



# STORIES AND *THE* STORY

PBCC Window

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This month marks the fifth anniversary of Art in the Auditorium. We begin the sixth year with a new exhibit, *Beauty Given by Grace: The Biblical Art of Sadao Watanabe*. For the first time we are hosting a traveling exhibit that is touring the country, and from here will go to Japan. Watanabe, a Japanese Christian artist, portrayed Biblical stories in the traditional Japanese folk art of stencil dying. Hanging on our walls are some fifty prints of Biblical stories. Old Testament stories from *Cain and Abel* to *Jonah*. Stories from Jesus: events of his life such as *The Nativity*, and stories that he told such as *The Prodigal Son*.

The Bible is full of stories. You children present with us this morning learn many of these stories in Sunday School. We love these stories. Many of them we know well. There are also some stories less suitable for children, some that are R-rated and scandalous.

The Bible is also one big story, *The Story*, symbolically depicted in this window behind me. The tenth anniversary of its installation is two months away. The Bible contains many stories, but is itself one big story. Our lives, too, contain stories. We ponder whether these stories form a coherent whole. Do our lives make sense? Is there a metanarrative? How do our stories fit into God's story?

Most stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. The middle often contains a complication, a turning point, and a resolution. This is often true of our own lives: we sense that our lives hit a complication. We hope for a turning point leading to a resolution. This turning may happen early or late in life. Some still feel stuck in the complication, still seeking a turning point.

This basic plot structure is true also of *The Story*, and it is true of our window. It is designed to be read as a story in five acts: a beginning, a middle which spans three acts, and an end.

## Prelude: God

Before the story begins God is already present: "In the beginning God." And so we begin at the very top of the window with God, represented by two symbols. On the left is the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In the Old Testament God declared, "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god" (Isa 44:6 ESV; cf. 48:12). In the New Testament Jesus applies the same language to himself: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13; cf. 1:8, 17; 21:6). God is God because he was already there in the beginning. He is without a beginning. He was there before anything else was there. Everything begins and ends with God, and so our thinking must begin and end with God. If we don't we'll get everything wrong. Many of us are glad that 2016 is over but the world faces great uncertainty in 2017. The only reason we can have confidence entering 2017 is because God is God. He is sovereign over all the affairs on earth. We place our hope in him not in any of the things which happen on earth.

The symbol on the right is the triquetra, an ancient symbol for the Trinity. God is and always has been a triune God: three in one. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Spirit eternally proceeds

from the Father through the Son. The Son is not subordinate to the Father, but basks in the Father's love to him and returns that love to the Father. The Spirit mediates the love between them. Before the story begins, God was already there as a community of perfect love, goodness and fulfilment. God is love. Any love that we can experience is possible only because of the love which exists within the Trinity. The Trinity has no need of anything or anyone else—that includes us and this world. This is actually good news because it means God is not codependent on us. When it came time to create us he did so as a free expression of his love rather than out of any necessity.

These two symbols are set against cerulean blue, heavenly blue, the precious color used in medieval and renaissance art to represent heaven. What is heaven? Heaven is where God is fully present, where his will is fully done. God was fully present in the beginning as a God of love. It is this love which drives the subsequent story.

## Act 1: Creation

Completely fulfilled within the community of the Godhead, God had no need of anything. Nevertheless, he chose to create a world for his glory and pleasure, and thus begins the Story with this expression of his love. Creation is the first act, and the first bay of our window.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). He created through his word: ten words. We later find that this word is the Son himself. Present also is the Spirit, ready to execute God's will. Starting with a blank slate covered with darkness and sea, God formed the world, then filled it. He created order and fullness. He spoke light into the darkness and put the sun, moon and stars in place. He created birds for the sky, fish for the sea, and animals for the land, each after their kind. Then he created humans, not after their kind, but after his kind, in his image. To them he delegated rule over his earth. He endowed his blessing upon all life, ensuring that all would be fruitful and successful. He saw that all this was very good: it was exactly what he intended. Creation is good news: God was pleased with the world he had made. The world matters. God likes it.

