

On What Will You Build Your Life?
Psalm 62
Mark 1:14-20

Dr. Don Flowers, Jr
Port Williams United Baptist Church

It is amazing really, to drive up Collins Road. In the middle of a global pandemic it seems like they are just inflating houses. In what was once an empty lot just yesterday it seems is a new house. Our Missions and Outreach Committee is almost running out of jam to include in our welcome kits! So much construction!

Even across the river, at the bottom of our hill, it isn't new construction, and yet.... A house that has been there since forever (at least as long as we have lived there) has recently been transformed into something new. For a while they were digging out what appeared to be a new basement, and now a whole new addition has emerged.

So much construction.

Now I am not an engineer. I know so little about construction that I really am not a danger to anyone. But I do know that an essential, a must have for any building is a foundation. In Charleston we built 2 facilities and I watched as the foundation was poured, only after trenches had been dug and filled with concrete, only after dirt had been allowed to set and then covered with concrete—all of it in order to give the building something solid to sit on. The last thing you want or need is an unsteady foundation. It's not our scripture lesson this morning, but Jesus told a parable about a man who built his house on sand only to see it crumble when the first big storm came. He suggested building on rock.

Now relax! I am not about to propose a building campaign. Well, not a physical building. But the truth is that each of us are in a building campaign. We are building our lives. So the question is on what are you building your life?

In many ways it would be simpler, easier if we could go to Home Hardware and just get the stuff we need. Go and get the lumber to provide the structure; the wires for our thoughts and emotions; down the plumbing aisle to get the pipes for our generosity. We could go in with our list and just build it. That would be so much easier.

But that isn't how lives are built. They are not built with stuff. They are built with and on stories.

Each morning I receive an email from Catholic priest Richard Rohr. Last week he was talking about another person I so admire, Brian McLaren. McLaren was talking about our framing stories, those stories that *"give people direction, values, vision, and inspiration by providing a framework for their lives. It tells them who they are, where they come from, where they are, what's going on, where things are going, and what they should do."*¹

¹ <https://cac.org/a-new-framing-story-2021-01-11/>

Reading that sent me down a rabbit hole that ended up at his book, *The Seventh Story*. It is a follow-up to a children's book that he did with Garrett Higgins. It is a short wonderful read that I highly recommend. I want you to hear the first chapter this morning.²

"there once was a people

let's call them THE PEOPLE.

THE PEOPLE used stories to interpret their lives stories of where they came from stories of where they're going stories that tell them how to be happy

stories that tell them where they are.

the stories say that one day, a long time ago, one of THE PEOPLE saw another one of THE PEOPLE holding something shiny "I WANT IT" said one of THE PEOPLE so he took it.

when he got back home that night, the rest of THE PEOPLE were amazed. Because I have a shiny object!, he proclaimed, YOU HAVE TO LISTEN TO ME! and he told them a story about what he had learned about how to be happy how to have peace and security how to keep the shiny thing that he had found

the first story said that the way to be happy is to rule over others

but every time that story was attempted, people were unhappy, because the rulers oppressed them... so another story was invented... Let's overthrow the rulers!

this story didn't work either, because it just turned the tables, putting new people under oppression... so another story began, in which the old revolutionaries withdrew into their own isolated spaces, and judged the world

but nothing changed, because these island communities used the same old stories to run themselves, competing to be in charge, building shiny object factories which blew ugly smoke into the air, making everyone cough, and dominating each other...

meanwhile, the domination story and the isolation story had a business merger, which resulted in an experiment: if they could get rid of the people they didn't like, who looked or sounded different, or whose customs weren't like their own, surely that would fix things?

but that story just led to more suffering: of those who were blamed and targeted and who felt unsafe; and of those who thought they were in charge, because they missed out on the gift of the rainbow.

they lived in a grey world. THE PEOPLE still weren't happy, and they knew it. So they began to... oh sorry I got distracted... they began to create a new... oh, look at that! A shiny black object! How lovely! I'd like one of those! How can I get one?...

...a lot of years went by. THE PEOPLE tried to convince themselves that things were ok by accumulating things. Toys or nations, it was all the same to them."

² Brian McLaren and Garrett Higgins. *The Seventh Story: Us, Them, and the End of Violence*. Kindle edition.

