story.

Amen

Sending Blessing

Go now,
 knowing you are beloved by God,

Go now,
 praising God for the Good Story
 in Jesus Christ.

Go now,
 living the story
 of God's grace, peace and love.

Go in peace to love and serve God,
Amen