

## ***In Which We Leave the Story***

Gen. 3: 22-24; Rev. 21: 1-5

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### **I. Introduction**

The last chapter of *The House at Pooh Corner* is entitled, “In which Christopher Robin and Pooh come to an enchanted place and we leave them there.” The heart of the story is about Christopher Robin growing up and getting ready to go to school, and he doesn't know exactly what that's going to mean but he knows somehow that his relationship with all of the animals of the forest is about to change and they know that, too. So, it's a story about how to say goodbye.

We've been spending this month of January with Winnie the Pooh and we do something analogous to this every January where we spend a month with a way of exploring the Gospel that might be a little bit more welcoming to those folks that don't have a church background and it gives those of us who are regular a chance to hear the gospel in some different ways. We started the month off talking about how we place ourselves in the story and see it through new eyes in that way and we're ending the month reflecting on how we leave stories and what that means.

### **II. Revisiting stories**

We all have stories that shaped us as we were growing up, stories that helped us understand the world in some different ways and helped us understand our place in the world in some different ways. And many of our January sermon series have explored those stories that had been formative for us. We've looked at *Les Misérables*, we've looked at *The Wizard of Oz*, we've looked at *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, *Dr. Seuss*. And it's tempting sometimes to engage those stories as sort of a trip down memory lane, sort of a chance to get nostalgic about remembering what it was like to read those growing up or have them read to us growing up. And that's certainly appropriate.

But I want to suggest that what's really happening as we re-engage those stories is that those were the places where we learned our archetypal language, what it really meant to be in the world. They're the stories that taught us what wrong and right looked like, they're the stories that helped us understand what friendship was about, they're the stories that helped us understand the power of sacrificial love and how that transforms lives. I find myself on a fairly regular basis going back to revisit those stories, to remember those really formative ideas for me. Because as we grow older and get sort of caught up in the dailiness of life, it's easy to forget those messages that were so important in forming us and sometimes get a little bit distant with time. But I also find myself as I engage those stories finding new messages because I'm different than I was when I read them originally and all great stories grow

as we grow so that we can start to understand their messages in different ways as we become older.

### **III. Re-encountering God's story**

That, of course, is also true of the story of scripture and God's great story in which we are a part. This is why we go back to those same passages over and over again and they never get tired because they're always new. Every Christmas we read the narrative of the birth again and every Easter we read the story of the cross and the resurrection. But hopefully if we're not just checked out, we hear them in different ways, because every time we encounter those stories, we encounter them from a different place. We're different people and therefore the words are speaking to us in a different way.

It's easy when our liturgist gets up and starts reading from Genesis. I remember what you read. I was listening. Or read those wonderful words from Revelation. And it's easy to just sort of let them wash over us because we've heard them many, many times. But every time we hear them, God is seeking to speak a word to us that God has not spoken before. Because we're different people, we hear those words in different ways and they have different things to say to us. The great Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, used to say that you can't step in the same river twice, because the next time you step in, it's a different river. Every time we engage these stories, we engage them as different people, and therefore God has a new word to speak to us through them if we're listening carefully.

We see that also in the text itself that we heard this morning. This first story from Genesis is about our expulsion from paradise, our being kicked out of the Garden of Eden because of our disobedience. But the narrative of scripture doesn't keep looking back at that wondrous place where we were created and first entered into relationship with God. Our Revelation passage is not about going back to paradise. It's about the new paradise that God creates for us because we're not the same people anymore. So, God is doing a new thing. God is always doing a new thing and inviting us to be part of that.

### **IV. We never actually leave the story**

And as we look backwards in remembrance of that wonderful picture of Eden and as we look forward to the new heaven and the new earth that God is calling into being, we start to realize all of a sudden that we are right now in the middle of that story, that's our story, and we are part of what is going on, we are part of what God is doing in the story. But again, we don't always pay attention. We let the dailiness of living cloud out the story so that it seems sometimes a little bit less real, a little bit less important. Life's dailiness makes Pooh a charming story to re-engage but not necessarily fodder for our formation. It makes scripture a topic for academic exploration rather than being the place where we hear God speaking to us right now in this moment. So, I think what we have is an invitation to pay attention, to be mindful of

the story as it is unfolding right now where we are living. To pay attention to the fact that God's story continues to shape us and we continue to shape it as the story moves forward. It means that God's story is always ongoing, that God's revelation is always ongoing. It doesn't stop. God's revelation did not stop when the canon was fixed in the 4th Century. God's revelation continues to unfold and we're part of that.

The great comedienne, Gracie Allen, in the last letter that she wrote to her husband, George Burns said, "Never put a period where God has put a comma." I like that, "Never put a period where God has put a comma." And the United Church of Christ picked up that theme and made it part of a campaign that they had against Biblical fundamentalism by saying that God is still speaking, God is always speaking if we're listening carefully.

God's story continues to be written and we are invited to be part of the writing as we pay attention to where the Holy Spirit moves among us. In his wonderful little book, *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff writes, "The Pooh books come to an end in the enchanted place at the top of the forest but we can go there anytime. It's not far away. It's not hard to find. Because the enchanted place is right where you are. And if you're friendly with bears, you can find it."

## **V. Conclusion**

Great stories always shape us. They shape how we understand the world, and inevitably and poignantly, they also always come to an end.

Jean Valjean dies peaceably in Cosette's arms. Frodo sails off to the undying land. Harry Potter becomes an adult. But those stories continue to live in us. It continued to shape who we are as we seek to be faithful to God's call. They live in us and our lives are infinitely richer when we re-visit them from time to time.

At the end of the Pooh story, Christopher Robin says, "Pooh, if I'm not quite --," he stopped again and tried, "Pooh, whatever happens, you will understand, won't you?" "Understand what?" says Pooh. "Oh, nothing." Christopher Robin laughed and he jumped to his feet, "Come on." "Where?" said Pooh. "Anywhere," said Christopher Robin. So, they went off together but wherever they go and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place at the top of the forest, a little boy and his bear will always be playing.

Amen.