

Origin Stories
First Reading: Colossians 1:15-20
Second Reading: Genesis 1:1-5

What is your origin story? I wish I had the courage and time to ask that question more often. I hesitate for a number of reasons — it's not the kind of question you receive frequently; the question may not be heard in ways the inquisitor intended, and thus fluster, confuse, irritate or offend; it could come across as invasive, patronizing, or possibly loaded with assumptions; or, if the person you ask is of the type who loves to talk about themselves, but doesn't possess an off switch, you could be committing to an hour of listening when you are already late for your next meal.

Yet, given the time and space and opportunity it is a question I would like to ask each of you. It is a great question. Every person is a chapter in a larger narrative and to know you and understand you, we have to look back, don't we? Family histories are at various times eye-opening, mysterious, revealing, hilarious, and sometimes dreadfully boring, depending on the historian. A life is so much more than flowcharts, dates, names, and places of birth. There is drama, humor, pain, tragedy, triumph, and everything in between. You have to get into the stories behind the flowcharts and generations. To know you, I'd want to be invited into those

stories, maybe not the unabridged version, but what a privilege it would be to comprehend the narrative of what made you, you. No less than the particles that burst forth from that cosmic explosion “in the beginning,” you are essential to the meaning of us.

Everyone has an origin story. Our purpose here is to unpack how your origin story is part of a larger story that stretches back to the dawn of creation. *“And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”* I learn from your story. You learn from my story. We learn as we discover the larger story we share. Haven’t you noticed how our spirits are energized when we meet someone new and discover we have a shared encounter with some place, no matter how minor it is. *You went to New York over Christmas break? Did you go to Rockefeller Center, meander through Chinatown, get tickets to Six, eat at Parm? Oh, we love Parm!*

We’re desperate to feel the rush of discovering places where our stories connect. *Your 3rd grade teacher was Miss Hawkins? Mine, too.* We’re so desperate to connect, we start launching Hail Marys — *You’re from Missouri? My cousin’s neighbor grew up in Sedalia. Name was Bill, I think. Did you know him?*

People need those connections; yearn to be accepted as a part of something. It is a need so great that if they cannot connect to a story, they'll make one up ... just ask Nobel Prize winning Olympic gymnast and film producer George Santos, the new Interim President of Harvard.

In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Trust*, Hernan Diaz creatively explores how, in our insecurity, we want to control our story rather than understand our story. A Wall Street titan of 1920s New York is incensed about a best-selling novel that is loosely based on his life and insinuates the role he played in the crash of '29.

So, Andrew Bevel sets out to write his own memoir, hiring a ghost writer to embellish his self-aggrandizing tale. Then, in the third section of Diaz's work, the ghost writer, Ida Partenza, offers her own take on the life and character of Andrew Bevel; and then, finally, we hear the perspective of his late wife through the notes of her private diary. In our vanity and insecurity, we focus not on understanding who we are but obsess over the narrative of who we want people to think we are. Why else would we see the best-seller lists choked with the memoirs of public figures, celebrities,

and fallen stars who, like Andrew Bevel, hire collaborators to craft an air-brushed image for the public to admire?

We long for the validation that we are accepted as a part of something, that we belong to a larger narrative, that we matter. So much of life's pathos stems from our inability to feel that, know that our micro-narrative has meaning in the meta-narrative, our story matters in the larger story of the human project. The tragedy of this is our failure to realize the story is there, we are connected to a larger narrative. We do belong. We play a role. We are a part of something so grand, so glorious, that Job, even as he suffered mightily, could not deny it. *"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth."*

In Deuteronomy 26, Moses instructs the Israelites that when they cross over into the promised land, they are to take their first fruits to the place dedicated as the house of God and upon presenting their offering recite the following: *"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7we cried to the Lord, the God*

of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

In presenting this offering and reciting this narrative, the Israelite was affirming before God and confirming to himself, that this story was his story. Abraham and Sarah, the slaves in Egypt, Moses, the exiles in the wilderness may have lived generations, or even centuries before the worshiper repeating the creed, but in repeating it, the worshiper is affirming that the story is no less their story, a story that is identity shaping and character forming. The Israelite was a part of something much larger than herself. She was a thread in the fabric of what God was doing in creation.

