

Behold the Lamb of God

Part 1: The True Tall Tale

TEXT: DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9 (ESV)



(About the Art: by Abby Mangan, commissioned for Oak Hills Presbyterian Church's 2009 Christmas Celebration)

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An Old Tale

Early in the Old Testament, God told His people to tell and retell to their children the story of how He saved them from slavery in Egypt. (Deut. 6:20-25) In this, we are reminded that while our redemption in Christ is set in doctrinal truths, they are anchored in an old, old story—an amazing and true tall tale. The aim of this series is to tell that story. Often I weave story and application throughout my sermons. Here I'm going to devote the majority of my sermons to telling stories from Scripture which point to the need for and promised coming of Christ.

Since this may “feel” different, I want to explain my reasons for this structure here at the start so you can know I am not trying to come up with some new way of preaching. Those who know me know I am generally wary of novelty for novelty's sake. Nor do I accept for one minute that I, as a preacher, need to innovate in order to make Scripture relevant to my hearers. The Bible is and forever will be relevant. So here are 5 reasons why I want to approach Christmas by way of story this year.

- **FIRST, PRECEDENT:** Scripture gives precedent for story-telling as proclamation. The Bible is mostly narrative—or story.
- **SECOND, POETRY:** the Psalms, which are poetry, rely heavily on imagery from the stories of the Patriarchs, Exodus and the Conquest. To understand the beauty and content of the poetry of Scripture, you need to know the stories behind them.
- **THIRD, PARABLE:** Through His continual use of parables, we see Jesus relied heavily on story-telling to reveal God's truths.
- **FOURTH, POWER:** Stories have power. Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount with a story: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” (Matt 7:27) Surely Jesus said this with dramatic effect.
- **FIFTH, PLEASURE:** Stories are fun. Especially stories with a happy ending where the hero saves the day. Christmas is nothing if not that kind of story. Children know stories are fun. This is why they ask grown-ups to tell them. The problem is grown-ups are often so busy with our grown-up lives that we're missing all the fun. So I make no apology for the fact that I hope and pray that as we hear these stories from Scripture, we will all, young and old, enjoy the true tall tale of the coming of Christ, and that our celebration of Christmas might be marked by our worship of Jesus.

Behold the Lamb of God

In the Gospel according to John, when Jesus approaches John the Baptist, John cries out “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” (Jn 1:29) Two words in that doxology of praise pull us deep into the Old Testament story. **FIRST**, John calls Jesus the Lamb of God. Why does John liken Jesus to a lamb, of all animals? We need the Old Testament to understand that—but when we have that story, we not only understand the comparison, we also learn His reason for coming—to die.

SECOND, John cries “Behold!” Why? Because the Lamb of God is standing right there on the banks of the Jordan. He is not some phantom or an idea or a geographic boundary line. He is a person, there for the world to see, to touch, to hear, to embrace. *Really.* And what does beholding get us? The reminder that the story of God's redemption is a true story.

Today's we jump into the story already underway, and we find God's instruction to His people to cling to the story of God's redemption, binding it to our heads and hands, so that it would be prominent in our face-to-face relationships and our work; writing it on our doorposts and gates so we see it coming and going. Let's read the text and then hear the story.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁴“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The True Tall Tale

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord your God is one. Love Him. Love Him with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Since just after their exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel began their worship with these words known as the *S'hema* (the Hebrew word for “Hear!”). But this wasn't some detached decree to render affection to an unknown deity. This was a command to remember. They were to rehearse in their minds and hearts and homes a story—their story. It was a story still unfolding, but underway enough to know that the Lord their God was one in number and in nature, and that the only proper way to respond to His dealings with them was to love Him with everything that they had and everything that they were.

This was different. At that time, most of the world bowed in worship to a host of idols and spirits, each with the power to bless or to curse. Under the plan of appeasing these gods in order to coax from them their favor while keeping their fury at bay, the entire pagan world had fashioned a tapestry of religious observance, interweaving the warp of the moods and demands of the gods with the woof of the tributes and rituals of man.

The people lived in fear of these gods who could lavish great prosperity upon their households, but could also scorch the earth beneath their feet. But these were not Israel's God. The nature of Israel's God was definite, His character immutably fixed. The only reasonable response to this was to love Him. But this wasn't just lore. This was history—an unbroken chain of actions and consequence, one following the other weaving together a binding blend of narrative and Law that said if this is the nature of your God, love Him with all you have & are. ^(Lk 10:27)

The people of Israel were to nail this Law to the doorposts of their homes that they might remember it in their comings and goings. ^(Deut 6:9) They were to bind it to their arms, that it might guide whatever work they set their hands to. They were to lash it to their foreheads that it might be the focus of every conversation and face to face relationship they knew. ^(Deut 6:8)

They were never to depart from this harmony of story and statute. They were to take it and teach it to their families. They were to recount the mighty deeds of their almighty God, never stopping until the story was so ingrained in their children that they would be able to tell it well when they had children of their own. They were to tell their children, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord your God is one. Love Him with all your heart, soul and might."

