

The Garden of the Heart

“How the Word of God Transforms Us”

March 2-3

Introduction

Growing up, my Grandfather would often tell the story of how we Palompos descended from Italy. Many generations ago, Italian sailors came to the Philippines and “Bada Bing, Bada Boom” Palompos. He’d tell the story with pride of how he and my late Grandmother traveled to a small town in Italy, looked up our name in the registry, and found our distant long-lost relatives. “Cassino, Italy. That is where we come from.” He’d say. And I wore this as a badge of honor. I’m not sure if you know this, but Italians are a proud people. I had a special connection with Rocky Balboa. “That’s me.” I would think. “The Italian Stallion”. I love Italian food. I’d swell with pride whenever we ate at a Bucca Di Beppo. I’d look at all the pictures on the wall and think, “These are my people.” I even dated a girl in college whose Dad was Italian. It was something we bonded over. So this story of our ancestry has shaped my identity, it has shaped my relationships, and my sense of belonging. There’s just one problem with the story — it isn’t true. We got my Dad one of those DNA tests for Father’s Day and it turns out we are 0% Italian and our family has no connection to Italy whatsoever. Devastating. Turns out I’m not the Italian Stallion. I’m just the Filipino Palomino.

Story-Driven People

But humans are story-driven people. Stories shape our sense of identity, purpose, and relationship. As Pastor John Tyson writes in his book, *The Intentional Father*, “Until we know the story we are in, we will never know the character we are called to become.” To quote Alasdair MacIntyre, “We can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ Or, ‘Who am I to be?’ If I can answer the previous question of, ‘What story or stories do I find myself a part of?’”

Each of us finds our identity within the context of the story or stories we believe to be true. As Pete Hughes from King’s Cross Church in London puts it, “The story you live in is the story you live out.” The stories we believe shape us in a powerful way, for good or for bad.

Not long ago I got chosen to be a chaperone for my son Judah’s field trip to the fire station. And it was an amazing time. The kids learned about life in the fire house, they got to shoot the hose and take an in-depth tour of the fire trucks. And I remember the firefighter talking to Judah’s group about all of the different switches and buttons on the side of the truck. There were dozens of different dials, and switches. And he turned to the group and said, “Who thinks they can count all of these different buttons?” Then he turned to Judah and asked, “How about you? Could you count them?” And without any hesitation Judah shook his head and said, “No, I’m bad at math.”

And I was so puzzled that he said that because he’s in kindergarten. He hasn’t even had the time or opportunity to find out if he’s bad at math or not. So where would he get such a notion? And then it hit me. I’m constantly going around saying, “I’m bad at math.” Judah must have overheard me say it on one of many occasions and thought to himself, “Palompos are bad at math.”

So the stories we believe not only shape our identity but our actions as well.

Identity-based Habits

In his book *Atomic Habits*, author James Clear says that a big problem people make when setting goals is beginning with trying to change outcomes. So if I want to start doing something, like spend more time in scripture or prayer, I simply start trying to spend more time in scripture and prayer.

The problem, he writes, is that behind every system of actions are a system of beliefs (Judah believing he's not good at math). In other words, most of us try to change our outcomes by changing what we do, when we should begin with our identity and who we wish to become. "You may start a habit because of motivation" he writes, "but the only way you'll stick with it is because of identity."

He gives the illustration of two people who are trying to stop smoking.

Person 1: "No thanks I'm trying to quit". This person identifies as a smoker who is trying to be something else. They are hoping their behaviors will change while still maintaining their old identity.

Person 2: "No thanks, I'm not a smoker." It's a subtle difference but this person has shifted their identity. The act of smoking was something that was attached to their former identity.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy states that thoughts -> feelings -> behaviors -> thoughts.

The Stories That Shape Us

This is why the stories we believe about who we are, our purpose, and our existence play a huge role in shaping us into the people we become. Every single one of us has been shaped by the stories we believe.

Consumerism: Many people are shaped by the story of consumerism. Jesus titled this story, "The Deceitfulness of Wealth". This narrative says that your identity and fulfillment are found in material wealth and possessions. It suggests that happiness and worth can be found externally in material things and experiences rather than an inward reality.

