OUR GOD STORIES

Today I’d like to focus on God stories. God stories are those stories which have God at the center. What I like best about God stories is that they describe moments when people receive personal proof of God’s existence.

In our Old Testament reading today, we hear Nehemiah share the God story about what is believed to be the first homily. It’s the story of men, women, and children - who have lost the truth of their identity - gathered together to listen to the priest Ezra read and interpret the Book of the Law. Upon hearing the Spirit speak through the words on the scroll, they begin weeping and sobbing and great rejoicing in understanding the words that had been declared to them.

In our Gospel reading, we hear Jesus’ God story of his experience in the synagogue on the Sabbath, where he declares not only who He is, but the character of the church - our church - that will flow from his ministry.

Our very personal life experiences are also powerful sources of the reality of God. I admit some of our God stories aren’t very pretty. I know a man who felt his life no longer had meaning after his wife left with their 2 young daughters. A loaded hand gun sat on the coffee table in front of him. The phone rings. It’s someone from church, not someone close, but someone who’d noticed that he seemed troubled and felt moved to call him at that particular moment. One man’s openness to the Spirit had saved another man’s life.

With your permission, I’d like to share with you my June 3, 2005 God story. Once while out on business in Canada, I decided to sneak off for a visit to Banff National Park. But darn it all, by the time I got there dark clouds and cold rain covered the famous glacially-carved mountains. After a few hours I left disappointed if not somewhat depressed. Suddenly, on the drive back, the sun broke through the darkness and bathed the inside of
my car in deep shades of orange. At that very same instant the radio stopped seeking and locked on a station. Out from the speakers poured forth these words of song from one of my favorite Christian bands: “You are my hope, you are my strength, you’re everything, everything I need.”¹ I looked down at the glowing-orange radio station display: it read Shine FM 88.9.

I recorded this God incident, just like many others, in my spiritual journal. I started doing this a little over 10 years ago to remind me - in my own words and in my own handwriting – of those many times the Spirit has reawakened my troubled soul with the brightness of our Son.

I suppose if I were poll all those here and ask how your understanding of God might have changed from hearing my experience of God, no doubt I’d get all different answers. You see our lives are compositions of the many stories we’ve heard and experienced on our journeys. Ultimately these stories manifest themselves as different expressions of our Catholic faith.

You see unity in faith comes from our diversity, our differences. This is the truth of our human existence. To deny this truth would be to deny our dignity as human persons uniquely created by God.

You see God looks at how we work with what we’ve got - not on what we should have or have had. He meets us where we are, reminding us in sometimes very emotional ways that He is not only watching over us, but that He’s active in our lives and that He loves us always.

In return God simply expects us to grow and evolve in the faith which we’ve been entrusted. We do this with great effect by sharing our God stories with others, particularly those within our very own parish.

Paul’s letter to his Corinthian Church warns us of what happens when we instead turn inward, forming cliques and dismissing people’s beliefs even though they have been rightly formed through Christ’s Catholic Church.

Using the imagery of a body, Paul urges us to lovingly embrace the unity which springs forth from the diversity of our many different expressions of
faith. And he tells us that diversity doesn’t just happen, but comes to us through the Holy Spirit out of concern for one another. It is part of God’s gift to us.

So let’s strengthen the body of Christ, our St. John Neumann community. First give yourself permission to be vulnerable. Then create opportunities to get to know people. Arrive early and leave late from Mass. Bring a cup of coffee to someone you don’t know. Participate in the Catholic Women’s group or party at the upcoming Mardi Gras fundraiser. If exploring God’s creation is your thing, volunteer to hike with the Neu Waves youth group.

And when the time seems right, ask permission to tell your new acquaintance your favorite God story. Or ask to hear their favorite God story. Above all be authentic, not just nice, to the person you’re with, your faith community, and our Savior Jesus.

As we move now into the Liturgy of the Eucharist, let us see with fresh eyes the reality of what it means to be the body of Christ. Let us joyfully approach this table looking beyond the head in front of us to the faces gathered here in union with you. Help us to grow in holiness, our capacity to love one another, and bring even greater honor and joy to our community.

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1 Skillet, “You are My Hope.” Alien Youth, 2005.