This relational response of love to a singular, omnipotent God was so gloriously uncommon in those days that it must have sounded to many like a tall tale. And it was. Only it is a true tall tale. Woven throughout the story are wrath, greed, lust, gluttony, sloth, envy and pride—together in force with all their consequences. But shooting through that darkness shines the bright rays of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. ^(Gal 5:22) Will darkness prevail in the end, or will light overcome the darkness? ^(Jn 1:5)

It is a story of people living between wandering & homecoming, transgression & grace. Every mortal in the story needs rescue, but "they have all turned aside; there is none who does good, not even one." ^(Psalm 14:3) Still, after clearing away all the layers of intrigue, conflict and suspense, this tale is not ultimately a story about mere mortals. It is a story of divine love.

The Law of the Lord is a love story. It is the story of the one true God calling a people His beloved, though for their part they had only lived in perpetual rebellion against Him. They were not meant to live this way. Still, they did. Though their lives were a ruin of their own making, God swore a covenant oath to redeem them. Everything wrong with the world He would put right. He would remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh, putting a new spirit within them. ^(Ezk 11:19) He would never, ever stop loving them. ^(1 Chron. 16:34)

The Beginning of the Story

To understand why God would keep such a people and love them with such a perfect, patient love and to see how He would redeem them in the end, one must go all the way back to the beginning of this story. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. All was right with the world. Eden was the first couple's to enjoy—every part except one tree in the middle, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned them, "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." ^(Gen 2:17) This was before death had entered the world. But before long, the tempter came in the form of a serpent. Every word spoken so far had been as honest as it was earnest. But there in the garden, the serpent spoke a sentence, subtle and slow, setting up a slippery slope of uncertainty and suspicion.

"You will not surely die. God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like Him, knowing good and evil." ^(Gen 3:4-5)

The woman reached for the fruit and saw it did look good for eating. ^(Gen 3:6) She raised it to her lips and took a bite. Her husband did as well. Though they couldn't hear it, as they broke the surface of the fruit all of creation groaned. Lust, shame, fear, guilt, mistrust and blame-shifting rushed into their hearts and as if waking up from a deep sleep, they saw for the first time they were naked. It was humiliating. So they made coverings out of fig leaves. The first lovers believed the first lie and woke to the first moment of shame. Was redemption amid this wreckage?

When God came walking in the cool of the day, the man & woman did something else they'd never done before. They hid. God found them hiding and clothed. They told Him what they'd done and how the serpent had deceived them. Still it was they who ate the fruit and broke the only Law God had given. And this broke them. They couldn't undo what they had done. If they were to be put right with God, God Himself would have to be the One to do it. Would they die? If so, would death ever be defeated? God's response in that moment would tell the tale.

God spoke an ominous word of finality to the deceiver: one would come from the woman and though the serpent would strike at his heel, this one would crush his head. ^(Gen 3:15) It was an image rich in irony—the scheme of the deceiver to destroy the offspring of the woman would end in the devil's own defeat. The serpent would nip at this man's heel only to end up crushed and powerless beneath the weight of it. ^(Gen 3: 15)

God told the man and woman life would be hard. They would have children and begin to fill the earth. Their descendants would be numbered like the stars. But every last one of them would struggle in some measure from the cradle to the grave—heirs to their first parents' sin. Coming into this world would be a struggle. Living in this world would be a struggle. Leaving this world would be a struggle. Would it end? Would the offspring of the woman the Lord spoke of be a real person? Would He overcome the deceiver? Would He overcome the world? ^(Jn 16:33)

Generations later, centuries deeper into the unfolding true tall tale, Israel would enter worship to the reminder that the Lord is their God. They have no power to possess Him. He possesses them. He is One—the same yesterday, today, forever. ^(Heb 13:8) That they remain under His covenant promise as recipients of His Law tells them God has not left them to perish in their sin. ^(Jn 8:24, 1 Pet 2:24) And if He hasn't, surely He means to deliver them from it. Maybe light will overcome darkness when the offspring of woman crushes evil's head as the snake strikes at His heel.

As the parents tell the story of the faithfulness of God, they return to the man & woman awkward in their fig leaves. What would come of their hiding and shame? "The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them." This had never been done before either—the death of an innocent to cover the shame of the guilty. Only it wasn't the man or the woman who shed the blood to make the covering. It was the Lord God who covered them. And this was just the beginning.

Beloved, Jesus is the light who overcomes the darkness. ^(Jn 1:5) It is He who crushes the serpent's head by triumphing over the grave, resurrected. He is the perfect, lasting sacrifice who covers our guilt and shame by offering His life for ours, wrapping us up in His righteousness. "He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; covered me with the robe of righteousness" ^(Isa 61:10) To defeat the power of sin, Jesus had to come as a man, born of a woman. At Christmas, we remember that He did. May your celebration of Christmas be marked by your worship of Jesus.