“some of THE PEOPLE knew such things don’t heal the soul, and the other stories hadn’t gone away either. THE PEOPLE kept hurting, and hurting each other... so a final story was created, that said if we couldn’t find peace, security, and happiness by ruling the world or withdrawing to isolation or getting rid of a minority they didn’t like or by accumulating things maybe they could make sure that they never forget this lack, this pain that others had caused them, and the suffering they had experienced. THE PEOPLE would make sure that no one would ever forget that they were the victims. That their suffering was their very identity, and that no one had suffered as much as them.

And if you try to tell them that others have suffered too, they might kill you.

“and then, something new...

a poet came to town.

a storyteller who knew that

the domination story

the revolution story

the isolation story

the purification story

the accumulation story

and the victimization story

were all destined to fail, because they invited every human being, who is already interdependent with every other human being, and even with the earth itself, to pretend that we are in a competition instead.

the poet knew how to build things, like tables, where we could all sit and eat together

she taught that the people most oppressed by the six stories should be the most honored

she taught that the kinds of differences that THE PEOPLE’s stories shame or use as an excuse for punishment were actually marks of what makes us most lovable

she invited people to join her in forming a new community,

where status would depend on service,

where domination would be replaced by equitable community,”

where the revolution of the heart would lead us to share power-with, not power-over, transforming the process by which we lead and learn,

where deadening isolation would be replaced by rejuvenating silences,

where we would learn from and celebrate folk on the margins,

*where we would share not possess, and heal each other's wounds in a new story,
not of victimhood or power-over, but of forgiving each other, co-conspiring only
beauty.*

the poet had a radical idea.

the seed of a Seventh Story that will heal the world."

*"the six earlier stories all claimed that the path to peace, security and happiness
was about "winning". us over them*

or us overthrowing them

or us staying apart from them

or us cleansing ourselves of them

or us having things that they don't

or us being more important than them because of our competitive suffering...

*but in the Seventh Story, the story of reconciliation, we still get to win, just not at
anybody else's expense.*

in the Seventh Story, human beings are not the protagonist of the world... Love is."

*In the Seventh Story, humans are participants in something far bigger than being
reduced to dominating others for one group's gain, or the pursuit of happiness through
revolutions that replace one dominance with another, or isolation, or purity, or being a
victim, or gaining possessions.*

*In the Seventh Story, humans are participants in the biggest thing that has ever
happened: of the evolution of the good, of the expansion of consciousness to include the
restoration and healing of all things.*

The Story of Love.

*It's a story in which some of us know that our purpose is not merely ourselves, but
all of us.*

Some of Us for All of Us.

they killed the poet, of course

*the seventh story was too much to take for people with visions limited to the
narrow circle of self*

but the poet did not actually die.

her story is alive, right now.

the story lives wherever someone reveals the other stories as failures.

the story lives every time someone lives for all of us

or offers a glass of cold water to a thirsty stranger

or a blanket for a naked person
or engages in sacred practices of friendship, lament, and hope.
the story lives wherever there are exchanges of power and gifts between the strong
and the vulnerable,
creating community.
the story lives wherever there are artistic endeavors that show us we're not alone,
and tell us where to go next, and remind some of us
to live for all of us,
because there is no them.

Seven stories.

A story of domination; of revolution, of isolation, of purification, of accumulation, of victimization. And a story of love.

Which will you live? On which story are you building your life?

I suspect that part of the problem in our world is that often times we try to build on multiple foundations, on multiple stories. And that just isn't possible. The stories conflict, leading to conflict in us, with us.

We have to choose, because we can **only** live one.

That is the word from the psalmist. There is a small word that appears over and over in our lesson this morning. In Hebrew, it is the work 'ak.' It appears 6 times in this sort psalm. When you consider that it only appears 24 times in the entire book of Psalms, maybe we should take notice!

The word carries a restrictive meaning—only or alone, as well as an assertive meaning—truly, indeed. When we read our translations we have to choose which word to use, but in Hebrew it carries both meanings: “To wait for God *alone* means to wait on God *indeed!* To *truly* hope in God means that one must hope *only* in God!”³

Each of us much choose our God, just as each of us much choose our story. That will determine how we live, what we strive for, who will be our god.

Dominion

Revolution

Isolation

Purification

Accumulation

Victimization

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-psalm-625-12>

Love

What is your story?

Who is your God?

On what will you build your life?