THE POWER OF STORY:

EXPLORING THE USE OF STORY AND STORYTELLING

IN THE LITURGY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

By

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It's the first Sunday of the month and I sit at my desk looking through my liturgies for the day. Being that it is the first Sunday, today the congregation I serve will gather for the Lord's Supper. So, there I sit, running through the invitation to the table, thinking through the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, considering the beautiful gift that today's celebration is. When I consider the Lord's Supper on a personal level, I think about my grandfather, who on the morning he died took communion in his little one-bedroom apartment in a New York nursing home with my grandmother by his side, and I consider the reality that in some mysterious way when I celebrate the Lord's Supper, he is present there with me. I think about Judas and the fact that he sat at the table with Jesus, experiencing the grace and love of God when all the while Jesus knew Judas would betray him. So, there I sit in my office considering the ways I can help communicate these deep truths to those in my congregation. When the time comes for the congregation to celebrate together, I move to my regular place behind the table, I recite the prepared liturgy, raising my hands, looking out at those in the pews, some whom I know well, some who are unfamiliar, and yet I speak words about the unity we experience when we come to this shared table. I speak of the love on offer to all, I proclaim the good news of God's grace on offer once again and, as I look out, I see glazed eyes, I see people half paying attention, rummaging through purses and bulletins, or talking with a neighbor. I begin thinking about the service. Yes, it has run a little long, the sermon wasn't my best work – it was a little dry, and halfway through I lost my place and stumbled for 30 seconds – but right now something beautiful is happening, shouldn't people be as excited as I am? Then the time comes to finally partake of this gracious foretaste of the Kingdom of God,

people begin walking down the center pew, coming forward and someone passes me a note – which I try to discretely glance at to make sure there's not something serious going on I'm unaware of, but instead it's a note to make an announcement for them. A woman walks forward wearing a red sweater. She is a beloved member of the congregation and is very passionate about her faith, regularly attending worship and Bible studies. When she reaches the table, she takes the bread and looks at me with a wonderful smile, and I feel the joy in my own heart, she dips the bread in the cup and just as I am about to speak, "Christ's blood shed for you," she interrupts saying, "I really like your tie today."

While the story above is a real moment in my ministry, it is also just one example among a plethora of similar stories, which I share it to help illustrate two points. First, there are many areas of faith and spirituality where people can have very different experiences. In this instance, I was experiencing something quite transcendent while partaking in the sacraments that members of my congregation seemingly were not. While it should go without saying there are always exceptions and there are people who have similar experiences to my own, the many conversations I had and interviews I conducted regarding my perception only strengthened this understanding. One of the ways I questioned if my perceptions were accurate was to share this story with others, with colleagues in ministry and congregants. Fellow colleagues in ministry could see themselves in the same place, picturing themselves at the table, hearing these words as if they were seeing their own congregations. Likewise, as I shared this story with members of the focus group that participated in this study, many laughed as they heard it, because

they too could see themselves within it, and acknowledged the ways they felt that perceived disconnect. Which leads to the second point: stories are a powerful tool that invite people, through the use of imagination, to experience realities that are not readily present or perceived. This paper grows out of those two observations and, by means of qualitative research, will examine how the use of story, particularly focusing on its use in a Reformed Eucharistic liturgy, can impact the experience and understanding of worshippers. More specifically, over the course of five Sundays the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Sand Springs will gather for the Lord's Supper. Each Sunday, rather than reciting the standard Eucharistic liturgy found within the *Book of Common Worship* the congregation will explore a story, either hearing a story told or telling it themselves. Over this same period, I will conduct interviews and brief surveys to explore the impact the practice of storytelling has.

While the story above points to the general observations that inspire this project, it is also important to examine the ways these observations intersect other realities within the trends of Western Christianity, my ministry, and myself in order to provide additional rationale inspiring this project.

"Nones," Spiritual but Not Religious, and Disenchantment

Prior to attending seminary, and then on several occasions in various classes in seminary, I heard and participated in many conversations regarding changing religious trends. Philosopher Charles Taylor speaks of the change quite succinctly in his book, *A Secular Age,* as he seeks to "define and trace [the change] which takes us from a society

in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even from the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[1] In other words, while belief in God was the norm in Western societies, that is no longer the case, and it is now culturally acceptable for people to hold a variety of beliefs. However, this does not mean people have simply turned to disbelief, but rather the nature of belief has changed. This is made evident in part by the growth of new groups of spiritual beliefs such as the "nones" or spiritual but not religious.[2]

The language of the "nones" comes from the 1972 General Social Survey (GSS) which asked the question "what is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion" with the last response option being "none."[3] In 1972, when the survey began, just over 5% of adults responded with "none" which increased to just under 21% by 2014 and as of 2021 sits just under 30%.[4] While the language of "none" in the GSS seems to indicate a lack of religious identity, meaning agnostic or atheist, the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey points to the idea that some who select "none" may still identify generally as Christian but have lost all connection to denominations. Within this nuance comes the language of "Spiritual but not religious," which has again grown out of the language and results found in the GSS since 1998, and which has grown from roughly

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[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

[2] It is important to note that all the proceeding information and statistics are solely focused on the U.S.

[3] Christopher Scheitle, Katie Corcoran, and Caitlin Halligan, "The Rise of the Nones and the Changing Relationships Between Identity, Belief, and Behavior," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 33, no. No. 3 (2018): 568.

[4] Gregory Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

10% to 15% of Americans.[5] Bluntly stated, Christianity within the West, and specifically in America, is declining, however there is a growth in those who still seem to be connected to some form of spirituality.

One of the obvious questions as a response to this information is, why? Scheitle, Corcoran, and Halligan point to a correlation between the falling number of those who espoused a weaker feeling of religious preference from 1974 to 2014 and the growth of the "nones" within that same timeframe.[6] In essence they point to one potential answer, arguing that the growing number of people with a weaker religious identity or connection leads to people who no longer identify with any religious tradition or identity. That idea, though, results in an additional question, and in this case the primary question I am concerned with: why might people have a weaker connection to religious tradition or identity? While this question is simply stated, the potential answers are far too complex and varied to explore within the scope of this paper, so I will focus specifically on the work of Charles Taylor.[7]

While the research mentioned above points to the statistical reality that trends within Christianity have shifted, Taylor engages the reality along philosophical and historical lines.[8] In examining the reality of the numerical growth of the "nones" and spiritual but

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[5] Nancy Ammerman, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52(2) (2013): 258.

[6] Scheitle, Corcoran, and Halligan, "The Rise of the Nones and the Changing Relationships Between Identity, Belief, and Behavior," 569–70.

[7] Pointing to the complexity of this question, while Scheitle, et al., point to the correlation stated above, they are also quick to point out the reality that said correlation may be misleading as there are those who strongly identified with a religious tradition but then stated they had no belief in God. In essence, there is potentially a shift in cultural expectations bringing about the changes in belief. Scheitle, Corcoran, and Halligan, 571–72.

[8] In fact, Taylor goes so far as to acknowledge he is not talking about statistics but that an "obvious" and "unchallengeable status that belief enjoyed in earlier centuries has been lost." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 530.

not religious Taylor states, "many young people are following their own spiritual instincts…looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth."[9] This search for the sacred, greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth often then stands in contrast to the "institutional religion" which has the prime mandate to "dictate a certain code of behaviour."[10] One of the possible reasons for this is the movement from enchantment to disenchantment. In essence, Taylor argues that an enchanted world is the world of "spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in," whereas a disenchanted world is one that is more scientifically minded and no longer inherently believes in the supernatural.[11] Disenchantment, according to Taylor, takes a few forms, one such form being the "buffered self," which "begins to find the idea of spirits, moral forces, causal powers with a purposive bent, close to incomprehensible."[12] Additionally, the buffered self creates a distinction between the inner and outer world, meaning, whereas once someone might be described as demon possessed now they might suffer from mental illness. In other words, the buffered self sees what was once considered external forces impacting the people as internal realities of a person.[13]

While these trends impact culture as a whole, in Western society there are still moments where the buffered self seeks out elements of enchantment. Andrew Root, reflecting on further work by Charles Taylor, points out the ways in which people now

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[9] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 506.
[10] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 508.
[11] It is important to note that Taylor focuses acknowledges multiple different areas of change that have led to "secularization" Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 26.
[12] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 539.
[13] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 540.

seek out sources of fear, such as going to horror movies or haunted houses.[14] In addition to horror movies, we could point to this reality with the success of things such as the Marvel franchise over the last decade, which has allowed people to engage in stories of their youth and see their dreams realized. Or you could look at a series like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R.R. Martin, which is sometimes referred to as "grimdark" as it engages darker themes and elements more that may stir emotional responses typical of horror while also being set in fantasy. All this to say, while we, as Taylor suggests, live in a disenchanted world, which has in part led to secularization, we also appear to seek enchantment still. And in the examples shown above, one of the common themes that appears to help us engage enchantment is story. Though the media source may vary, it is story that seems to create a space where the buffered self can engage something outside of itself.

