

THE RECOVERY OF THE THIRD NARRATIVE
A Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2009.
Text: John 8:31-39

"If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

This Sunday, instead of preaching on the appointed lessons, which I have already done twice here at Bethlehem, I'm going to give a short lecture on Lutheranism.

What is Lutheranism?

Lutheranism is a project which exists for the sake of the whole church. The project is this: the Recovery of the Third Narrative.

The Third Narrative is not the exclusive property of the Lutherans. But Lutherans have a great interest in the Third Narrative, because it is what got us thrown out of the party back in the 16th century. We keep hoping that the whole church will wake up to the Third Narrative, so that we can all be together again.

What is the Third Narrative?

Let me tell you first about the First and the Second Narratives.

The narratives I am talking about are narratives that are found in the Bible.

The First Narrative may be summed up like this: God made people to belong to him, and to be good. People did wrong. God said, "Stop it!" People stopped, and God blessed them; or people didn't stop, and God whacked them. End of narrative.

The First Narrative becomes our narrative like this: God made us to be good. We have done evil. God has told us to stop it. If we stop, he will bless us. If we don't, he will whack us. End of narrative.

There are thousands of instances of the First Narrative in the Bible. For example, the Flood. God saw they were doing evil. They wouldn't stop. God whacked them. And there are millions of instances of the First Narrative in the contemporary world. They are harder to see, but maybe we feel them. We stop being bad, we start being good, and God is good to us. End of narrative.

The Second Narrative is more nuanced. It is also found in the Bible, in many places. The Second Narrative goes something like this: God made people to believe in him, to trust him, to love him, in short, to be his people. Loving and trusting in him, people would love and take care of one another.

But people stopped believing in God, and started believing in themselves, or in the things of the world. God told people to stop this and believe in him. They tried, sometimes they succeeded to a certain extent, but sometimes they just pretended, doing all sorts of worship-type things and paying empty homage to God while continuing to live for themselves. If people started believing in him and loving one another from the heart, God rewarded them. If not, God whacked them.

Again, there are hundreds of instances in the Scriptures of the Second Narrative. The Second Narrative gets to the root of our problems, because it points to the heart, which is not visible, and says that inside the heart is where the problem is. But in the Second Narrative, it is still up to us to make the changes that will bring God's blessing and forestall his whacking, his wrath.

To review:

First Narrative is about people's behavior. Do this, don't do that. God will bless or curse you accordingly.

Second Narrative is about what's in your heart. Feel this way, want this, don't desire that. Love this, hate that. God will bless you or curse you accordingly.

The Third Narrative is radically different from the First and Second Narratives. It is so different that a lot of Christians kind of miss it. In Luther's day, it was not getting played very often.

The Third Narrative is also found in Scripture, and it goes something like this:

God made us to be good, to love him and love one another. But we didn't. We made a hash of it. So God blessed us by saving us. Up front. While we still deserved whacking, and before we deserved blessing. He intervened already, and conferred goodness and blessing upon us. *And then*, well, it's kind of complicated. Faith in God means we *believe* that he has redeemed us already; and then, because of that faith, we live differently with God and with other people.

In the Third Narrative, God doesn't wait until after we do things to bless us or whack us according to how good we've been. He blesses us up front. He brings the ending up into the middle.

Let me give you an example of how this works, in a Biblical narrative. The most important one in the Old Testament.

The children of Israel were all messed up in Egypt. They didn't worship right, or do much of anything right. They didn't even have 10 Commandments yet. But God didn't just whack them night and day. Instead, God was proactive. He rescued them *first!* Before they had done anything to deserve it, just because he is that kind of God, he sent his Moses in to make old Pharaoh let his people go. And it took more than a week to make them his people. But the power in the people of Israel, from that day to now, is the power of God who acted first. He didn't wait till the end of the narrative—he started it rolling with an act of salvation.

The prior-ness of God's blessing is what gets missed, when people read the Bible and find only the First and Second Narratives. They think they have to make themselves better, so that God will be good to them. They act like they don't know that God has already given his final blessing to them.

Now, we are not part of the Hebrew people, so the power of the Exodus does not work in us. We are more closely related to Pharaoh, probably. The ones who got whacked. But we *are*, by our baptism, a part of another Narrative, the Third Narrative whose lead character is Jesus Christ. God's sending Jesus Christ his Son to be our Savior was just like God's sending Moses to save a people who were not yet worth saving, in order to *make* them worth saving.

Luther recovered the Third Narrative with his teaching, and he insisted that only in the Third Narrative is the Gospel really good news. The Third Narrative is the key to interpreting the Bible as Christians. Lutheranism says he was right. We still try to read the Bible in such a way as to see that in the Bible's decisive narrative, about Jesus, God's love was in no way contingent upon our prior good behavior *or* our prior good intentions. *God is just that good.*

In today's Gospel, Jesus told the Judeans who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And in conclusion he said, "If the Son *makes* you free, you will be free indeed."

Where is the action? What is it that makes us blessed? The Word of God, Jesus Christ himself, is the source of our freedom and blessedness. We do not make ourselves free, we do not make ourselves blessed. God does. God has, by his Son. So, we *are* free. By grace. And faith is not a feeling we gin up in ourselves, in order to make God happy. Faith is simply the dawning in our hearts that we are blessed to be living within the Third Narrative, in which we are already righteous and holy and blessed, and have peace with God.

The church needs to be careful. When the First Narrative dominates its preaching and life, it's all about whether we are behaving the way we should, and getting everyone else to behave.

When the Second Narrative is dominant in the preaching and life of the church, which is actually an improvement on the First, then it's all about our feelings, our heart, our desires, and getting those things right, as well as making everyone else love everyone else.

The Lutheran Reformation stood for this: not that the First and Second Narratives are absent from Scripture, or totally wrong (they actually are quite effective in other parts of our life); but that the Good News is not a form of them but a radically different thing. God is gracious and merciful, and in his mercy has acted "while we were yet sinful," to make us what he wants us to be. We are saved by his grace, and we are made right or justified by our faith in that grace.

What Reformation means today is that the church keeps correcting itself when it slides into First- and Second-Narrative ways of thinking and acting. It does this by recalling that *everything Christians do as Christians we do as a response, not to a requirement, but to a gift.*

We do not get baptized in order to meet the baptism requirement, but in response to Christ's dying for us.

We do not attend Communion to meet the communing requirement, but as a response to God's gracious gift of his Son.

We do works of mercy and kindness not to check them off a list of things we must do, but as a response to the good God has done.

We even give gifts to the church not because it is required, but because of our gratitude to God for his generosity to us.

That's Reformation, today. Recovering the Third Narrative as our own story and our church's story. Amen.