

# STORY SHAPES LIFE

## The Story We Want...

### SEARCHING FOR STORY

Life can be confusing. Whether in romance, vocation, family, or opportunity; making sense of what we are experiencing in the moment is a human puzzle we are constantly working on. Especially when what we are experiencing is loss, drastic change, difficulty, suffering, or uncertainty.

It is in these moments that humans tell stories. After all, Stories are *crafted* narrative that *disclose the continuity* in the particulars of the plot-line, uniting to *reveal* something outside of the visible range, something going on behind the scenes of the story: a value, a state of being, a quality, *a truth*. Storytelling is “*sensemaking*”<sup>1</sup>.

Let me tell you a story of how storytelling is sensemaking:

Cohen and I get our hair cut at a little barbershop in our neighborhood. This local shop was started by a young hairstylist, Courtney, and her mom Catherine, about the same time we moved from Seattle to east Dallas to begin the story of Christ City. So Courtney and Catherine’s plight to start something new, in a new place, with little connection but big dreams was something we had in common. In part because of our common story and in part because my profession happens to be pastor; I have been invited into a lot of details of Courtney and Catherine’s stories! From histories to personalities to personal issues and even business issues. Instead of my barber being my therapist, I am usually the one in the counseling chair!

Whenever you start something new, something you own and love; there is a lot of work, emotion, and identity wrapped up in what could be. Yet, a lot of new things fail. The highs and lows of life seem ever more vivid in these kind of stories. Inevitably, something happens in the story that cannot be overcome and what starts finishes sooner than expected. I knew our little barber shop was coming to one of those chapters that would require a change in direction of the characters. So, when I went to get my haircut this week it was not a surprise to learn that the shop is closing next month.

Catherine happen to be the one cutting my hair this day, and as she began to process the weight of the decision to close and the uncertainty of what is ahead she began to try and makes sense of the situation by telling stories.

Catherine’s story begin by recounting the seemingly miraculous account of how she was presented with the seed money for this shared dream with her daughter. Surely such a divine appointment must mean that there is more to this story than a closing business.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: stories Americans live by*, 55.

She then began to outline the plot in the form of questions. Did she simply move here with Courtney to start this shop so Courtney could meet Matt, a guy she believes Courtney will spend the rest of her life with? Maybe the Lord, how often we begin to look for him in times of desperation, is moving them on because there shop and the surrounding shops are going to get sold to a big developer anyway, or something bad is going to happen here a few months from now and this is just a way to protect them from it. Maybe the reason Catherine's mother (who has been pretty sick for a while) hasn't gotten worse yet is because Catherine wasn't in a place to take her; but now she will be. Even, just maybe, Catherine ponders, "I have made this place an idol, I don't think so, but maybe. And this is a way to free me from that idol."

In our conversation Catherine was trying to make sense of her world today by shaping a story, a story with a past, with purpose in the up and down nature of her plot, with hope in the future. She was searching for a story of redemption; liberation from difficulty into something prosperous, a better ending than she was experiencing: whether a lifelong relationship for her daughter, the ability to care for her aging mother, or protection from something worse or evil without warning.

A story in which God's role was at times a good sovereign, at others a punitive parent, and others a distant deity. Never absent, rather playing various roles as the story was being formed. Is he author? Is he advisor? He is judge?

Catherine searching for her own identity in the story as well. Is she the crafter of the story who got it wrong? Is she the offender that has caused the tension being faced? Is she one following faithfully in the ups and downs?

Every maybe, every story arch, looking to see the good in what is obviously a not good situation. Processing pain and looking for opportunity. Catherine has a faith history, and so we talk about reality as it is revealed in Scripture. We talk about how it is okay to cry out to God with confusion and hurt, like the psalmists do. We talk about how God shows grace and mercy over and over again, even when we fail in our faithfulness. We also talk about the reality that we live in a broken world in which difficulty is experienced without a discernable cause; though not without limitation either.

We end the conversation and hair trimming encouraged in God's faithfulness to his story, even when Catherine is unsure of her own. And, a pretty good hair cut too!