This leads me in part to the hypothesis of this paper. In a secularized world where the population of "nones" are growing, along with the spiritual but not religious, where disenchantment appears to be the normative view, might story be an avenue to help people experience something beyond themselves? In this case, might story help people experience the sacred, greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth?

The Context of First Presbyterian Church of Sand Springs

While there is a larger question this paper tries to explore, it is also grounded within the context of the worshipping community that I serve. It is a small Presbyterian Church U.S.A. congregation consisting of roughly 70 active congregants located in Sand Springs,

[14] Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic a division of Baker Publishing Company, 2019), 32.

Oklahoma. While my congregation is very much situated within a disenchanted world, it is also situated in what is affectionately referred to as the "Bible Belt." This makes my context somewhat different than the reality as Taylor presents it. While the world around my congregation and city are very much disenchanted, many within the "Bible Belt" cling to enchantment. For instance, in a recent Bible study within my church, an individual began speaking about the reality of various oppressive spirits that can control people and the need for prayer to battle spirits. However, even if that view is held by many in the community, it is not a majority view within the congregation, which instead contains a broad spectrum of belief. For instance, within the group of individuals that participated in this research, there are a few who regularly speak of the interventional power of God, a God who will even reach down into the world to change a stop light from red to green, or the belief that though spiritual oppression may not be real Satan still interferes at times in life bringing moments of hardship. In contrast to this, there are also those who profess a belief that no form of demonic reality exists, not even a basic belief in Satan.

While this plurality of views provides a wonderful space for conversation, it is also challenging to engage at times as a pastor because it forces me to engage both views of reality simultaneously. For example, if I were to preach or teach about a biblical text such as Matthew 8:28–34, the famous passage where Jesus heals two demon possessed men, resulting in a multitude of demons being cast into swine and later running into the sea, I would encounter difficulty communicating to the plurality of thought in the congregation. By speaking as if demon possession is possible, I would make some completely tune out of the teaching or preaching. Contrasting that, by pointing to the

potential literary moves the author of Matthew is making, joining this pericope with the one before where the question by Jesus' disciples is, "what sort of man is this?" (Matthew 8:27 [NRSVUE]) a question answered by the demon possessed men in Matthew 8:29, I would lose the ears of some parishioners who deeply believe in the supernatural. In essence, because of the plurality of views within my own congregation, let alone the surrounding local culture, engaging faith becomes complicated as you engage those clinging to enchantment and those who have a buffered self.

This reality is further complicated when the theological tradition my congregation finds itself in affirms there are elements of our faith that hold to an enchanted understanding of the world. For instance, when we look at either of the sacraments practiced in the Reformed tradition, we see glimpses of enchantment. As the *Book of Order* for the PCUSA states, "when we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites with the church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God."[15] In other words, within the theological convictions of my congregation's denomination is a belief that the sacraments invite something outside of the buffered self to be experienced.

I share this to help illustrate the difficulty of ministry that I, and likely other pastors, experience. We preach and teach to a group of people, some clinging to enchantment in the midst of a culture that is disenchanted, and some who have embraced the buffered self. All the while, I and others proclaim great mysteries that invite people to experience something beyond themselves. However, as has been illustrated in the opening story above, when I proclaim these mysteries of our faith, that God through the Holy Spirit

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[15] *Book of Order 2022–2025: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Office of the General Assembly, 2023), 99.

draws us with the totality of the Church into the presence of God, some people stare blankly forward, disconnected, or distracted. Once again, I turn to the main question of this paper: might story and the practice of storytelling help engage the minds and imaginations of both the enchanted and disenchanted, offering a tool to help both groups experience something of the nature and work of God?

My Love of Story

Finally, I must confess, I love stories.

Growing up, stories were a wonderful escape mechanism. In a home that was often unstable, I turned to stories of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, stories that let me live in a world that was not mine, if only for a moment. They became a gateway for me to experience something different than my immediate circumstance.

In adulthood, I have found that stories have continued to function as an escape, letting my mind wonder and wander into worlds and circumstances much different than my own. They have also become a tool for me to explore aspects of my life, giving images and words to what is real. For instance, one of my favorite authors, Brandon Sanderson, tends to create characters who, though often rooted in fantasy, are very real. In his series, *The Stormlight Archive,* some of the main characters suffer from mental illness such as depression and anxiety, realities that I have wrestled with personally for years. As I read their stories, I often find that I'm looking at myself, I'm seeing my own struggles and pains, and sometimes they give voice to parts of my inner self I am struggling to make sense of.

This love of stories has also impacted how I read the story of the Bible. Yes, as a pastor I study language, I exegete texts, and I delve into theology trying to learn and grow, but I also find myself reading the Bible just to read the story. I stop theologizing and try to imagine what is being said, imagine the feelings and expressions of the various characters, imagine being present in the story, walking the streets of Jerusalem just as I would navigate the Shattered Plains of Roshar.[16] However, that is also only my personal experience. Only once during my time in ministry can I recall preaching or teaching in a way that focused on engaging scripture as story, viewing myself as storyteller.[17] The vast majority of my ministry has focused on the task of preaching, teaching, or worship leading as exploring biblical texts for the purposes of learning. In fact, in my preaching I tend to even avoid including too many illustrations or stories, focusing most of my attention on the exegetical exploration of a text. While that has been my view historically it is also a view held by some within my congregations. I have heard from various members the desire to not hear stories during sermons, but rather hear explanations or theological insights to help them better interpret scripture. This, however, has led to the final question that helps ground this paper: if I truly love stories and am personally impacted in the process of engaging them, why am I reluctant to use story in the context of Christian worship? Why can I read a story for the sake of the story and yet find myself in the context of ministry unable to invite that same experience regarding the Bible?

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[16] The Shattered Plains are one of the main locations within *The Stormlight Archives* which is set on the planet Roshar.

[17] The one instance being a Palm Sunday sermon during the COVID-19 pandemic where I chose to read through the entirety of the passion narrative. In this instance the choice came out of the reality that our normal structure of Holy Week services was disrupted given the pandemic and I wanted to ensure people experienced more of the Passion narrative prior to Easter Sunday.

Again, the purpose of this project is to examine how story and the practice of storytelling, particularly focusing on its use in a Reformed Eucharistic liturgy, can impact the experience and understanding of worshippers. I seek to explore the ways the practice of storytelling might affect the experiences and understanding of worshippers quite broadly, exploring its impact on the buffered self. Locating the practice of storytelling in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy more specifically helps to engage my context of ministry, in that the Lord's table is already a space where I can visibly see people disconnect from an experience that, at least in the context of denominational belief, should be a "thin space" between enchantment and disenchantment. And I explore the practice of storytelling because stories have been a foundational part of my life, and I am curious if that same experience can be had in the context of faith.

Over the course of the following chapters I will explore the theological and biblical rationale for the use of story and the practice of storytelling, as well as the location of story and storytelling in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy, examine the physical implementation of the project, and present the concluding data, examining how it relates to the thesis that guides this project.

CHAPTER 2: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The beginning of the season of Lent was upon me with the arrival of our Ash Wednesday service. During my time in ministry, I had developed the tradition of connecting the imposition of ashes with the celebration of the Lord's Supper in an effort to simultaneously remind people of their mortality and of the grace, mercy, and love of God. Having served in two congregations that were made up mostly of older members, the imposition of ashes was always quite a powerful moment for me. I knew that there were some whom I would impose ashes upon, repeat the common phrase, "remember you are dust and to dust you will return" adding to it an extra word of grace, "but you are precious in the eyes of God," for whom this truth would become realized this year. Then people would walk past me to receive communion.

This night has always held meaning and always been a personally powerful experience. That said, this year was even more powerful. It was my first year serving as a solo pastor in a new congregation, a move my family and I made because, with two small children, it would provide a better environment for our family. A reality I experienced that night. As the service went on, the time came for the imposition of ashes. I walked forward off the chancel, in front of the Lord's Table in the center aisle of the church, and invited the members forward to receive the imposition of ashes and come to the Lord's table. For several minutes, I stood dipping my thumb in a small cup of ashes, brushing foreheads and hands, while looking deeply into the eyes of a parishioner, repeating the familiar phrase, "remember you are dust and to dust you will return…but you are precious in the eyes of God." Though the moments were powerful for me and at times brought me to tears, I could also distance myself. I imposed the truth of their mortality upon them, but it

was upon them, not me. Then something unexpected happened. I had not realized it, but my spouse and daughter had come to the service. There, walking down the aisle was my 3-year-old daughter with a smile on her face. She walked straight up to me, and just like those before her pulled up the front of her blonde hair, baring her forehead to me. I doubt that, at the age of three, she understood the words I spoke to her in that moment as I once again dipped my thumb into the small cup of ashes and then brushed a small cross on her forehead. And as I looked at her, speaking those difficult words, she just kept smiling, simply glad to be participating in this moment. I, on the other hand, was struggling to keep my composure. I could see the small child I held in my arms bouncing to sleep as I watched the Chicago Cubs finally win a World Series, I could see this small girl full of joy standing in front of me glad to be present unaware of what she was participating in, and I was confronted with the core reality that at some point she would return to the dust. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes, because after years of imposing this truth on so many, it felt like the first time it was being imposed upon me. She was dust and to dust she would return…but she was precious to me.

