

Text: Psalm 105
Title: An Organizing Motif
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How do you tell your story?
What is the organizing motif of your story?

I start my story with, “My father was a history professor.” It helps me makes sense of moving from the University of Michigan to Michigan State to a small Christian liberal arts college in the northwest corner of Iowa. He left a tenured position and took a pay cut of more than a half to work at the intersection of faith and learning. That organizing motif helps make sense of my brokenness, my quirkiness, and it even helps draw a line to a murder in a church parking lot and me standing behind this pulpit.

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We all carry an internal narrative. We all have ways to tell our stories. The themes or frameworks that we rely on help us make sense of our lives. Those motifs get deeply engrained. And, the way that we understand our stories in turn shapes our sense of self, our place in the world, what we value, what we do, and who we are.

Therefore, some therapists listen to how we tell our stories not necessarily to uncover a hidden key or a subconscious impulse but that we might consider how we frame our story and if there are ways to help reframe the same story. Are there other motifs that provide coherence and in turn new ways of seeing self, place, value, etc.?

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Psalm 105 provides an organizing motif for scripture.
Psalm 105 is a history psalm.
Psalm 105 is a way to tell the Hebrew’s story, God’s story, our story.

Rather than a psalm that celebrates God’s lovingkindness, or one that provides an intricate dance about the Law, or even one that cries out to God with a dose of indignation and anger, Psalm 105 tells a story.....

It starts with a series of instructions about how to approach the story. In verses 1 through 6 there are no less than 10 commands. We’re told to sing, to make known, to look, to remember. And then the remaining 40 verses tell what God has done. They recount what German theologians of a few generations ago referred to as *heilsgeshichte* ~ salvation history. The organizing motif is the action of God for the salvation of his people.

Stan Mast describes it this way:

Israel's religion (and the Christian religion that is its fulfillment) is not first of all a set of ideas or a list of laws or a pattern of practices (though it has given rise to exalted philosophy and includes life affirming laws and teaches spiritual disciplines that shape community and individual). It is first of all the true story of what God has done in history....

.....God gets so deeply involved in human life that he interrupts, intervenes, even becomes incarnate in history. It is better to wrestle with the mystery of divine involvement than agonize over the meaninglessness of a universe that is godless. God's incarnate entry into human history is the central claim of biblical religion.

Dear friends, in some ways Psalm 105 is a miniaturized version of the Bible. It tells how God interrupted and intervened in human history in the promises that he made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. And, in that way it is a family story...

But, the dilemma is:

How then do we make it our family story?

How does this ancient psalm have any meaning or coherence in our lives?

How does this organizing motif become our organizing motif?

And it seems a particularly important question today.

Witness the hate and racism on display in Virginia....

One could make the case that our organizing motif, our shared cultural narrative, is lost, eroded, or under assault. We live in world with few shared stories. Alternative facts, fake news, conspiracy theories, lies, biased media, tweets, identity politics, monetized or weaponized information, revisionist and racist history are the soup-du-jour.

There's a whole host of reasons ~ philosophical, technological, sociological, psychological ~ that created today's soup, but what we're left with is a time and place with widely divergent understandings of reality. And, it's not just the interpretations that are in dispute but the very nature or reliability of truth is up for grabs.

And into that contemporary cultural soup we make the claim that this psalm is, "first of all the true story of what God has done in history...."

Rob Bell was the evangelical pastor of a mega-church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The archetype hipster pastor, he's a complex mix of cool, humor, scholarship, charisma, cultural awareness, and an earnest authenticity. He's a gifted communicator both as an author and a speaker; his was a full-page picture in Time magazine.

But, at the height of his popularity he walked away from the church to write more and speak more and be on television more. And, freed of the confines of a congregation his voice began to make too much space for everyone. He reframed understandings of hell. He accepted same sex marriage. He got branded a heretic and got kicked to the curb....

However, today he's something of a rock star for disillusioned and disenfranchised evangelicals. He, along with a host of other hip-n-happ'nin' writers, are trying figure out what to do with the faith and church that formed them but in which they no longer find a place....

And, central to that effort is an understanding of the Bible. They are wrestling with the way in which scripture (salvation history) has any sustaining and shaping truth today. How does this text, or any text, have any relevance in our lives? Rob Bell's current book, *What is the Bible? How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, Stories can Transform the way You Think and Feel about Everything* is an example of that struggle.

I don't pretend to have easy answers for those questions and that struggle. I can tell you that the "struggle is real." I can tell you that I am wrestling with that question every week. But, what if without answers what we have are practices?

Psalms 105 was probably written after the exile.

The Hebrews had been carried off and scattered in a foreign land. It seemed as if God had forgotten them and given up on his covenant promises. They lost faith; they didn't know how to make sense of reality. And now, although they were back in Israel, they were again "few in number, few indeed, and strangers in (their own land)." They were the laughing stock of other countries. Their God had failed them. They were beaten down and wondered where to place any trust. The nature or reliability of truth was up for grabs.

So, Psalm 105 was probably read by Israelites as a way to remember and rehearse their history. Some scholars think that priests would have read this psalm as part of a liturgy gathering Hebrews for great festivals. It was a way in which they celebrated their organizing motif. In effect: we are gathered together because

(The Lord) remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant. "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit."

Dear friends, part of what we do, as we gather week to week, is listen to a counter-cultural narrative. We've been given a story with an organizing motif ~ God interrupts and intervenes and is even incarnate in history. And therefore, rather than reflect the world in which we live, we bear witness to the love, mercy, *shalom*, and the covenant promises of God fulfilled in Jesus.

In liturgy and singing and preaching and coming to the table we rehearse, remember, and reenact that story. We recall and retell and wrestle with salvation history. And as we do we hope/believe that there is some shaping power, that we might embody love rather than fear, mercy rather than hate, and *shalom* rather than supremacy, that we might live, work, raise kids, spend money, stand with others, and organize life around the covenant promises of God ~ in Charlottesville and Chicago and every corner of creation.

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Amen.