We call identify with Catherine's *narrative sensemaking*. Each of us can remember times where, like Catherine, we have been in search of the story in which we found ourselves, looking for continuity and coherence in the plot of life events. **Looking at our past for something behind the twists and turns, something giving insight to our perceived present plight helping us to imagine a future.**

And most often, the story we humans, especially we Americans (even with varied histories and ideologies) end up telling is a story of redemption. A story of "*deliverance from suffering to a better world.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. xiv.

Dan McAdams, a professor at Northwestern University, has spent his life researching and studying story in the lives of people and the greater culture in which these stories are told. He argues that,

“Research on life stories suggests that the narratives people construct to make sense of their lives **say as much about the culture** in which those stories are told as they do about the tellers themselves...I will argue that Americans have a favorite story about how to become a good person, a story that can be traced back hundreds of years...The story is called *the redemptive self*.”<sup>3</sup>

**As a culture, we want to tell redemptive stories.** Not too dissimilar to the story our faith family has been immersed in for millennia. Much like the story of redemption that we looked at in Exodus last Sunday: “a deliverance from suffering to a better world.” The stories that give shape to the American dream!

This afternoon we will give a brief sketch of these foundational stories of redemption in our culture, and, in light of Jesus, we will see how we might respond.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. xiii.

## WHAT REDEMPTIVE STORIES?

Let me sketch the most common images and ideas we use to tell redemptive stories, to “make sense of the moves in [our] lives from negativity and suffering, on the one hand, to positivity and enhancement, on the other...In making narrative sense of our own lives, we may borrow from and blend many different discourses to capture the idea of moving from suffering to positive outcome.”<sup>4</sup>

However, McAdams has found that our culture has six most common languages of redemption. Perhaps you have heard these stories before, perhaps you are even telling them as your story!

<i>Type</i>	<i>Source Domains</i>	<i>Redemptive Move</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<b>Atonement</b>	Religion	Sin to Forgiveness, Salvation	Puritan spiritual autobiographies. Christian conversion experiences & confession.
<b>Emancipation</b>	Political System	Slavery to Freedom	African American slave narratives. Stories of escaping abuse, liberation from oppression.
<b>Upward Mobility</b>	Economy	Poverty to Wealth, Social Standing	Benjamin Franklin’s <i>Autobiography</i> . <b>Horatio Alger</b> stories, rags-to-riches immigrant success stories. <b>Motivational speakers, business testimonials.</b>
<b>Recovery</b>	Medicine, Psychology	Sickness to Health, Wholeness	Stories of healing. Psychotherapy narratives. 12-Step programs.
<b>Enlightenment</b>	Education, Science	Ignorance to Knowledge	Stories of the growth of the mind. Stories of insight, discovery.
<b>Development</b>	Parenting, Psychology	Immaturity to Actualization	Stories of psychological growth. Stories of moral development & character-building.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 24-25. Includes the chart reproduced here.

In film, literature, counseling, and coffee-shop conversations; when we listen to the stories being told in our culture—especially stories told by people considered healthy in their psychological, social, and even economic functions of life—we hear redemptive stories. Stories moving from difficulty to a better world. These are the stories we want for our life. **Stories we have been told and stories we are trying to tell.** *Stories that capture reality as we experience it: positively and negatively, and with a purpose.*

**“Redemptive narratives are not simply happy stories; rather, they are stories of suffering and negativity that turn positive in the end. Without the negative emotions, there can be no redemption in the story.** In the same study, we analyzed overall positivity of life-story accounts, as well as the redemption theme. Many stories have happy endings; only some of them are redemptive. We found that simply telling or writing emotionally positive, upbeat, optimistic stories about life was not very strongly related to measures of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and life coherence. Instead, the redemption theme predicated psychological well-being much more strongly than did the measure of how ‘positive’ or ‘happy’ the person’s story was. **Put simply, people who feel good about themselves and their lives do not necessarily tell life stories that are filled with positive emotions. Sometimes they do; sometimes they do not. But they often tell life stories that are filled with redemption themes.** Life stories of atonement, emancipation, recovery, enlightenment, development, and upward mobility are the kinds of life stories that especially happy and well-functioning American students and adults tend to tell. **Reflecting for sure the sensibilities of our current age, they are nonetheless reminiscent of the kinds of life stories that have captured some of the brightest and most hopeful aspects of American identity for over 300 years.”**<sup>5</sup>