Individualism: Many others are being shaped by the story of individualism. In this story, you play the main character and your desires, needs and rights are paramount. In this narrative, personal freedom and gratification are prioritized above service and sacrifice.

Influencer Culture: With the rise of social media, there is a growing narrative that equates popularity, influence, and image with worth and success. The moral of this story is that external validation is more important than inner transformation. This is an especially alluring narrative for people of influence like Pastors. It can be tempting to measure the success of a Church or ministry by the 'likes' and 'follows' it receives. I remember God speaking to me about my social media engagement and how much I was posting. He said, "Mark, you can either stay on your phone and keep *portraying* a "#blessed life", or you can get off of your phone and actually live one. But you can't do both."

Nationalism/Political Ideology: Sometimes people's identities become so deeply intertwined with their political beliefs or national affiliations that there is a disconnect between their political agendas and Biblical principles.

Self-Help and New Age Spirituality: A lot of people are buying into the self-help or project-self narrative. This story says that people have the power within themselves to achieve their desires and manifest their own reality through positive thinking, energy alignment, and other life hacks.

Whether we realize it or not, each of us *has been* and *are being* formed by the stories we've been told.

And God must've known the power of stories to shape us because He wove the passing on of stories into the very fabric of His people — the Israelites.

A Story-Centered People

⁴ *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates,” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 NIV).*

These words were spoken to the people of God right before they were to enter the Promised Land. This was a land rampant with polytheism, hedonism, and dark spiritual practices. God was reminding His people to never forget Him and all of the things He had revealed to them about Himself. He was reminding them of His mighty works and of His promises to those who walked according to His ways. He was reminding them to pass these stories down to their children and their children’s children so that *they* would not be enticed and swayed by the stories of the land they were entering.

The Israelites have a rich oral tradition of telling the stories of God often and passing them on to future generations. This is why their culture and traditions have survived amidst great suffering and persecution. On our flight to Israel we saw a Jewish father and his son standing in the bulk head reciting portions of the Torah together, no doubt preparing for the son’s bar mitzvah. Times of remembering the stories were woven into their traditions and festivals. Young leaders were not only trained in how to be a leader but were also entrusted with the passing on of the stories. They had written scriptures and psalms that they would sing. So much of their culture was centered around these amazing stories that told of their identity in God, who God revealed Himself to be and His plan and purpose for them.

The prosperity of God’s people directly correlated with their remembrance and obedience to the stories He imparted to them; conversely, their suffering ensued when they neglected or forgot these truths.

Apprenticing to Jesus

As a disciple of Jesus, it is vital for the Word of God to be the central and guiding story of your life. This world will bombard us with many counter-narratives and lies so we must be intentional in keeping our gaze fixed on the perfect truth of God’s Word.

When Jesus called His disciples He said to them,

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,” (Matthew 4:19).

This is the recipe to being a disciple of Jesus. The first part of the invitation is to follow Him. Jesus never had an altar call, He didn’t ask for a show of hands or to repeat a prayer after Him. He invited any who would be His disciple to leave behind the things of this world, to leave behind their old lives and follow Him. This is what we mean when we talk about abiding. To abide means to make your abode (your home) in Jesus. It means to leave the cares of this world and do life with Him every day.

As we do life with Jesus He says, “I will make you.” Jesus is saying, “Leave behind the stories that formed you, the habits that shaped you, and even the people who mislead you. Follow Me and I will make you into someone new. I will teach you the truth, I will show You the way, and I will give you true community with whom you will experience life.”

“If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. Old things have passed away; behold all things have become new,” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In our youth ministry we call this dynamic “Belonging & Becoming”. Jesus invites us to true belonging “Follow Me” so that we can become “And I will make you”. But becoming what exactly? Who or what are we becoming? In the invitation Jesus uses the phrase, “Fishers of Men”. Simply put, Jesus is making us into someone who does the things He did.

In Luke 6:40, Jesus tells His disciples,

“The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher,” (Luke 6:40).