In this ordered cosmos, he planted a garden, his sanctuary on earth. In this garden was the tree of life, and from the garden flowed life-giving water. It was here in Paradise, filled with life, that God put the humans to enjoy the bounty of his provision. Here they were at harmony with him, with themselves, and with creation. God placed them in his sanctuary to serve him and to obey him, to worship him and to keep a single command: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They had no need of that knowledge, for God had declared what was good. All they had to do was heed his word, and enjoy him forever. It was all very good.

But good quickly turned to bad. Something went wrong in Paradise. A complication arose. Eve decided that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good, and she took. This is the root of all sin: we make our own decisions of what is good and evil, and we act on them. In so doing, we reject God who, as creator, is the only one qualified to declare what is good and evil. God expelled the humans from his

garden; they were no longer fit to live in his sanctuary, in his presence. But God launched a plan of redemption to remove sin, death and evil from his world and to bring humanity back to himself. He promised humanity a son who would crush the serpent (Gen 3:15).

In the short run things went from bad to worse: Cain killed his brother Abel, the sons of God intermarried with the daughters of men, humanity gathered to build a tower to heaven. Repeatedly God intervened to limit evil. He even performed a complete remodel, undoing creation in the Flood, then unveiling a new world. None of this solved the problem of evil, but it did clarify the extent of evil: humanity's natural tendency is to sink into self-centered sin. We will never understand the Story if we don't appreciate the depths of this problem.

Nevertheless, God committed to keep the earth going, hanging his bow in the sky as a sign to himself: "Never again" (Gen 8:21). A rainbow arches across the window. All that subsequently happens, both the good and the evil, happens under this rainbow. It is against this backdrop of sin and God's covenant commitment to creation that God calls Abraham, promising to give him descendants, a land and his blessing, and to bless all nations through him (Gen 12:2-3). This call of Abraham is God's answer to sin and evil: he begins to form a people for himself and he begins to prepare a home for them. The rest of the Story is the outworking of this promise to Abraham.

## Act 2: Israel

In the portion of the second bay under the cross, our window shows Israel on pilgrimage from Egypt through Sinai to Jerusalem. Moses led the Israelites through the sea, after the slaying of the Passover lambs. God repeatedly identifies himself to Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This is the Old Testament paradigm of salvation: God defeated the forces of evil to deliver his people from bondage into glorious freedom. He brought his people through the wilderness to Mt Sinai. Here he met with them and formally took them as his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:4-6). He gave them the Ten Commandments, his treaty document binding him and his people together in covenant. He gave them his law: "Be holy, for I am holy." He provided a sacrificial system to atone for sin. All so that Israel might dwell in the presence of a holy God as he took up residence in the tabernacle in their midst.

A vine winds through the window for Israel was God's vine which he planted in the vineyard he had lovingly prepared. Israel moved on from Sinai, and entered the promised land. Trumpets accompanied their journey. They were blown at each stage of the journey through the wilderness. They were blown every fifty years in the Year of Jubilee to proclaim liberty. They were blown at Jericho to open Israel's entrance into the Land. And they were blown for the coronation of the king, the one God placed over his kingdom to lead his people in righteousness and justice.

The final panel shows Jerusalem and its temple. Here in Zion God and his people dwelt together. The goal of Israel's pilgrimage was God himself. In Israel God redeemed a people for himself, and in Zion he dwelt with them in their midst.

Just as something had gone wrong in Paradise, so something went wrong in Israel. The nation broke faith, going the same way as Adam. The vineyard became ruined. Intended to be the solution to the problem, Israel became part of the problem. Called to be a holy nation, Israel became indistinguishable from the other nations. God finally removed his presence and expelled Israel from the land, just as he had

expelled Adam and Eve from the garden. But he promised to come and save his people.