In this chapter I explore the theological and biblical rationale that guides this project. This project explores how story and the practice of storytelling impact the experiences of worshippers, particularly focusing on its use in a Reformed Eucharistic liturgy. This chapter will therefore be structured with three sections: the power of story; liturgical practice; and a Reformed understanding of the Eucharist. As the power of story is the primary focus of this project, this section will garner the most attention, with the other two sections serving to offer a contextual understanding to explore how the practice

of using story and storytelling will be used in this project, namely how it fits in its liturgical location and the story being told in that liturgy.

The Power of Story

The power of story will be the primary focus of this chapter and will consist of multiple subsections, some of which are illustrated in the story above. To begin, the story above is a story about story. That is to say, in the context of that and many other Ash Wednesday services, the culmination of the service is the retelling of a short but poignant story – humanity came from the ground and will at some point return to the ground and yet God calls us beloved. This is a story that is rooted in one of the opening creation accounts in Genesis 2:7 where God forms the man or in Hebrew, *adam,* from the ground, *adamah.* It ties that story to other biblical stories like the famous John 3:16 or 1 John 4:19 which proclaim the love of God. However, it also implies another story, that is the story of life, that humans are mortal beings who will die. Echoing the famous phrase, "nothing is certain except death and taxes," this very brief story both retells stories and helps tell a story to make sense of the reality of life. In essence, we are story people. Whether we realize it or not story and the practice of storytelling is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human.

Second, story and the practice of storytelling invite people to engage their imagination. Now, when speaking of imagination I will be using the language of Sr. Mary Karita Ivancic, as quoted by Pavol Bargár, who describes imagination as the "complex activity that engages body, mind, and affect" an act that is rooted in "a person's past history, present experience, and future projections in an effort to know and make

meaning of reality."[18] In the story above, individuals are invited through the engagement of their body by the imposition of ashes and minds through the story to make meaning of their lived realities in light of the history and promises found in their faith. Within my own experience depicted in the story, imagination invited me to make meaning of a reality I had yet to fully consider. In this instance, the story being told conflicted with my immediate experience and brought me to reflect on the reality of both my present experience and future possibilities.

Third, connected to the idea of imagination, while we tend to think of story and storytelling as a linear idea, moving along a plot line that follows a path with a beginning, middle, and end, story can serve to draw events together, moving the hearer out of linear time.[19] For instance, in the story above as I stood reciting the familiar story to my daughter, a moment was created where I was invited to be present in the moment, seeing the youth of my daughter, be present in the potential of the future as I remembered her mortality, and be present in the past as I remembered my personal experiences with her. Additionally, considering the context in which the stories will be presented in this project, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we see this idea presented again as the celebration of the Lord's Supper invites participants to think back to the institution of the Lord's Supper, the present reality of participants gathered around the table, and the future feast to which the Lord's Supper points. The question at hand is, can story and storytelling help congregants better understand and/or experience that idea?

It is to these three themes that we now turn our attention.

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[18] Pavol Bargár, *Embodied Existence: Our Common Life in God* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023), 55.

[19] I am alluding here to the idea of story as *event* which will be explored below in greater detail. Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*.

The Nature of Story

I must first begin engaging the nature of story by defining what a story is. Pavol Bargár defines story as "something that someone tells someone else about something."[20] In other words, a story is the communication via spoken word, written word, film, or some other form of media of "something," an event, to a person or group. Within this definition we see that stories must be communicated. For instance, in one of his most recent novels, author Brandon Sanderson penned a note to his fans thanking them for reading his stories. Sanderson notes that though, as a storyteller, he will always be creating stories. They are not truly stories until they are read; they are not truly alive until they are read; in essence, a story only truly becomes story in its telling.[21] Additionally, as stories help communicate an event, that event necessarily happens to someone or something, creating characters, things that act or are acted upon, having "agency" in a story.[22] Additionally, the process of telling a story involves perspective, it always happens within a context, both the context of the telling and the context of the hearing.[23]

Why focus on story?

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[20] Bargár, *Embodied Existence: Our Common Life in God*, 13. Though I find the simplicity of Bargár's definition helpful as it allows for a multiplicity of forms of story and still maintains concreteness, I would suggest that, as will be shown shortly, it does fail in one regard. While the impulse of Bargár's definition implies a story must be told and heard, Bargár also suggests a story is something "someone tells someone else" (emphasis added). The implication in this is that the teller and hearer of the story must be distinct individuals. While that may be the normative form of story, I would suggest story is often something we can engage in on an individual level functioning as both narrator and hearer.

[21] Brandon Sanderson, *The Sunlit Man* (American Fork, UT: Dragonsteel Entertainment, LLC, 2023), 445.

[22] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 14.

[23] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 14. This idea of perspective will become more important as we engage the idea of "self-reflective imagination" below.

As I think about this question I am reminded of a moment from the novel, *Yumi and the Nightmare Painter,* again written by Brandon Sanderson, which is itself a story being told by a character named Hoid.[24] At the end of the story, Hoid asks the reader, "Why do we tell stories?," acknowledging that all cultures throughout time (and in this case space) tell stories: "men trapped alone for years tell them to themselves. Ancients leave them painted on the walls. Women whisper them to their babies. Stories explain us…we need stories."[25] Although this idea is presented in a fictional novel taking place on a fictional planet, in a fictional universe, with characters who are not always human, the idea is still true. You can see it in the eyes of children who sit transfixed as they hear a story told, letting the story influence them, allowing the characters to "be incorporated into the way the child experiences events during the day."[26] However, it is not just children influenced by story, as "modern studies indicate that the adult human body begins to relax when listening to a story."[27] And there are a plethora of stories we tell. Being from the State of Oklahoma, with a strong Indigenous population, I have heard many stories such as the story that serves as the foundation of the Green Corn Festival celebrated by the Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole peoples which celebrates the story of two male hunters who gave up their catch to feed a hungry woman, because of their kindness the woman promises to feed them in the coming year, and returning one year later they find corn

[24] To help explain with a more well-known pop culture reference, it is similar to a story like *The Princess Bride* where the audience is watching a story that is being told, witnessing both the story and the telling of the story.

[25] Brandon Sanderson, *Yumi and the Nightmare Painter* (Dragonsteel Entertainment, LLC, 2023), 465.

[26] Ray Buckley, *Dancing with Words: Storytelling as Legacy, Culture, and Faith* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2004), 12.

[27] Buckley, *Dancing with Words,* 12.

plants growing.[28] Almost on a weekly basis I stand in the pulpit of my church and read to those present a story from the Bible such as the story of the birth of Jesus Christ which is being told throughout the Advent season in which I find myself.[29] Or, there is even the deeper reality that some of the stories I and others tell in worship are stories told by Jesus himself. In other words, it is undeniable that humans are very connected to stories, but the question still remains as to why this is the case.

To answer this question, I first turn to the work of Brené Brown. In her book, *Rising Strong,* Brown tells the story of a consulting visit she made to the Pixar studios; while there she saw upon their wall three phrases, "story is the big picture," "story is process," and "story is research," all of which helped to reinforce the idea that "story is king."[30] These few phrases pushed Brown to explore the ways in which storytelling is an integral part of human thought. Brown argues, "Meaning making is in our biology, and our default is often to come up with a story that makes sense, feels familiar, and offers us insight into how best to self-protect."[31] While Brown is focused on her own research into resilience, and how the stories we tell ourselves help contribute to our ability to get up or hold us down, it is still a revealing lens through which to see human nature – meaning-making is in our biology. Brown argues, according to the work of neurologist and novelist Richard Burton, stories are quite literally in our blood as "our brains reward us with dopamine when we recognize and complete patterns" and "stories are patterns."[32]

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[28] Michelene Pesantubbee, "The Way of the Ghost Bird – Not," *Methodist History* 50, no. 2 (2012): 97.

[29] For instance, see the birth narrative found in Matthew 1–4 which will be explore below.

[30] Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, and Lead* (New York: Random House, 2015), 28.

[31] Brown, *Rising Strong,* 79.

[32] Brown, *Rising Strong,* 79.