In the same way, we read Genesis 1, not as a science documentary or a social studies lesson. Rather, Genesis 1 is an origin story seeking the essence and defining the character of who we are. *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...”* Old Testament scholar Theodore Hiebert says — “when a culture tells stories of its beginnings, it is telling

stories about itself, about who it is and who it is meant to be.” (Timothy Hiebert, *Theological Bible Commentary*) Readers are meant to see ourselves in its stories and characters. As such, Genesis 1 was never meant to be a slideshow in a travelogue taking us back to the primordial chaos out of which the earth came to be. Rather, it is a foundation of identity in a chaotic world for readers of every time and place.

Quick Bible lesson — Genesis is a fabric woven from three different traditions (Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly) written in different contexts, and at different times. There are actually two separate Creation stories at the beginning of Genesis: Genesis 2-3 with Adam, Eve, and the serpent are part of the Yahwist tradition, written in the context of an agrarian society during the Davidic monarchy; Genesis 1 is a product of the Priestly tradition, the latest of the traditions, written in the context of the Babylonian exile during the Sixth Century BCE.

Think about the context of Genesis 1. Its first readers had suffered a crushing defeat. Jerusalem was in ruins and Solomon’s temple walls had fallen. God’s chosen people, the heirs of King David, much like today’s Gazans had lost everything and were exiles in a strange place far from

home, and home no longer looked like anything to which you could return. Discouraged, disheartened, depressed, the Israelites were not feeling so chosen. Had Babylon's gods rendered their God illegitimate? As far as they were concerned, they had been thrown into the primordial chaos that had preceded Creation. What did they have to hold onto? Genesis 1 is the answer to their context of chaos — *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”*

The Babylonian crisis of chaos is undercut by a more foundational claim, Creation. Genesis 1 proclaims a sovereign God who takes chaos and forms it into an ordered world of time and space — 7 days, ordinary time, sacred time, labor, rest, worship. First 3 days: light and darkness, sky and waters, land and vegetation. Second 3 days bring the inhabitants of these spaces: stars and planets, birds and sea creatures, land animals and humans. It is not a tale of how creation came to be, but an affirmation of why creation came to be.

This is a God who can be trusted in spite of chaos. There is no chaos out of which this God cannot form a future. Though your world may be rocked, the world has not slipped from the continually creative hands of God. The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way: *"Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."* The prophet Isaiah prays: *"But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."* The Apostle Paul reminds us: *"we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."* And in Ephesians we are informed: *"We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*

You are never alone, isolated, irrelevant, for you are a thread in the tapestry of God's intentions. You have a story that is still being written. Paul says, *"Through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."*

Your particular chaos will never eclipse God's love for you, or use for you; God's hopes for you, and intentions for you. To the exiles and to you in

your distress, the Lord speaks in Jeremiah: *“Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”* Your story is still being written by the Creator who knows you by name, by the Son who gave his life for you, and by the Spirit who is lighting a path for you. *“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.”*

Like every generation before us we enter a new year facing threats that may fundamentally alter our way of life. There are disturbing winds and irrational fools tossing people to and fro with bizarre ideas, conspiracy theories, and hair-trigger emotions. People we’ve known and loved are increasingly quick to rage and slow to listen, quick to convict and slow to reason.

You know, though we are loathe to admit it, as we age our filters start to falter. Thoughts are given voice that you never would have said before. Emotions emerge that were held at bay earlier in life. *Why Grandpa, where’d that come from?* However, today we all inhabit a technology that has no filters, no guardrails, giving everyone the freedom to ignore any tradition of reason or decency, discretion or accountability. Estrangement is on the rise.

The common good is becoming a quaint memory. Yet, still in need of a defining narrative, a connection to a story, we are more vulnerable to the lure of false narratives that are self-destructive and mutually destructive; that fragment communities, and form enemies.

So, it is a critical moment for some self-reflection. What is your story? What story defines your identity and shapes your character? What story holds you steady and grants you peace amidst the cacophony and chaos? What story equips you to discern the narrow path of hope, justice, and mercy through all the furor and the madness? You don't need to search for a story or fashion a fake one. You have a story. *"In the beginning ... God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light..."* Trust your story. Follow the light. Amen.