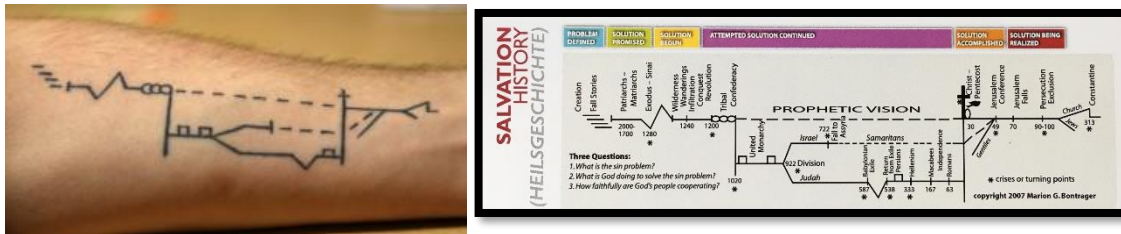


What Now?

I have a tattoo to show you. No, I still haven't got one – and I don't intend to ever get one. A young adult got this tattoo after taking the Introduction to Biblical Literature course at Hesston College.



This tattoo is a representation of the timeline of salvation history developed by a Hesston College Professor and used as the basis of the book, *The Bible as Story*. The author states, “The biblical salvation story is the dynamic story of the interaction between a living God and the People of God who have freedom of choice. It is an up and down story of a faithful God and a sometimes faithful and unfaithful people.”¹

This timeline of the biblical story includes hills and valleys, times of abrupt change for the better and for the worse, times of gradual improvement or decline, and long stretches of flat lines. It includes times of waiting, wondering if the bad times will ever end or, perhaps, worrying that the good times will soon be over. Throughout this biblical story God sent messengers with words of correction or words of comfort as needed. We heard examples of this in the dramatic reading that Tom and I read.²

Isaiah 40 is a familiar scripture.

“Comfort, comfort My people,” says your God.

“With gentle words, tender and kind,

*Assure Jerusalem, this chosen city from long ago,
that her battles are over.*

The terror, the bloodshed, the horror of My punishing work is done.

*This place has paid for its guilt; iniquity is pardoned;
its term of incarceration is complete.*

It has endured double the punishment it was due.”

The grass withers, the flower fades

as the breath of the Eternal One blows away.

People are no different from grass.

¹ Marion G. Bontrager, Michele Hershberger, John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story: An Introduction to Biblical Literature*, Workplay Publishing, 2016, p. 10.

² Sources for this sermon include Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B*, Trinity Press International, 1993, pp.8-13; Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year B*, Abingdon Press, 2002, pp. 18-23; and Advent 2 resources in *Leader, Fall 2023*, MennoMedia, pp. 41-42.

*The grass withers, the flower fades;
nothing lasts except the word of our God.
It will stand forever.*

*The Lord, the Eternal, comes with power, with unstoppable might;
He will take control without question or delay.
He will see to it that wages are paid,
repairs are made, and all is set right again.
He will feed His fold like a shepherd;
He will gather together His lambs—the weak and the wobbly ones—
into His arms.
He will carry them close to His bosom,
and tenderly lead like a shepherd the mother of her lambs.³*

Remember the context for these words. The kingdom of Judah had been overwhelmingly defeated in its wars with the Babylonians. The city of Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. Many of the people had been carried off into captivity in Babylon. There they bemoan the misery and destitution they are experiencing. But Isaiah proclaims these tragic circumstances are coming to an end. Salvation is at hand. In this text the prophet seeks to bolster the courage and hope of the desolate and despondent community.

When we experience times of difficulty, as we ask, “What do we do now?” these words invite us to accept God’s forgiveness, to receive God’s comfort, and to make a fresh start. Something greater is coming. We must open our eyes, ears, and hearts so we are able to recognize and experience it.

Psalm 85 also offers words of hope.

*O Eternal One, there was a time when You were gracious to Your land;
You returned Jacob’s descendants from their captivity.
You forgave the iniquity of Your people,
covered all of their sins.
There was a time when You restrained all of Your fierce wrath,
when You cooled Your hot anger.
O God of our salvation, bring us back again—as You did before—
and put away Your anger toward us.*

*O Eternal One, show us Your unfailing love;
give us what we truly need: Your salvation.
I will hear what the True God—the Eternal—will say,
for He will speak peace over His people,
peace over those who faithfully follow Him,
[but do not let them abuse His gift and return to foolish ways].
Without a doubt, His salvation is near for those who revere Him
so that He will be with us again and all His glory will fill this land.⁴*

The psalmist writes about the ups and downs of life. The psalm begins with a prayer addressed to God, recalling an earlier time when God restored fortunes, forgave and pardoned sin,

³ Isaiah 40:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, *The Voice*

⁴ Psalm 85:1-4, 7-9, *The Voice*

and withdrew anger. Next the psalmist pleads with God to do this again. Stop being angry, give us life again, show us your love, and save us. The last half of the psalm proclaims what this restoration will be like. God will bring peace. Everyone will see God's glory. This will result in love, truth, goodness, peace, and abundance. The present day is anchored in the past with all its failures, shortcomings, sufferings, and heartaches. It's also attached to the future anticipating the time when God "will speak peace to his people."