## Act 3: Christ

The third act is Christ, represented by the cross, surmounted by the Lion and the Lamb. God was true to his promise, but not in the way Israel was expecting. They expected a conquering hero, a lion from the tribe of Judah, who would destroy God's enemies, Israel's enemies. But God sent his own Son. He shone light into the world. Jesus healed lepers, dined with tax collectors and prostitutes, and pronounced forgiveness of sins. To those who cried out, "Lord, have mercy," he gave mercy. The leaders didn't make that cry; they wanted justice not mercy, for they assumed they were in the right and everyone else in the wrong. Jesus made a final pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its temple, joining with all Israel. Finding the temple to be a den of rebels he cleansed it, an implicit claim to be the king, for the spiritual health of the temple, of God's earthly dwelling-place, was the responsibility of the king, the one appointed by God to tend and care for his kingdom.

This was too much! Saying, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15), the Jewish leaders banded with their supposed enemies, the Romans, to kill Jesus, to extinguish this light. The Son of God died on the cross as the rest of Israel ate its Passover lambs and remembered its deliverance from Egypt.

Evil reached its climax, making its greatest assault against God and his purposes. The ruler of the kingdom of darkness brought even the Son of God into his realm of death, removing the light which God had again spoken into the world. Throughout the sabbath day Jesus' body lay in the grave, and the destiny of the world hung in the balance. On the Sunday, the first day of a new week, God raised him from death. This Son, who had taken on human form as the new image of God, had done no wrong; he had done what Adam and Israel had failed to do: be a faithful and obedient servant. Therefore death could not hold him. God vindicated him in the resurrection, and again in the ascension, raising him back to heaven where he has installed him as King.

The lamb atop the cross is an ancient symbol, the *Agnus Dei*, or Lamb of God. The Lamb stands as though slain (Rev 5:6). He is pierced by the cross, but from the cross flies the banner of resurrection, a red cross against a white background. The halo indicates deity for this is the Son of God. God himself entered the human story to defeat evil and put the world aright, even at great cost to himself. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's enemies are defeated: not the Romans or the Jews, but evil, Satan, death and sin. With Jesus' ascension to heaven there is a human in God's presence. With Christ's enthronement there is a faithful and true ruler over God's kingdom. The Son returns to the Father, fully justifying God's earlier declaration, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; 17:5).

## Act 4: Church

The fourth act, represented by the third bay under the cross, is the Church. In the death and resurrection of his Son, God has defeated evil: sin, Satan, death. He has installed a king over his kingdom. But what good does that do to us?

Through his Spirit, represented as a dove, God births a new people on earth. As he spoke light into darkness in the beginning, God through his Spirit shines light into our dark hearts, breathes life into our dead bodies, brings order to our disorder. Through his Spirit God

gives us the resurrection life of his Son, giving us faith in Christ for our salvation. The Spirit is indispensable to us having life.

The vine that was Israel winds also through this panel. Jesus declared, "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). He was the faithful remnant of Israel distilled down to one, the only one who was faithful to God. Into this true vine, Jew and Gentile together are now grafted as branches.

The church is a community, here represented by three people with arms embraced. We are a community gathered around the Scriptures, which tell the story of God's saving work in Christ. And we are gathered around the eucharist: the bread and the cup in which we commune with one another and with God, in which we remember and proclaim the Lord's death, and in which we express our ongoing identification with Christ.

We enter the story in this panel. There are three pairs of hands. I hope they are our hands. The top pair is reached up, both to receive the Holy Spirit, and in praise to God. The middle pair, two hands of different colors, is reached out in peace and reconciliation, for the church is a family in which all are reconciled, not only to God, but also to one another, in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The third pair of hands reaches out to the world, for Christ has sent his people out into all the world as his witnesses. From all nations Jesus Christ is assembling a people for his Father. God wants Christians to be good for the world. But if you ask most non-Christians if Christians are good for the world they will say, No. God intends the church to be a blessing to the world. The church sends out missionaries to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel. But the blessing extends far beyond this. It begins with our neighbor whom we are to love: our near neighbor and our far neighbor. The church itself is also missional, sent into the world as God's agent of healing, sent to be salt and light. For us this begins in Cupertino; it begins with our neighbors. God wants Christians to be good for the world, to be a blessing.