The human brain is created to connect the dots of the information that it receives and make meaning of that information. As an example, in his book *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human,* Jonathan Gottschall, recounts the work of Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov who produced a short film in the early 1900s which consisted of a series of unnarrated images: a corpse in a coffin, a young woman, and a bowl of soup. Between each of these images a picture of an actor was shown. According to Gottschall, when audience members described what they saw they would describe the actor as hungry when the soup was shown, sad when the coffin was shown, or lustful when the woman was shown. In other words, though there was no narrative to tell people what to think or how to interpret what they were seeing they created a story in their head about what the actor was thinking or feeling based on the information at hand in the other pictures. However, the image of the actor shown between the other images never changed and was never emotive. The stories people experienced and told were formed simply because our human nature pushes us to make meaning.[33]

While Gottschall and Brown engage the power and purpose of story to help explore and make meaning of particular moments of life by looking at social and evolutionary sciences, Pavol Bargár, invites us to think of the broader power of story on a theological level. Bargár, echoing Brown and Gottschall, reflecting on the work of Stephen Crites, argues not only that "story constitutes an inherent part of human existence but also that the narrative structure of human consciousness belongs to the realm of 'nature.'"[34] However, Bargár takes the idea one step further, suggesting that story is not just a part of

[33] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2013), 106–108. Kindle.

[34] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 5.

human nature but is an "irreplaceable element for conceiving human identity when the self is perceived in terms of a narrative unity linking an individual's entire life from cradle to grave."[35] In this sense, story is not just *an* evolutionary tool our minds use to make sense of our experiences, but *the* way in which we create meaning for life itself.

While this paper is primarily focused on the use of story and storytelling in the context of worship, I think it is also important to consider more specifically why storytelling works in the context of the Christian tradition. In other words, though I am seeking to point to the importance of story as a tool, I also want to acknowledge that the Christian tradition has a unique way it engages story, which will once again point to the importance of story. Again, turning to the work of Bargár, it is suggested that Christians be seen as a "storying people" given that they use stories on both an individual and a communal level, specifically scriptural stories, to help guide their "logic and argumentation."[36] More specifically, Bargár states that "God is a story," not in the same sense that the understanding of story has been presented here, a meaning making tool, but rather God has created meaning in the world through God's "self-giving and self-receiving love," which God desires to share with creation.[37] In light of that, the story Christians engage in is inherently God's story which people are invited into.[38] This is important because this again uplifts the importance of story. In essence, Christianity comes forth from the story of God and is then drawn into God's story. Though theology and thought may be engaged in the practice of understanding that story, the story

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[35] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 5. To be clear, neither Brown nor Gottschall claim story is only used to help make meaning of events as opposed to the totality of life.

[36] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 7.

[37] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 8.

[38] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 8.

necessarily remains primary as it is the object of the theological work. Within this line of thought we once again see that story is an integral part, not only of human nature, but also the Christian faith, and therefore to ignore engaging in storytelling, and more specifically the telling of God's story, is to miss out on a foundational element of faith and life.

Imagination

Having looked at the necessity of story in human life and faith, we now turn to reflect on the power of story, namely the way story can impact our imagination. Again, when speaking of imagination, I am working with the definition of Sr. Mary Karita Ivancic as presented by Bargár, describing imagination as "a complex activity that engages body, mind, and affect" which draws upon the "past history, present experience, and future projections in an effort to know and make meaning of reality."[39] In other words, imagination is not just the act of daydreaming, or playing pretend; instead, imagination serves as a "mediator" that engages the rest of our being, our body, mind, and affect and it does so for the sake of transformation.[40] Or, as Bargár, referencing the work of William Lynch, says, "the task of imagination is to imagine the real."[41] If we connect this understanding of imagination to the nature of story, namely the idea that God is story, and that the nature of the Christian faith is to draw people into that story, we begin to see where the power of imagination is rooted. When we are confronted with the story of God we encounter the story of the creator of the universe; while we as humans have

[39] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 55. In this section I will primarily focus on the first half of the definition with the second half becoming the focus in the following section.
[40] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 56.
[41] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 56.

our own stories and tell our own stories, we are invited to see the world as God has created it and intends it and then imagination can help break through reality so that "God's transformed and reconciled future may enter the immanent reality."[42] As an example, in many congregations like my own, the Lord's Prayer is recited regularly, and within that prayer those present proclaim "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" or some variation of that idea. The kingdom and will of God are necessarily part of God's story, to understand them means one must engage in God's story. However, to consider how those elements of God's story are brought to earth, how they "enter the immanent reality" takes imagination, it takes the activity of the body, mind, and affect.

Now, it should be noted that for Bargár, while story and imagination can be connected, they do not necessarily have to be so. Instead, they are both simply fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. However, for the purposes of this project I continue to work with the premise that story can be a tool to help engage imagination. For instance, we can look to the teachings of Jesus and his parables. In one of my favorite descriptions of parables, C.H. Dodd states that "the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."[43] While there are likely more precise and critical definitions and descriptions of the parables of Jesus, I would argue Dodd helps point to the connection of story and imagination. That is to say that the parables, or stories, of Jesus "tease" the

[42] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 56.
[43] C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Great Britain: Fount Paperbacks, 1961), 16.

hearers into "active thought," inviting people to hear something of God's story but simultaneously consider their own story and consider how those stories, particularly God's, might enter the immanent. Said differently, story allows humans to "practice the skills of human social life" creating a space where people are allowed to "love, condemn, condone, hope, dread, and hate without any risks those feelings ordinarily involve," and that, when we imagine or practice these ideas with our body, mind, and affect, the neurons in our brain fire and help us physically experience what we imagine.[44] Again, to imagine is to create space where we can imagine the real and bring that into the immanent reality, with the focus of that imagination primarily on God's story.

Having looked at the importance and purpose of imagination I now want to turn, again leaning on the work of Bargár, to explore a few ways in which imagination can particularly function, namely the "self-reflective imagination," the "deconstructive imagination," and the "reconstructive imagination."[45] In essence, through story, people will be invited to participate in these various forms of imaginative work.

The "self-reflective imagination" begins from simply acknowledging the self. Again, returning to the original description of story above, self-reflective imagination is in part acknowledging perspective. When we as humans hear or tell a story our experience and context influence that story, whether we want it to or not. For instance, I used the example above of praying the Lord's Prayer, a moment within the story of Jesus that

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[44] Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 57–61. Kindle. Gottschall is referring to research with "mirror neurons" that activate not only when we "perform an action or experience an emotion" but also "when we observe someone else performing an action or experiencing an emotion." Additionally, when I speak of "affect" in this and other instances in this paper I am speaking more in terms of the spiritual or philosophical understanding of "affections." I use the language of affect rather than affections as I do not want to fully embrace the idea of "affections" but do want to speak to a broader sense of humanity that engages the physical, cognitive, and spiritual.

[45] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 61, 62, 66.

helps the hearers and speakers reflect on the story of God; however, as I pray that prayer, I—based on my relationship, context, experience, and countless other variables—will bring something into the hearing and saying of that prayer. The self-reflective imagination is the space where we can acknowledge our own contextual realities and bring them into conversation with the story of God. As Bargár states, "the self-reflective imagination enables the theologian to go beyond her or his habitual framework of reference, disclosing new dimensions of the reality and helping make sense of them."[46] Self-reflective imagination then invites an individual to examine the boundaries of both their story and the story being told, acknowledging the context of each, and creating conversation between those various realities. When we can engage in that conversation between those various stories, making space for their contextual realities then we can step into the second form of imagination, the "deconstructive imagination."

The "deconstructive imagination," simply stated, is the space where we, having brought contexts into conversation with God's story, can deconstruct the various stories about God we discern we have created that are not God's story. The deconstructive imaginative work is rooted in the "hope of liberation," trying to free the reality of God from the confines we create as well as working to break down the systems we have created in our world. As an example, continuing to look at the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, when I pray "thy kingdom come" the self-reflective imagination invites me to consider the context I find myself in, my understanding of both the nature of kingdom generally and God's kingdom, to consider what my image of that reality is, and the image my faith tradition has given to me. I am also invited to then hold that in dialogue with the

[46] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 61–62.

image of God's kingdom Jesus speaks of in the Gospel of Matthew and to consider what Jesus is trying to communicate in the usage of this language given his context. When I bring these various imaginative ideas into conversation, it may then cause me to deconstruct the idea of kingdom I hold or work to deconstruct the various ways the language and idea of the kingdom of God are used in my life or the world around me. Upon engaging in deconstructing imaginative work, one can then take up the task of engaging the process of "reconstructive imagination."

As can likely be surmised by the name, the reconstructive imagination is the result of becoming aware of "what is absent, of nostalgia for that which is not yet, [and] the declaration of love for things that are yet to be born."[47] Using the language of the story of God, the reconstructive imagination seeks to engage God's creative work by engaging in the transformative work of God. In this sense, the language of reconstruction is not focused on recreation or preservation, but about considering what could be, inviting people to "not only [dwell] in the story they inhabit but on reaching beyond to embrace what God is doing in the present."[48]

To conclude this section, I want to turn to the work of Walter Brueggemann and his book, *The Prophetic Imagination,* as a further example of these various elements and the overall process conveyed here.[49] Brueggemann begins by making the statement:

> The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act…that enculturation is true not only of the institution of the church but also of us as persons. Our consciousness

[47] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 67.
[48] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 68.
[49] To be fair, Brueggemann does not uses the language of "story" or "imagination" in the sense being spoken of in this paper. However, I would suggest both story and imagination are fundamental to what Brueggemann's argument.