So the aim of being *with* Jesus is to become *like* Jesus. It is not to avoid eternal damnation, acquire a blessed life, avoid pain, gain status, or live a life of comfort and ease. The aim of discipleship is to become like Jesus.

Author John Mark Comer suggests that a helpful understanding of the word *Disciple* is the word *Apprentice*. Often in Church circles you will hear a disciple defined as a student. This is true, but when modern listeners hear “Student” they immediately picture a classroom with a teacher in the front and the rest of us sitting in rows. It also implies that the aim of being a disciple of Jesus is to learn the right information and know the right answers. We picture the day of judgment like a final exam. God will stand there like a professor and administer the oral exam.

Question 1: “Who is My Son?” [Oh I know this one! Jesus.]

Question 2: “Did you believe in Him?” [Oh I know this one too! Yes!]

God: “Get over here you!”

But God is not looking for right answers, He’s looking for a right heart. Are we becoming people like Jesus — People who embody His love, teach others the truth of His Kingdom, and point them to a life with the Father. That is why a more helpful understanding of a disciple could be an apprentice. Zach Montayre is an apprentice at the Pearl Harbor Shipyard. He is training to be an electrician. Part of this training is academic. But the ultimate aim of Zach’s apprenticeship program is not to simply know the right answers, it is to do the work of an electrician. To be a disciple means to apprentice under Jesus. We spend time with the Master, we learn His ways, so that we can be like Him and ultimately do the work of the Master.

Most of us are familiar with the teaching model, “I do, you watch; I do, you help; You do, I help; You do, I watch” This is exactly what Jesus did with His disciples. First they watched, then they helped, then they did.

How the Word of God Forms Us

It is so important that we approach God’s Word this way. Not as scholars or self-help gurus but as apprentices of Jesus, sitting at His feet and being formed into His likeness. The Bible is not only a story of what God has done in the past, it is an invitation for what will do through you as you are formed into His likeness.

In the upper room where Jesus told His disciples to abide, He says,

25 “I am telling you these things now while I am still with you. 26 But when the Father sends the Advocate as My representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—He will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.

27 “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid,” (John 14:25-27).

The physical Jesus has not walked the earth for over 2000 years. Yet the Spirit of Jesus (The Holy Spirit) still teaches and imparts the life of Jesus into His disciples today.

Through the Word the Holy Spirit reveals the nature and character of God so that we will trust Him and grow in our relationship with Him.

Through the Word the Holy Spirit teaches us about our true identity and the purpose for which we were created.

Through the Word the Holy Spirit corrects us and teaches us a better way.

Through the Word the Holy Spirit outlines God’s Master Plan of salvation and redemption.

Next week we will hear from a panel of our Pastors about how they practice abiding with Jesus through His Word for a transformed life. We will answer practical questions like, “What should I read? How much should I read? How should I read it? What if I’m not getting anything from what I read?” So you won’t want to miss next week’s Pastor’s Panel.

Conclusion

As we close, I was grabbing coffee with a dear friend and Brother in Christ, Pastor Chad Getz from Calvary Chapel Wahiawa. I love our brothers and sisters at Calvary Chapel. God has given them a deep conviction and anointing for teaching the Word of God. He said Peter writes,

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps,” (1 Peter 2:21 NIV).

As disciples of Jesus, He has left us an example, that we should follow in His steps. Pastor Chad said, “You know that word ‘example’ in the Greek is ὑπογραμμός (hypogrammos). The under-copy. It was a writing copy, including all the letters of the alphabet, given to learners as an aid in learning to draw them. I think of the dotted letter outlines my son traces over to learn the alphabet. Peter is saying Jesus has given us His life, written in His Word, for us to place our lives over and trace as an example. Is Christ the example that you hold your life to? Are you getting into His Word and tracing your life to His?”

As you abide in the written Word, trace your life to the Living Word. The more you get into His Word the more His Word gets into you. Because the story you live in is the story you live out.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the stories you have believed that have formed your life?
2. How has the story of God’s Word formed your identity, choices, and relationships?
3. When you read the Bible, how do you approach it?
4. In what areas have you traced your life after Christ? What areas need more work?