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Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4-14

You probably looked at this title and thought I made one of my flying-fat finger typos. No, I assure you, it is intentional. Today is about biographies. It is about the power of stories and not lists... and the meaning of the title will make sense when we get to the end.

Isaiah lifts the memories of long ago and uses them as a stage. He tells us to 'forget them' and yet he builds a renewed faith on the events of the past because that is what we do. We do not forget, we build on the rubble – just as Jerusalem is built on layers and layers of history. In all great cities from Edinburgh to Rome and even Sydney, if you dig a hole, you will dig through a previous settlement. There will be a whole era of people once going about their lives (and deaths) on streets that are now beneath us. ¹

You might think those cities are far away and the metaphor does not speak to you but when I walk the shores of the lake or any of the rivers that surround us, I see middens and campfire places. I see scar trees and rock formations like the Pinnacles and I can almost see the people gathered round the fire singing songs and telling stories. I know that the Pinnacles have their own song but those who sang it are not here. Their remains are scattered through the forest floors that I pad about on. They are part of the soil and the leaves and form part of a new story I can't hear. If you dig a hole in my soul, family lines will leak out. If you dig a hole in Australia, song-lines will surround it.

That is us – our stories do not disappear, they get buried.

Paul's letter is startlingly biographical. Paul is not just outlining his life – he is trying to express to the Philippians what a dramatic and fundamental change has taken place. What God has done in him. So again, he has had to look backwards in order to help others move forward. He is honest and that takes courage. He said who he was to an audience that had every right to hate him.

It is much safer to make lists. Most eulogies I have heard were like a table of contents. They list off a series of dates and events – with a promise that somewhere later in the book, you will get the story behind the entry. But you

¹ Devonshire Street Cemetery - <https://pastlivesofthenearfuture.com/2013/06/27/devonshire-street-cemeterycentral-station-sydney-nsw/>

don't. mostly they are just lists – and that is how we sanitise and disguise our stories.

If I told you that from 1956-1962, I attended Satchel Ford Elementary School, it doesn't tell you how much the 600+ students loved Mrs Hampton, the Principle. And how on rainy days when we had to stay inside, she would play the piano. A list doesn't tell us how the smell of rain and wet clothes and that particular smell of auditorium-dusty, wooden floors could feel so safe in a time when nuclear drills were as routine as fire drills in an uncertain world.

It doesn't tell you that I later learned principals were supposed to be feared - not loved. It doesn't tell you how beautiful Mrs Anderson changed the librarian stereotype from prudish matron to glamorous queen – and I wanted to be just like her.²

Lists are armour – promises unkept; catalogues of potential.

When people read a biography, they want to know the person better. They don't care what they ate for breakfast so much as how the person cared about the non-event.

The family did not want eulogy at the recent graveside service. All they wanted was for people to tell how this loving person touched their lives. They asked for stories and it was beautiful. Yes, this man had had a remarkable career but like Paul, it was nothing compared to how he loved and what a friend he was to many.

There are two things at play here. One is owning our stories honestly because they make us who we are and we can influence others by the power of our transformation. We don't just pop out from behind a curtain fully formed. We are the product of the lives we have lived. And the 2nd is recognising the stories and calling them out from behind the lists of things we do.

That's what Rev Andrew Smith was calling for in the mission planning Presbytery Meeting. He wasn't looking for a list of what churches do in communities – he was looking for the stories that come out of what we do intentionally or accidentally.

Once upon a time there was an op shop manager bemoaning that she went to work unwell and couldn't do much, so all she did was listen to a woman

² Gosh! You could be smart and beautiful!

struggling and sorting out life's difficult problems. *That* is the story. That is what we are there for...oh, and we also sell stuff.

Nadia Boltz Webber tells this story....

...I was in the vestry of a Lutheran church in Wales, Wisconsin with half a dozen other clergy preparing ourselves for an ordination, I introduced myself to another pastor. She shakes my hand and says, "we've met – but I do not expect you to remember. I've waited 7 years to be able to tell you this: You shared your chicken with me that night and you have no idea what it meant."

Not what I was expecting her to say.

She went on to tell me how that night, she was at a real low point in the middle of a very painful divorce. We were in the green room and she was supposed to introduce me and she was exhausted and hadn't eaten all day. Apparently, I looked up from my huge chicken dinner and was like, "I'm never gonna eat all of this, please help me out here" and it nearly made her cry.

I have literally no memory of this, but even if I did, I could never have known what it meant to her.

The fact is, had I been *trying* to be an angel to her, had my ego been involved in some charitable scheme to "do good", I surely would have fumbled. But as it was, I just got to unknowingly be the one who said the thing and did the thing at a time when God needed God's child to be cared for in a particular way. I'm certain at the time, I just had more fried chicken than I needed.

Truth is, we have no idea what we are doing but if we go through life intentionally open then good things happen ...AND if we are able to see God's stories as they unfold around us, we are able to magnify the moment and His significance 1000-fold. It is the story that has the enduring power of the experience.

These are God moments rather than 'mission'. They might be the result of mission but mission is just an item on our church table of contents – *unless* we are aware of the God moments.

Did I tell you about the time I walked into the wrong room in the hospital and a homeless young man lifted his arms like a toddler and I enfolded him like any

mother would have? I held him while he wept. He wept for his childhood and his good parents. He wept for Sunday school and Bible studies that taught him wrong from right and for all the wrong decisions he had made. He cried and covered my shoulder with snot and tears and as I held him, I wondered, how did I get here? But I knew who sent me.

Paul's biographical letter is powerful for so many reasons but most importantly for its vulnerability. Theologically, it is a knock out, the way 'the little story of Paul's life becomes meaningful by its relation to the big story of God's activity.'³ Unlike modern auto-biographers, Paul does not suggest people do their own thing but asks them to see themselves in the light of the divine story. Paul's story is about how the Gospels can change a person and their attitude towards the future. And Jesus is very much in the centre of that story.

So, when we come to the communion table – it is not about 'contents' but about content. The service is not only full of a story that we hear again and again – we hear *that* story along with millions all over the world doing the same thing; raising the same cup; breaking the same bread. The collective story of all that is happening in 1000s of places *is* part of that story – with Jesus in the middle of it.

It is not the motions of the act but what happens when we do it. There is a new story of community. Stories that are built around things that went wrong, bread that won't break, siren and airplane disruptions...all stories that create collective memories.

And while we stand there and say "we remember" – we are not trying to go backwards to a better time or place. We are not hiding what is about to happen as Jesus prepares for the cross. We are building a new story on the rubble of events, unashamed – content.

Now I look at the story of my life with a new lens. Both good and bad formed me. The past is part of the story – like it or not... but surprisingly, I find myself at the table of content. It is grace that allows us a seat at this feast.

Lord, walk with me as I reclaim the whole story, good and bad, and record it by the God moments. This is the way I will remember who I am and whose I am.

³ Coursar, Gavinta et al, Texts for preaching. Year C p.233