

Jesus, speak words of light and life. Free us from the shame that obscures your radiance. Amen.

I was recently in a conversation with someone pretty brand new to me. I had never had any real interaction with this person then one day we had the occasion to finally have a one on one conversation. Everything was going well – we were both friendly, warm, grinning from ear to ear and then somewhere in the middle of a lull in the conversation the person declared with a smile “I like you. Wait for it. You’re just so bubbly.” While I maintained my exterior smile, my insides began to rage. I was so insulted by this compliment. I had been trying so hard to be my most charming self and this was the compliment I got?!

Now to be clear, this is not the first time I have been called bubbly. I have been called bubbly for decades. Which is why I hate it so much! That adjective comes with so much baggage. People assume that bubbly people are: dim witted; Easy to please; Pushovers; Individuals with little depth.

I know these are the assumptions because I too have made the exact same assumptions about bubbly people over the years. This is bubbly pot calling the bubbly kettle black.

An adjective, a name, a designation – These simple answers reveal that in a mere few words whole stories come to life. When Jesus asks the disciples “Who do people say that I am?” He is in fact asking a much broader question – what are the stories being told about me? He wants to know how people are piecing together his incredible acts and teachings. Jesus’ interest in the stories being told make incredible sense – humans, relationships, civilizations, each one is built and sustained by stories.

We may think we fundamentally inhabit worlds broken down into neighborhoods, cities, nations but not a single one of these things exists as it does without the stories that shaped them. This neighborhood could’ve looked very different if the people who first built these houses held on to a different story about race and ethnicity. This city was planned right in this swampy region to safeguard it from the vice and corruption inevitable in cities - as was the established story of the day. People inspired by a story of self-determination and freedom went about and designated a land a new nation even as they simultaneously clung to a story

legitimizing slavery and oppression for others. No one said stories have to be coherent. A happy ending doesn't make something a story nor does a tragic ending. Stories are the lifeblood of human existence. You and I are a collection of stories each one filling us like the air that fills our lungs. (Breathe in.) Feel it. Feel that, that's a story.

The pandemic has painted in bright neon colors how incredible the power of story is. A virus is very much a part of the material world. This virus is very much a part of our material existence; and yet the stories being told about the virus and everything related to it are as powerful, if not more so than the virus itself. The lesson is profound – do not ever ever underestimate a story. As unnerving as it may be, it appears that we are making reality with every story we tell... So now's the moment where I am compelled to ask... dear friends, with reality itself on the line, what stories are we telling? Or as Jesus once asked “Who do people say that I am?”

[Friends for a moment please sit with this question. What stories are we telling that are helpful? What stories are we telling that are harmful?]

Throughout the ages people have had different stories and therefore shaped different realities. In this our designated season of creation we are being asked to consider our story and how it informs our relationship with creation.

Most of us think Creation is great as a pastime or place to be refreshed for a moment. We love the natural world when we're out hiking or by a river or lake. But then we leave the beautiful vistas and don't think about creation again, not until our next visit. Creation is a thing, like all the other things. Great and wonderful, but inanimate and ultimately forgettable.

What we need is a new vision. A new story to help us correct our relationship with creation. All the better if this vision is informed not by the consumptive impulses of our culture but by a sense of God's pervading presence in the natural world. Lucky for us we have siblings in Christ who had such a profound sense of the holy one precisely in and through the natural world to learn from. In her book *Every Earthly Blessing: Celebrating a Spirituality of Creation*, Celtic historian Esther de Waal paints a picture of Celtic life where creation is never an afterthought and the spirit of God is alive in every moment. She writes “The world is God's and [the

Holy One] is known in and through it... This is an approach to life in which God breaks in on the ordinary, daily, mundane, earthy. It is very much a down to earth spirituality. The sense of the presence of God informs daily life and transforms it, so that any moment, any object, any job of work, can become the time and the place for an encounter with God. It is ultimately a question of vision, of seeing. [(Someone else might say of storytelling.)] The Celtic approach to God opens up a world in which nothing is too common to be exalted and nothing is so exalted that it cannot be made common.” And then de Waal invites the reader to envision what this can look like in practice by telling the story of what a typical morning for a Celtic woman would sound like. Want to hear it?

A woman kneels on the earth floor in her small hut in the Outer Hebrides and lights her fire with this prayer:

I will kindle my fire this morning in the presence of the holy angels of heaven.

She started the day by splashing her face with three palmfuls of water in the name of the Trinity.

The palmful of the God of Life.

The palmful of the Christ of Life.

The palmful of the Spirit of Peace. Triune of Grace.

And now at daybreak, before the rest of the family is awake, she starts... to stir into life the fire banked down the night before. [Praying/ Saying]

I will kindle my fire this morning

In the presence of the holy angels of heaven...

God kindle Thou in my heart within

A flame of love to my neighbor,

To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all...

To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall,

O son of the loveliest Mary,

From the lowliest thing that liveth

To the Name that is highest of all.

The story that this woman and her community told was that God was in the midst of life with them because the world and everything in it is God’s domain. What an incredible story. I can’t help but wonder what our lives would be like if we began

to tell this story anew in our day and time. I for one am ready to start telling a new story. Amen.