God has gathered us in Christ to be his family, the people of the risen King, filled with his Spirit, empowered to be new people.

## Act 5: Consummation

The fourth bay depicts the End, the fifth and final act, the climax of the Biblical stories of creation and redemption. The rainbow leads here, to the new heavens and the new earth. The joining of heaven and earth is not possible until evil is removed from earth and all is made holy and therefore fit for God's presence. Here all space and time is holy, and God's presence is universal.

Purple represents God's royal majesty. Trumpets again proclaim the coronation of the king, this time the King of kings. The cry goes up, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:15).

In Revelation John sees an innumerable multitude from all nations gathered in heaven singing praise to God and the Lamb (Rev 7:9-10). In the window we see God's people gathered as a community with harp and lyre singing praise to God. God's people are a people who sing, both here and in heaven. We have been given much to sing about. We have been redeemed to the praise of his glory.

The goal of our pilgrimage is New Jerusalem, a city so vast that it fills the whole cosmos. This is the city of God's people and the city of God himself. But here there is no temple, for God himself is its temple. The twelve jewels in the foundations represent the people of God, for this city is the people. This is the heavenly city built by God for those who long to dwell in his presence.

The city is also Paradise restored. Here the river of life flows from God's throne (Rev 22:1-2), bringing life. Here the tree of life grows on

either side of the river; its leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2). Here the lion and the lamb lie down together (Isa 11:6; 65:25), as peace, harmony and wholeness are restored to the created order. The whole creation is released from its bondage to decay and brought into glorious freedom (Rom 8:19-22).

Here the stories of creation and redemption reach their climax. The one story is contained within the other, redemption within creation. The end is not just a recovery of the beginning but something much better. Creation was very good but it was not perfect, it had not attained its final goal. The sanctification of the seventh day raised the possibility that holiness might be extended to the whole creation. Though Adam and Eve dwelt in God's earthly sanctuary their experience of God's direct presence was limited, for heaven and earth were separate realms.

In the new heavens and the new earth, these two realms are joined together: the heavenly city descends to earth. All space and time is holy. God's presence is fully experienced, for we "will see his face" (Rev 22:4). The end is far better than the beginning.