Like our faith family, we too find ourselves longing for redemption. Recognizing brokenness and difficulty, hoping for a new and better world than what we see today. **And that’s not a bad thing!**

Yet, ***our faith calls us to be discerning.*** To not be conformed to the patterns of this world but transformed by the renewing of our mind so that we can test and support what God is doing. If God is the one redeeming, are these his stories? To be ones who are not tossed to and fro by every story in the sea of stories we traverse, but to find stability and sure navigation in the midst of the flow of story that make up our life.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 27.

## WHY REDEMPTIVE STORIES SHOULD PEAK OUR ATTENTION

**Each of the redemption images which McAdams offers, describes nothing less than a picture of a good life.** A deliverance from a world of suffering to a better world. Moving from sin to forgiveness, from slavery to freedom, from poverty to prosperity, from ignorance to knowledge, from sickness to health, from youthfulness to maturity. All good things! After all, are these not the very aspirations we encourage as a faith family? Are they not the stories we desire for ourselves as well as for our neighbors?

Should we not just say “Yes and Amen!” to the clear parallels to redemption? We are redeemed, so let’s continue redeeming! Isn’t all of our stories on an Exodus arch anyway? What then could be the issue?

There is actually a character in the story of Revelation that helps us understand **why these cultural stories of redemption should peak our attention.**

John through the Holy Spirit, gives us **a physical picture of what is invisible** (yet nonetheless real). Specifically the influence of a *beast*. It may seem a bit over the top for our western, non-imaginative minds, but to see the unseen we need a bit of abnormal!

In chapter 12, the wisdom of the Lord is about to give birth to the salvation of the world; yet the dragon—the physical manifestation of evil, the rebellious serpent in the garden, the singular representative of the covetous gods and their people dispersed at Babel—is seeking out the salvation intended by God to overcome the dragon; seeking to kill the first born, the rescuer out of fear of its own destruction—much like Pharaoh’s attempted slaughter of the first born in Exodus.

The wisdom of the Lord, hidden for ages however, gives birth to the salvation—a male child—at which point the dragon turns his attention to “make war on the rest of her offspring”—the first born’s brothers and sisters—described as “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus”.

How does the dragon, the rebellious divines, make war on Jesus and his family? By giving power to a beast that springs from the sea which is described as “the peoples and the multitudes and the nations and languages”; **a beast birthed out of cultures and civilizations (stories) of humanity; a golden calf of sorts.** This beast is a first born itself, a beginning of the dragon and humanities relationship, an opposing salvation to the one birthed by the wisdom of God.

“And I saw the beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bears, and its mouth like a lion’s mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast and who can fight against it?’” (Rev. 13:1-4)

What you might not see or hear immediately, at least not yet but you will as much of the imagery here we’ll encounter as we walk through Scripture together this year, is that **this beast is as slightly distorted mirror image of the salvation of the world birthed in chapter 12.**

- He is a first born who looks like an assemblage of authority (animals for the beast vs elements of metal, stone, light and fire of Jesus from chapter 1).
- He is given authority and power to persuade the people to worship the one who has given him such (here the dragon vs. Jesus seeking the glory of the Father).
- He is considered different, above, superior to all other forces (a name above all names, a name in which nothing can pluck his own form from his hand much like what is said of Jesus in Romans 8).
- But most all, **he resembles the one who opens the scroll in the beginning of the story** (chapter 5), “a lamb standing, as though he had been slain, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth”.

This beast was meant to reflect the lamb, wounded but healed. **Not dying for the people, but having the appearance of overcoming humanity's greatest enemy: death.** He is seen as our salvation. Overcoming suffering for a better world. Ironically, a few chapters later this same salvation turns out to be the very destroyer of humanity itself. He consumes the ones he promised to save; himself tossed into eternal destruction.