> has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric.[50]

In essence, Brueggemann is suggesting the American church practice self-reflective imaginative work, examining the state of the church and their own thinking to see the ways in which the story they are telling is influenced by the surrounding culture. Brueggemann goes on to suggest that the "church will not have power to act or believe until it recovers its tradition of faith and permits that tradition to be the primal way out of enculturation."[51] To use the language of imagination, Brueggemann is pointing to the self-reflective imaginative work that both understands a person or group's location in a context and the context of God's story. In this instance, Brueggemann appears to be making an argument that the dialogue that ensues in that moment should listen more closely to God's story given the context of the church as he sees it. Brueggemann then speaks of an "alternative consciousness" which serves to "dismant[le] the dominant consciousness."[52] Brueggemann begins illustrating this idea looking to the work of Moses. Moses is the one who begins speaking of God's story disclosing "the alternative religion of the freedom of God," which stands in contrast to the gods worshipped in Egypt and the experience of the people of Israel.[53] This criticism is engaging in the deconstructive imagination by way of "radical criticism and radical delegitimizing of the Egyptian empire," an empire which has shown a lack of caring and held to "politics of

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[50] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

[51] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2.

[52] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

[53] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 6.

injustice."[54] When the "prophetic criticism" and destructive imagination has occurred Brueggemann then points to the "prophetic energizing."[55]

The prophetic energizing is "closely linked to hope. We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given."[56] In terms of imagination, Brueggemann is pointing to the reconstructive imagination which, having identified what is missing in self-reflection and working to deconstruct systems that stand in opposition to the story of God, can now begin the work of entering into God's creative work. Brueggemann illustrates the idea pointing to Exodus 11:7 which contains "a wondrous statement of a new reality that surely must energize" a "narrative and an unproven memory that we must let stand in all its audacity," a narrative that begins with self-reflection and subsequently engages in deconstruction and reconstruction, all rooted in the realm of imagination.[57]

Story as Event

Again, the working description of imagination being held is the complex activity that engages body, mind, and affect and draws upon the past history, present experience, and future projections in an effort to know and make meaning of reality. The above section focuses on the nature of imagination, engaging body, mind, and affect as it invites us into self-reflection, deconstruction, and recreation. This section will focus on the nature of

[54] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 9, 14.
[55] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 9, 14.
[56] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 14.
[57] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 14.

story, drawing upon past history, present experience, and future projections, or story as *event*.

Looking again at the story above, when I saw my daughter come forward for the imposition of ashes and recited the short story, "remember you are dust and to dust you will return…but you are precious in the eyes of God," I began to simultaneously imagine her past, present, and future in a moment, a singular event. To help explore this I turn to the work of Andrew Root. According to Root, "to understand Israel's conception of God is to understand God as the one who arrives. God is *the* event with an aim (*telos*), delivering a history."[58] Root is suggesting that the activity of God does not come in a linear fashion through various events such as the raising of Jesus or the Exodus of Israel. Instead, these acts of God are so revelatory they "become essential revelation of who God is."[59] This means that the activity of God as *event* becomes revelatory for the past, present, and future.

It may be helpful to provide an illustration of this idea. There are many stories that engage this reality like James Islington's *Licanius Trilogy* in which time folds in on itself, but they are likely too complicated to fully explore, so I turn to the 1999 thriller, *The Sixth Sense.* I can remember the first time I watched M. Night Shyamalan's mind-bending film, watching the story unfold and connecting with Haley Joel Osment's character, Cole, because I was of a similar age, and he was the first actor I had ever seen that I shared a name with. It was a film that in the initial watching made me cringe in fear at moments as I was confronted with grotesque images of dead people, and the chills

[58] Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 179. Emphasis in original. Root appears to be grounding his work in Barth's conversation around God's Being in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II.1 which will be discussed more below.

[59] Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 179.

felt when he uttered the famous line, "I see people, they don't know they're dead."[60] It also left me scratching my head as I watched Bruce Willis' character, Malcom, as he engaged the world around him, especially his spouse. I remember wondering what happened that brought such disconnect between Malcom and his spouse, and even in my youth, it made me quite sad.[61] That is, until the end, when the famous M. Night Shyamalan twist comes out and I discovered Willis' character, one of the two main protagonists, is dead, in fact he had been dead since about five minutes into the movie. In that singular moment, that revelatory event, my entire understanding of everything I had seen over the last hour and a half changed. The anger I felt watching the disconnect between Malcom and his wife dissipated, and I almost immediately wanted to watch the film again to see all the small details alluded to in the final montage that gave hints of Malcom's death. The single revelatory event changed my present experience as I watched the movie, changed my understanding of everything I had witnessed, and impacted every future viewing of the movie.

In essence, that is what Root is suggesting when he speaks of the *event* of God. Root is focusing primarily on the *event* of God whereas the focus of this paper is the power of story. Root, in his exploration of God as *event* is also focused on the work of the pastor. As such, Root suggests that "the pastor in a secular age holds a space to wait for God's becoming. The pastor's primary focus, then, isn't to build a church of size and reputation but to attend to revelation."[62] If we hold to the idea that "God is story" as has been

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[60] *The Sixth Sense*, Psychological Thriller (Spyglass, 1999).

[61] The emotional distress of the growing separation between Malcom and his spouse, Anna, was added to as I saw similar separation happening within my own family unit. This is a significant memory in my watching of the film because when it is revealed that, spoiler alert, Malcom is dead my distress shifted from anger, as I felt my own potential reality in the story, to a deep sadness.

[62] Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 185.

suggested by Bargár and that the nature of story is to communicate an *event*, then to attend to revelation, specifically the revelation of God, is to attend to story, and more precisely God's story. Or as Frederick Buechner suggests, "it is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in your own life's story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of others' lives. *If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories that God is present."*[63]

In the proclamation or telling of God's story, we invite the *event* of God once again, a moment when time can collapse upon itself creating meaning of the past, in the present, and for the future.

Story in Scripture

Having explored the nature and power of story, I want to turn to explore in detail the way in which story is used within the Bible. On a basic level it is easy to point to the prevalence of story within the Bible, starting from the broadly held understanding that the opening books within the Bible were formed via oral transmission, telling the event of God from generation to generation until it was finally written.[64] The very creation of the Bible is engaging in storytelling. Then we can turn to the content of the Bible, the self-contained stories in the books of Jonah, Esther, Ruth, and Job and the stories of biblical characters such as Noah, David, Paul, or even Jesus. Or there is the nature of Jesus'

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[63] Jennifer Holberg, *Nourishing Narratives: The Power of Story to Shape Our Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 6. Emphasis added.

[64] See for instance, John van Seters article "The Origins of the Hebrew Bible Which suggests the Hebrew scripture was developed through "traditions and stories" which were "passed on orally from one generation to the next," creating a communal work rather than works with traditional authorship. "The Origins of the Hebrew Bible: Some New Answers to Old Questions," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 7, no. 1 (2007): 89.

teaching. Ray Buckley suggests that "Jesus was a storyteller" as Jesus was often found encircled by a crowd where he then "told them stories to illustrate spiritual truths."[65]

While the importance of story within the context of the Bible is self-evident, I want to look more precisely at one story in particular to help illustrate the overall nature of story: the story of the birth of Jesus found within the Gospel of Matthew.

We begin with the acknowledgement that, according to the definition of story used in this paper, the Gospel of Matthew is a story, a claim Warren Carter supports when he argues "Matthew is an ancient biography or story."[66] It is someone, the author, communicating something, the story of Jesus, to someone else, the intended audience. Regardless of one's views on the nature and inspiration of the Bible, by definition, it is a story likely written late in the first century around 80–90 CE.[67] Before engaging the content of the story presented in the opening chapters of the gospel, I want to first focus on the first and last of those three elements that make the gospel story to provide perspective and a space for self-reflective imagination.

Though the gospel is referred to as "The Gospel of Matthew," implying knowledge of authorship, authorship is not clear. According to Warren Carter, the first known reference to the gospel's authorship occurred in the late second century by Irenaeus, roughly one hundred years after the gospel was written.[68] This is important, as the

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[65] Buckley, *Dancing with Words*, 26.

[66] Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 42. Similar claims have been made in regard to the Gospel of Mark and the importance of Narrative Criticism which focuses on literary features such as narrator, tone, style, setting, plot, and characters, ideas David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie developed in their important work *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, Third (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, n.d.).