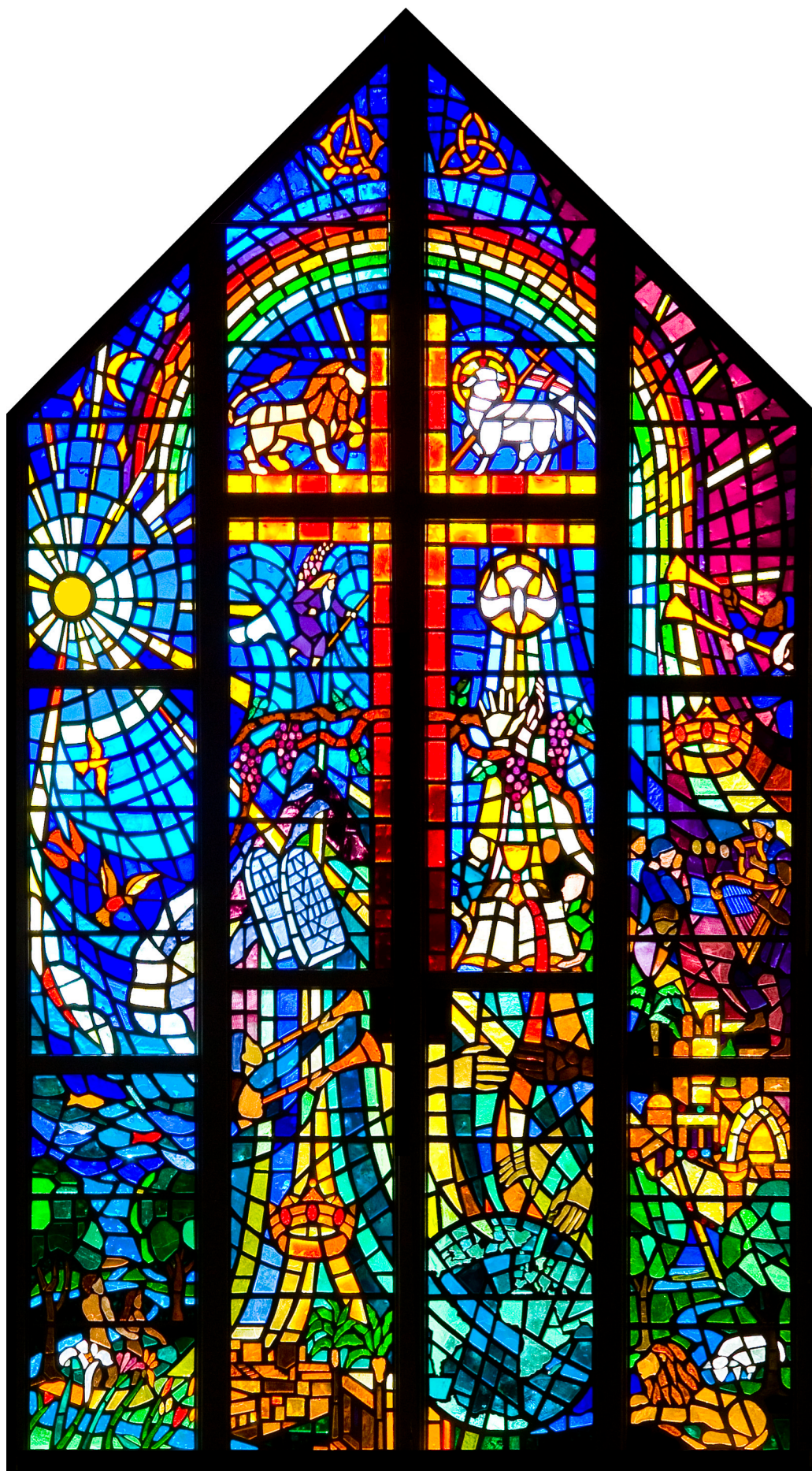
Within this larger story of creation, unfolds the story of redemption. We don't know why God allows evil in his world, but we do see what he is doing about evil: he is in the process of removing it entirely. At the center stands the cross: the cross where humanity concentrated its evil, putting to death the Son of God.

God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them to himself to dwell in his presence. Through the death and resurrection of his Son, and the life-giving ministry of his Spirit, he has delivered us from bondage to sin and death to bring us to himself to dwell in his presence. At the heart lies God's oft-repeated statement: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." This is gloriously fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Rev 21:3).

Where do you fit in this story? How do you understand your own life and its plot? How does it intersect God's plot? We have a tendency to conform God's story to our story. This can take many forms. We may seek to co-opt God to give us what we want. Whether it's health, wealth, prosperity, or the pursuit of the American dream, or life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, we want God to bless the story that we're pursuing. But what we need to do is conform our story to God's story. God seeks to mend our brokenness, to shine light into our dark hearts, to order our disorder, to repair our broken worlds, to fill us with his Spirit that we become transformed people. What drives him is his love, for he is a God of love who invites us into his love. No story is so broken that God cannot bring life through Christ and his Spirit.

Are those our hands in the window? Do our hands reach up to God, seeing him as the source of all things? Are they reached up in praise, and to receive his Spirit who breathes life into us? Do our hands reach out to one another in reconciliation, in peace and forgiveness? And do our hands reach out to the world, beginning with our neighbor, as we seek to bless the world? This is where our stories need to intersect God's story, as he seeks to bring blessing to the world he loves. We are his presence in the world. May he give us the grace to live a Christ-centered life, dependent upon his Spirit working in us, to his glory and to the good of the world.





This message from Scripture was preached at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino on January 1st, 2017. PBCC is located at 10601 N Blaney Ave, Cupertino, CA 95014. Tel (408) 366 6690. Website: [www.pbcc.org](http://www.pbcc.org).