Okay, so what does this have to do with redemptive stories?

Remember, the images of the dragon, sea and beast are *physical pictures of invisible reality*. **A reality in which the characters we were introduced to in Genesis 1-11 and who we saw in various conflicts with God in Exodus, are in collaboration to write their own salvation stories<sup>6</sup>.** To be the authors of their own salvation. For no one—well, almost not one!—fails to recognize that things are not as good as they could or should be in this world.

*So, can you see that the redemptive stories of our culture are these slightly distorted mirrored images of the slain lamb, of true salvation; deliverance from suffering to a better world?*

They appear to overcome our human struggles, wounded but not killed. In doing so, **they draw us into the praise of the one who rescues, which usually is ourselves (whether particularly or in wisdom of design, piety, process, strength, ingenuity, grit) and sometimes with a little luck (fate, chance, a distant but helpful deity)!**

**Our cultural stories run parallel to the Story of God, yet remain in conflict with it.** Giving the appearance of being for us, but ultimately warring against our very perseverance as humans; for almost all of these redemptive stories are missing two things: **the real issue and the only hope.**

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<sup>6</sup> More often than not, this collaboration is only semi-friendly. Like two partners who really want their own way but have some issue they have to face together to get their own way. So they work together, but often not to each other's full benefit, certainly not sacrificially for the other, and often trying to one-up the other. Kind of like feuding siblings, ha!

## WHAT EVERY REDEMPTIVE STORY LEAVES OUT

What we will discover in our journey from rescue to the promise land, from deliverance to a better world, in the story of Scripture is **that the issue we are trying to overcome is rebellion (sin) and the only hope is holiness.** *Two things not easily overcome/escaped nor easily gained.*

What the law and the prophets (the summary terminology for the Old Testament) will show us, over and over again, what was storied for us in the experience of Exodus, is that **rescue is not just from the evil** authorities like Pharaoh and the dragon **but from our own doubt and rebellion.** And that what we are rescued to, in **not merely prosperity but presence**, a restoration of Eden in the good and purposeful company of God. *We are sinful and we are in need of holiness.* This video will help us see this...

## THE LAW | [Video](#)

**Sin and Holiness.** The real issue and the real hope of redemption.

What our cultural stories most often assume is that redemption is simply a deliverance from difficulty to a better world. **What we are delivered from is difficulty or suffering** (even if it is evil making things difficult), and in turn, **the locus of redemption is found within.** The story is within you and we are told to shape what we want and how to get it—whether that be through pious religion, strength, grit, growth, escape.

**Ultimately our redemptive story making never moves us beyond our original issue of control; of writing our own story.** *These stories fail to move us into God's Story.*

While parallel they are actually in conflict with the Story of redemption. **Our stories are the issue and our only hope is not struggle made into something good, but death being taken on and life being given.** This is the story that Scripture shows us. The Story that Jesus tells and who redirects our stories.

## REDEEMING REDEMPTION

Jesus' rebukes and corrections to stories in Revelation 2-3 show us how His Story confronts and corrects our stories or religion or self-made redemption. **The parallels of our culturally redemptive stories make it easy to correct/redirect them, but also deceptively dangerous if we are lulled to sleep and fail to pay attention.**

Thus we must be discerning. Not fearful, not dismissive, but prayerful, immersed in Jesus' story, **always redeeming redemption.** Which, is why we confess and receive the broken body and shed blood of Jesus!

Confessing that we are often **lured into telling slightly mirrored stories of redemption**, as we receive and recognizing **who is redeeming and what is actually being redeemed in our everyday life.**

As we split into groups to 'redeem redemption', consider these questions:

- Is the **issue** of the story **sin**—rebellion from God? What we need to be delivered from are the consequences of the rebellion—internally and externally, individually and collectively.
- Is the **hope** of the story **holiness**—restored relationship with God? Is the better world the presence of God?
- Or, something else? *Sickness to health, poverty to wealth, ignorance to knowledge, enslavement to freedom, immaturity to maturity?*

**Our redemptive cultural stories will be upon the screen during this time for your reference.**