[67] Frederick Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Revised & Expanded Edition, Volume 1: The Christbook Matthew 1–12 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004). xxix.

[68] Carter, *Matthew*, 14.

implication based on the title of the gospel is that the original author was likely Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve disciples referenced in Matthew 9:9. However, Irenaeus also claims the gospel, having been written by one of Jesus' disciples, was originally written in Hebrew for the Jewish people; however, the internal evidence within the book shows the book was written in Greek, which raises questions of the author's ethnicity and status as original disciple.[69] Warren Carter suggests that though there is not a clear case for authorship, based on the data available "the author was an educated Jewish Christian…clearly familiar with Jewish traditions and practices."[70] From this understanding we can discern that the gospel is likely not a first-hand witness account but rather "the basic nature of the gospel is proclamation, an insight that shapes the audience's expectations."[71] In other words, the gospel, though it may have some historical truth that can teach about the person of Jesus, primarily has a theological focus to help communicate the "significance of Jesus" in and to a particular community.[72] Or, to keep the language of "story as *event,*" the purpose of Matthew's gospel is to tell the story of the *event* of God in Jesus, to help hearers/readers engage their imagination, their body, mind, and affect, in a way that draws from their past and present for their future.

We turn now to the audience to which Matthew was written, the "someone else" the story is being told to. Warren Carter argues that, given the sources Matthew's author pulled from, Q, M, and the Gospel of Mark, it is unlikely that the intended audience would have been unaware of the traditions the author uses. In other words, it is likely that the original audience to which the gospel was written were "followers of Jesus who

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[69] Carter, *Matthew,* 17.
[70] Carter, *Matthew,* 21.
[71] Carter, *Matthew*. 32.
[72] Carter, *Matthew,* 32.

are familiar with these traditions."[73] Additionally, based on redaction criticism, it can be discerned that the community Matthew's gospel engages is one which has been separated from the synagogue. While Matthew's gospel uses all but 55 verses of the 661 verses in the Gospel of Mark, there are notable changes made.[74] For instance, on several occasions when Matthew's gospel refers to the synagogue, finding its source in Mark's gospel, Matthew's gospel adds the possessive language of "their" and "your" demonstrating a distance between the audience and the synagogue.[75] Additionally, while Matthew continues the tradition set in Mark of acknowledging the part the religious leaders play in the opposition and death of Jesus, Matthew intensifies these claims adding "seven references to hypocritical Pharisees, six of which appear in chapter 23."[76] Additionally, on multiple occasions Matthew describes the Pharisees as blind, in contrast to the healing of the physically blind who "see" Jesus as the "Son of David," the opening Matthean claim of Jesus' identity.[77] Again, Carter suggests these changes in the story of Matthew compared to the other synoptic gospels suggests an audience's "experiences of bitter conflict with the separation from a least one of the synagogues in Antioch. Matthew's largely Jewish community had belonged to a synagogue but was either expelled or withdrew voluntarily."[78] Lastly, given the fact that the community to which Matthew's gospel speaks has been expelled or withdrew from the synagogue, a fundamental aspect

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[73] Carter, *Matthew,* 47. "These traditions" referring to Q, a source available to the authors of Matthew and Luke, M, a source unique to Matthew, and the Mark's gospel.

[74] Carter, *Matthew*, 47.

[75] Carter, *Matthew,* 71. See Matthew 9:35, 12:9, and 13:54. This also happens when the author uses Q, see Matthew 10:17 and 23:34.

[76] Carter, *Matthew*, 71.

[77] See Matthew 15:14; 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26 regarding the blindness of Pharisees and Matthew 9:27–31 and 20:29–34 regarding the healing of blind men.

[78] Carter, *Matthew,* 73.

of Jewish worship and identity, it would logically follow that this same community would now be searching for a sense of identity or affirming the identity they have found. Having now explored both the "someone" telling the story and the ones to whom the story is told, let me now turn to the content, the event, which Matthew's gospel seeks to communicate.

The Gospel of Matthew opens, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1 [NRSVUE]). On one hand, the introduction of Matthew's gospel simply acknowledges by the author who the protagonist of this story is, Jesus the Messiah, a person of whom, as has been argued above, the author and the community addressed have knowledge. Additionally, given the potential Jewishness of both the author and the audience, Jesus then is connected to both David and Abraham, serving to connect the present audience to a past reality. Again, part of the work of imagination is to draw upon past history, present experience, and future projections in an effort to know and make meaning of reality. Within the opening verse of the gospel this is exactly what is being done. However, it goes even a step further. The first two words of the gospel in Greek read, *biblos geneseos,* drawing the readers' memory back to the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis. In this, as is suggested by Frederick Bruner, and affirmed by W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, the author intends to title the work, "Book of the New Genesis wrought by Jesus Christ" pointing to the idea that Jesus is the "subject and author of the new genesis."[79] To again put this in terms of story and imagination, the author of Matthew begins, or even titles, the story by rooting the story in the past and present, telling the story of the *event* of Jesus which then makes

[79] Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1: The Christbook Matthew 1-12:4.

meaning of the past, present, and future. The imagination in the opening words is engaged in self-reflection, as the audience discerns the story in which they find themselves, and the story of God being communicated. However, that is only the beginning.

Matthew's gospel then proceeds to depict a genealogy, an element unique to this account (Matthew 1:2-17). While there are many elements that could be examined within the genealogy that are interesting, such as the inclusion of women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and Mary, or the shape of the genealogy, I want to focus on the events depicted in the genealogy. The genealogy is broken into three sections, Abraham to David, Solomon to the exile in Babylon, "and after the deportation" (Matthew 1:12 [NRSVUE]) to Jesus. The exile to Babylon occurred around 597 BCE and ended in 539 BCE, however the storyteller in Matthew makes a double reference to the exile and no reference to the return. Again, if the audience being told this story of Jesus has an understanding of Jewish history they likely know when the exile ended and they themselves are hearing this story outside of the confines of Babylon, yet the story invites the hearers to dwell on the exile until the conclusion of the genealogy in the arrival of Jesus. Then, in summary fashion the storyteller reiterates the previous 15 verses, again pointing to the exile in Babylon without acknowledging the return (Matthew 1:17). It is as if the storyteller is inviting the hearers to hear the beginning of the story, a story they themselves are invested in as it is grounded in this history, by inviting them to imagine they are still in a place of exile. If we remember again the possible audience, a group of people who have been expelled or withdrawn from the synagogue, it is not hard to imagine they see themselves in a form of exile. And yet, knowing the story of ancient

Israel, it is not hard for the audience to remember that "Babylon's imperial aggression is both used by and overcome by God. Like Rome, it is not powerful enough to derail God's plan."[80] In other words, the story being told begins by pointing to the *event* of Jesus, but does so in a way that invites the audience to engage their imagination, to participate in a self-reflective imagination, understanding their context and reality and the nature of God's story, leading to both the deconstructive imagination pointed to in Carter's words above, and ultimately, as the story continues, a reconstructive imagination.

The story then turns to the actual *event* of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25). If the first section of Matthew's story invites the audience to imagine God's past activity in the context of their current experience of exile, then the story of the *event* of Jesus' birth helps the audience understand "God's will and action to bring forth Jesus so that he may carry out God's purposes."[81] Even within the early parts of the story of Jesus, the storyteller begins to subvert expectations inviting the audience to engage in the process of deconstructive and reconstructive imagination. The story begins with an echo. While some translations continue the story saying, "now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way," (Matthew 1:18 [NRSVUE]) the Greek again speaks of the *genesis* of Jesus. In other words, the storyteller focuses the attention of the audience, saying, "this is the beginning, this is the *event*, and this is the way the *event* took place." At this point the storyteller invites the listener into information that the characters do not yet know, Mary the mother of Jesus is pregnant, and Joseph is unaware. It is at this point that the audience is invited into deconstructive and reconstructive imaginative work as they are

[80] Carter, *Matthew*, 108.
[81] Carter, *Matthew,* 109.

told Joseph, "being a righteous man" (Matthew 1:18 [NRSVUE]) intended to divorce Mary, but again because of the activity of God he is instructed not to. As Carter suggests, "the opening seventeen verses have invoked God's previous dealings with Israel, so the authorial audience knows that Israel's law is an appropriate context in which to try to understand Joseph's actions."[82] In other words, given the way the story has been told and the understanding of the audience, expectation is built, self-reflective imagination would invite the hearers to ponder Deuteronomistic law justifying Joseph's decision. However, the storyteller invites them to engage in a deconstructive imagination as Joseph is told to disregard the law, and in doing so God "manifests God's purpose" which is the *event* of Jesus who will "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21 [NRSVUE]).[83] Again, sin would be a concept known to the audience, and as they heard the story of the genealogy, they were confronted with various memories of sinfulness within the communal history, for instance David's adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. However, the genealogy also serves as a communal memory of the ways God has already saved people from their sin. In essence, the story told once again draws the audience into an imaginative place, pondering God's story, and what God is doing now. The reconstructive imagination, considering the way in which God moves against the norm with Joseph invites the audience to imagine what God may be doing now in an effort to save the people, save the audience from sin. In the words of Frederick Bruner:

> seen in the context of the whole Gospel (with its especially 'embarrassing' crucifixion), the embarrassing pregnancy of Mary, the first narrative in the Gospel, may have served Matthew's purpose by showing at the very beginning that God's ways are not our ways and that God's righteousness is not our righteousness.[84]

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[82] Carter, *Matthew*, 109.
[83] Carter, *Matthew,* 109.
[84] Bruner, *Matthew,* 25.