What do we do now? Sometimes we need to acknowledge our failure to follow God's ways. When we do that, these words invite us to listen to God and receive what God has to offer us. Repentance includes a willingness to hear from God. Then we must be willing to receive the good that the Lord offers to us – steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark we hear the familiar proclamation of John the Baptist.

This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Anointed One, the Liberating King, the Son of God. Isaiah the prophet told us what would happen before He came:

*Watch, I will send My messenger in front of You
to prepare Your way and make it clear and straight.
You'll hear him, a voice crying in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way of the Eternal One,
a straight way in the wandering desert, a highway for our God."*

That messenger was John the Baptist, who appeared in the desert near the Jordan River preaching that people should be ritually cleansed through baptism with water as a sign of both their changed hearts and God's forgiveness of their sins. He preached a message in the wilderness:

"Someone is coming who is a lot more powerful than I am—One whose sandals I'm not worthy to bend down and untie. I've washed you here through baptism with water; but when He gets here, He will wash you in the Spirit of God."⁵

As was the case in Psalm 85, these opening verses of Mark point both backward and forward. Mark starts with words from Isaiah, moves through John the Baptist, and looks forward to the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Although the coming of Christ is a new thing God is doing, it is not without a past. Mark roots the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in the history of Israel.

The words of John the Baptist challenge us to use the power of God to make changes in our lives. He doesn't sugarcoat his analysis of human sin, the need for repentance, and the urgency of the situation. At the same time, he shares the good news that power is available. The good news comes with transforming power, changing a person from the inside out.

2 Peter also contains words of warning and of comfort.

Don't imagine, dear friends, that God's timetable is the same as ours; as the psalm says, for with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day.

Now the Lord is not slow about enacting His promise—slow is how some people want to characterize it—no, He is not slow but patient and merciful to you, not wanting anyone to be destroyed, but wanting everyone to turn away from following his own path and to turn toward God's.

⁵ Mark 1:1-4, 7-8, *The Voice*

The day of the Lord will come unexpectedly like a thief in the night; and on that day, the sky will vanish with a roar, the elements will melt with intense heat, and the earth and all the works done on it will be seen as they truly are. Knowing that one day all this will come to pass, think what sort of people you ought to be—how you should be living faithful and godly lives, waiting hopefully for and hastening the coming of God’s day when the heavens will vanish in flames and the elements melt away with intense heat. What will happen next, and what we hope for, is what God promised: a new heaven and a new earth where justice reigns.

So, my friends, while we wait for the day of the Lord, work hard to live in peace, without flaw or blemish; and look at the patience of the Lord as your salvation.⁶

The people to whom Isaiah spoke were waiting for their exile to end. The people for whom the psalmist wrote were returning to a city in ruins. The people to whom John the Baptist spoke were waiting for their Messiah to come. The people to whom the writer of 2 Peter wrote were waiting for Jesus to return – and, perhaps, for a response to the scoffers among them.

Scoffers didn’t see a pattern of divine intervention in history. They concluded that the world operates by chance, not divine plan. They were convinced that things now were pretty much as they always have been and were likely to continue along the same course. Since God hadn’t judged human behavior in the past, this wouldn’t happen in the future either; therefore, people could live as they pleased.

But Peter stated that God doesn’t follow a human calendar. Since God played a decisive role in the beginning of things, God will also be involved in the end of history. The deferral of God’s judgment is a sign of divine patience and kindness, not weakness. The people of God need to continue to wait in hope.

Peter’s words urge us to invite God to walk alongside us as we wonder, “How will we know what to do now?” His words catch something of the gentleness of the gift offered to us, saying that God is patient and merciful, not wanting anyone to be separated from the Lord. God gives everyone space and time to change. God is willing to walk a long way on the road with us.

While we may sometimes feel discouraged or uncertain about when or how God will act, like those in our Scriptures, we are called to live and move in the world as God’s people. Even as we wonder “How long?,” we begin to ask “What shall we do while we wait?”

Jesus, as well as all of Scripture, shows us that our faith is not to be an idle one. We are called to partner with God in the work of the kingdom of heaven. We are called to wait for the return of Jesus, and also told how to be faithful servants while we wait. Cultivating spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible study, and acts of kindness as well as participating in a faith community are ways that we can be faithful servants.

We are called to constantly work out our faith and continue to improve. We acknowledge that we can never be perfect, even though that is our goal. Scripture also shows us that God is always willing to give us another chance by coming to find us when we wander off or giving us time to realize our need for God.

What do we do now? We continue to wait. We continue to pray. We continue to work. We continue to build bridges of peace in our relationships with each other. During this season of Advent, may we wait and hope, repent and pray, and work for justice and peace. Amen.

⁶ 2 Peter 3:8-15a, *The Voice*