In summary, to this point in the story, Matthew's gospel is telling a story that is inviting the audience to remember their own story as well as engage God's story by inviting them to engage self-reflective imagination, giving them space to see themselves in a state of exile, while also reminding them of God's previous salvific activity, to help them imagine God's salvific activity to come. The story of Matthew, through self-reflective imagination, invites the hearers to ponder the way God acts, such as obedience to the law, while also encouraging a deconstructive imagination when God's story does not fully engage those ideas, and yet salvation is still at hand in the *event* of Jesus, which means there is now space for the reconstructive imagination to ponder the way God's story is unfolding now. In the telling of this story, the *event* of Jesus, the past, present, and future collapse in on themselves fundamentally altering the way the past, present, and future have been and can be understood, helping a people in exile who have lost a source of identity re-establish a new identity rooted in Jesus.

Summary

Again, the purpose of this paper is to explore the power of story, examining how story and storytelling can impact the experience of worshippers in a congregation. As has been shown in this section, story is a fundamental aspect of human life. Whether we realize it or not, our brains are wired for story. Story is a mechanism through which we make meaning, and one of the reasons story works well in that manner is because it serves to engage the imagination in a variety of ways. Looking more closely at the Christian tradition, story, or more precisely the story of God, serves as an orienting event that fundamentally changes and transforms past, present, and future. When we participate

in the practice of storytelling, we create a space where we can experience the *event* of God, which can engage our imaginations in a way that helps us better understand ourselves, helps us understand the nature of the world as it compares to God's story, and creates a space in which we can step into the creative work of God's story through a reconstructive imagination.

Eucharistic Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition

Having focused upon the nature of story we turn our attention to the nature of liturgy. Again, while the primary focus of this project is on story, the practice of storytelling takes place in a particular context, and that context carries with it not only theological convictions and an embedded story to be told, but also a practice of storytelling that already exists.

Historically, outside the context of this project, which will be discussed below, my congregation has gathered on the first Sunday of each month around the Lord's table to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In each of those instances prior to this project, the congregation used the standard liturgical format found in the *Book of Common Worship,* which consists of an invitation, a Great Thanksgiving and the Lord's Prayer, Words of Institution, and a concluding prayer. Additionally, these prescribed elements presented in the *Book of Common Worship* have ideas that are regularly included, as the *Book of Common Worship* states:

> A pastor invites worshipers to the Lord's Supper using sentences from scripture. At the table, facing the people, the pastor shall lead the people in a prayer to the triune God; giving thanks for God's creative power, providential care, and covenant faithfulness, along with particular blessings of the day; remembering God's acts of salvation through Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return, as well as Jesus' institution of the sacrament…and calling on the Holy Spirit

> to draw worshipers into the present of the risen Lord, nourish them in the body and blood of Christ, unite them with Christ in the communion of the saints and the Church in every place, and send them in mission to the world.[85]

While the physical words used in the liturgical practice change regularly, the content and character of those words should remain constant. Considering this, the question must be asked more broadly: what is the purpose of liturgy is and how might story enhance that practice? In order to accomplish this task, this section will be broken into two fundamental sections, the liturgy as story, exploring the nature and power of liturgy, and exploring the liturgical practice of John Calvin in Geneva.

Liturgy as Story

We begin by exploring the nature of liturgy. In my experience, based on conversations with congregants throughout my time in ministry and in connection to this project, what is far too often thought of when speaking of liturgy is rote ritual that takes place during a worship service. However, for the purposes of this paper I will speak of liturgy using the language of James K. A. Smith, who suggests liturgy is "formative, love-shaping rituals."[86] Within this understanding is the idea that liturgy is not innately connected to the practice of worship or even Christianity.[87] Rather, liturgies serve to "train our love – they are practice for the coming kingdom, habituating us as citizens of the kingdom of God."[88] In this sense, liturgy is not just certain aspects of worship such

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[85] *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 10.

[86] James Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 22.

[87] In this case I speak of worship meaning the gathering of a group of people for the purpose of worship. Smith would argue liturgy is always about worship whether we realize it or not, however that worship is never limited to God.

[88] Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 25.

as a Call to Worship or Confession and Pardon, but rather that the entirety of the worship service in its structure and content participate in the "recalibration and rehabituation project."[89] Once again, we can hear in Smith's language echoes of Bargár's thoughts on imagination. Liturgical practice helps recalibrate and rehabituate, or to use the language of imagination, liturgy helps us engage in the work of deconstructive and reconstructive imagination. Smith even invites us to consider the use of imagination through liturgy, saying, "formative Christian worship paints a picture of the beauty of the Lord – and a vision of the *shalom* [the Lord] desires for creation – in a way that captures our imagination."[90] Once again, we see the importance of story and imagination. Smith goes so far as to say it is not just that worship *can* engage imagination but "Christian worship *should* tell a story;" that "worship works as fiction does: both traffic in story and target the imagination."[91]

Thinking back to the story that opened this paper, the blank stares I experienced while engaging in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the story being told in that moment, and the response to receiving the bread and cup by praising my choice in tie, I cannot help but still feel a disconnect between Smith's description of what *should* be and what *is.* If Christian worship and our liturgical practices should work as story, engaging our imaginations, why does that not appear to be the case in reality?[92]

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[89] Smith, *You Are What You Love,* 83.
[90] Smith, *You Are What You Love,* 91.
[91] Smith, *You Are What You Love,* 93. Emphasis added and edited to be gender neutral.
[92] While I will readily admit there is likely a personal ability aspect of this to acknowledge, in other words my own ability to communicate story has been poor, resulting in the perceived disconnect. However, my experience has been shared by other colleagues in ministry. Additionally, Smith will continue his argument pointing to the structure of worship as a form of narrative communicating the story of God and faith. While I think Smith's argument is valid, I would suggest, and the purpose of this paper is to argue that a more explicit form of storytelling would be beneficial.

Martha Moore-Keish suggests part of the answer is a problem of our own making. For instance, she points to the definition of the Lord's Supper in the Westminster Catechism, which she argues is "a carefully constructed definition of right doctrine, with little attention to the details of Eucharistic practice. We might call this theology *about* Eucharist."[93] In other words, Moore-Keish is suggesting the inherent belief that when we gather at the Lord's table, we can only correctly partake of the sacrament if we can understand it correctly. To reiterate an idea used above, we make theology primary and story secondary, when theology should be secondary. Moore-Keish argues, leaning on the work of Howard Hageman, this is in part because "[the Reformers] wanted their liturgy to be an adequate and accurate *expression* of their theology."[94] Given the culture of the time, it became important for the people to understand what they were doing in contrast to what some of the Reformers saw as superstitious beliefs. That impulse has unfortunately led to the feeling that the Lord's Supper is only a "liturgical enactment," the acting out of theological belief rather than understanding.[95] Smith also echoes this understanding, suggesting:

> One of the unintended consequences of the Protestant Reformation, [Charles] Taylor argues, was a disenchantment of the world. Critical of the way such an enchanted, sacramental understanding of the world had lapsed into sheer superstition, the later Reformers emphasized the simple hearing of the Word, the message of the gospel, and the arid simplicity of Christian worship. The result was a process of *ex*carnation – of disembodying the Christian faith, turning it into a 'heady' affair that could be boiled down to a message and grasped with the mind.[96]

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[93] Martha Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: A Ritual Approach to a Reformed Eucharistic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 9. Emphasis in original.

[94] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 10.

[95] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me,* 11.

[96] Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 101. Emphasis in original.

In other words, both Moore-Keish and Smith suggest the disconnect I experienced is real, and likely on account of our Reformed tradition, and what might be a lack of imagination. In contrast, Smith has argued that worship should tell a story, and Moore-Keish will further the discussion arguing that "liturgy is holy encounter," or *event* to use the language of Root.[97]

To explore this idea more fully Moore-Keish engages a phrase by Prosper of Aquitaine, "*ut legem credenda lex statuat supplicandi"* which she translates as "the law of praying establishes the law of believing."[98] Moore-Keish, quoting Aidan Kavanagh, describes this understanding, stating, "our reception of God's Word is subordinated to the presentation of that Word to us in the act of its being revealed and proclaimed to us."[99] Or, more succinctly, "it was a Presence, not faith, which drew Moses to the burning bush, and what happened there was a revelation, not a seminar."[100] This language echoes ideas presented by Smith and Bargár, namely the primacy of story over theology. Not only does the proclamation of the Word precede the theologizing of the Word, but the proclamation is of *event,* of Presence and encounter. With this understanding, it is not just that liturgy as story helps bring forth imagination simply because it is story, rather it is that liturgy is a form of encounter with God.

If we ended the conversation there, it would end on a bold statement, though one which does not fully resolve the disconnect expressed above as it equates liturgy with revelation. To resolve this tension Moore-Keish engages one more principle by suggesting that *lex orandi,* the law of praying, is *lex agendi*, the law of agency. In other

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[97] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 62.
[98] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 63.
[99] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 63.
[100] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 63.

words, "*lex orandi* [is] first and foremost about doing, as a *lex agenda* in which participants are both engaged in embodied activity and also formed by patterns of liturgical action over time."[101] This is illustrated in part by looking at the changes in understanding regarding liturgy over time. In the medieval Catholic church, it was believed that rituals and liturgy actually made something occur: they physically did something. When the Reformers came along, they generally argued rituals and liturgy helped to communicate meaning. Liturgy no longer *did,* instead it *meant.*[102]

Moore-Keish's understanding is vitally important when thinking of liturgy as story. This chapter began by reflecting on the importance of story because humans are innately story people. Our minds are wired for story, so much so that, when we imagine, the neurons in our brain function in a way that helps to realize what we imagine in our physical bodies. Additionally, when describing imagination, we spoke of the active engagement of body, mind, and affect. While Smith points to the need for worship to be story, Moore-Keish, engaging the idea that *lex orandi* is *lex agendi* engages more fully the nature of story, as liturgy is about activity, about engaging body, mind, and affect. Additionally, in this understanding story remains primary, serving as a means of *event.*

Eucharistic Liturgy in Calvin's Geneva

As noted above, in my experience both as a congregant in a worship service and now serving as a pastor, the liturgy surrounding the Lord's Supper has been very constant. This led me to tell myself a story, that the liturgical practices I saw today in my

[101] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 88.
[102] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 89.

congregation and the tradition around me were rooted in and mirrored the practices of some of the founders of the Reformed tradition, such as John Calvin. However, when I began to examine the liturgy used by Calvin in Geneva for a service held April 14, 1560, I found something quite different. Again, according to the *Book of Common Worship* the liturgical practices include both an invitation and a Great Thanksgiving, which are unique elements in the liturgy, both occurring before the elements of bread and cup are distributed to the community of faith. In part, as I considered the placement of story in the context of liturgy I did so because I saw the liturgy serving as a story both in form and substance, with the main story being told within the Great Thanksgiving. Traditionally the Great Thanksgiving is made of three essential parts, part one being "thanksgiving to God for creation, salvation, and the blessings of this life," part two focusing on remembering "what Jesus has done, and recit[ing] elements of his birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection," and part three being the *epiclesis,* an invocation asking for the Holy Spirit to be present in the activity taking place.[103] These three elements serve to tell, at least in part, the story of faith and more importantly God's story. However, as I began examining Calvin's liturgy, it did not reflect the liturgical practice to which I had become accustomed, most notably in the fact that the Great Thanksgiving, and the story communicated in that prayer were not present. In Calvin's 1560 liturgy, his focus is primarily on the act of invitation, which is far longer and more detailed than anything I had seen. Nevertheless, Calvin still appears to be inviting his community, through his liturgy, to engage in story, albeit not fully in the way story has been described to this point.

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[103] Howard Rice and James Huffstutler, *Reformed Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2001), 74–75.

To explain, I begin with a reminder of the definition of story used in this paper, "something that someone tells someone else about something." In this instance I would suggest the "something" or event Calvin is communicating is the lived reality of the people of Geneva in contrast to the *event* of God. Historically, Calvin found himself in Geneva in 1536 in a place that was going through immense change. Prior to Calvin's arrival, Geneva was politically allied with its western neighbor, the Duchy of Savoy, and now Geneva sought to ally with the Swiss cantons of Bern and Fribourg, which it had previously been allied with, to help gain independence. This then began a political and theological shift in Geneva to Protestantism. Finally, in 1532, when William Farel arrived in Geneva, the Mass was banned officially making Geneva Protestant.[104] It is in this context of a shifting political and theological landscape that Calvin started his ministry in Geneva; however, even his start resulted in another shift as he was exiled from Geneva two years later in 1538. Interestingly, part of the reason for his exile, according to William Naphy, is because Calvin, and Farel, refused to "correctly" serve communion; although Elsie McKee suggests the exile was rooted in Calvin's refusal to administer the Lord's Supper as "the whole community should be reconciled before its members shared in the sacrament."[105] Calvin's exile was short-lived as he returned two years later to what was now an explicitly Protestant Geneva, fighting against the request to return to the "true church" by Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto.[106] The point of this historical

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[104] Elsie McKee, ed., *John Calvin: Writings On Pastoral Piety* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2001), 8–9.

[105] William Naphy, "A Long-Suffering Ministry: Calvin and the Continual Crises of Geneva, ca. 1535-1560," in *A Companion to the Reformation in Geneva* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 80; McKee, *John Calvin: Writings On Pastoral Piety*, 11. Based on the language Calvin uses in his liturgy and the story I will argue is being told I would suggest McKee's understanding of events is likely the more accurate interpretation of events. However, both Naphy and McKee point out the reality that the Lord's Supper is the central conflict resulting in Calvin's exile.

[106] McKee, *John Calvin,* 13.

tangent is to point out that, as Naphy states, "throughout Calvin's time in Geneva he faced almost continuous crises. Indeed, if one includes plague as a crisis (albeit a natural one) one can suggest that Calvin only had from 1542–1543 as a period of relative calm in the city."[107] The context of Calvin's ministry and community was one of crisis, a community that was constantly trying to maintain unity within. And it is this story that Calvin brings into his liturgy.

Focusing again on the liturgy of April 14, 1560, Calvin begins with the Words of Institution provided by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23–29, from the story of Paul participating in the sacrament. From there, Calvin lifts up the idea that the "stranger" and those "who do not belong to the company of [Jesus'] faithful people, must not be admitted."[108] However, for Calvin, these strangers then get identified as "idolaters, blasphemers, and despisers of God, all heretics and those who create private sects in order to break the *unity* of the church…all who promote sedition or mutiny."[109] In essence, part of what Calvin is pointing to in his liturgy is the idea that there are those, both present in Geneva and the Catholic tradition, who made choices that brought forth division within the community which stands in contrast to the story of God told at the Lord's Table. This is further evidenced in Calvin's liturgy as he first stands in opposition to "idolaters, blasphemers, and despisers" and those that "break the unity of the church," then continues the invitation by having people examine themselves, "assured that the sin and imperfections that remain in us will not prevent [Jesus] from receiving us

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[107] Naphy, "A Long-Suffering Ministry," 92.
[108] McKee, *John Calvin*, 132.
[109] McKee, *John Calvin:* 132. Emphasis added. "Private sects" is likely a reference to private Masses which were being held at the time which Calvin believed were "diametrically opposed to Christ's institution" (see Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1960,* 2:1436*)*.

and making us worthy partakers of this spiritual table."[110] In other words, Calvin is not arguing that being a "stranger" or not belonging to God's faithful is a matter of sinfulness, but rather one who brings division within the community of believers. Calvin is inviting his community to engage in a story which reflects both on their own story (self-reflective imagination), of a community who has been founded and formed in crisis and division, while also pointing to God's story, which in this case Calvin sees as one of union. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Calvin will suggest that those who partake in the Lord's supper grow "into one body," that the story of this event brings forth unity among a people who have struggled to find unity.[111] This idea is later communicated in the closing prayer Calvin offers in his liturgy, praying, "Thus may we order and pursue all our life to the exaltation of Your glory and the edification of our neighbors," once again engaging the idea that part of the *event* of Lord's Supper, the story of God proclaimed, brings unity where there once was none.[112]

While this section has been examining the liturgy Calvin used in Geneva, it is not lifting Calvin up as "an example." To say that Calvin was engaging in "liturgy as story" in the sense this paper is arguing would be untrue. However, while Smith argued that the early Reformers turned the liturgy into a "heady" practice, that does not appear to be the case for Calvin in this instance. Yes, he is concerned with "correctness," pointing out those who should not partake and why; however, he is still trying to communicate *event,* pointing out that the "sacrament is a mediation for poor sick souls" and that "though we

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[110] McKee, *John Calvin,* 132.

[111] John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1362.

[112] Once again, I emphasize the idea of event as expressed above. However, this idea will be examined in more detail below.

see but bread and wine, let us *not doubt* that He accomplishes spiritually in our souls all that He shows us outwardly by these visible signs."[113] Behind Calvin's concern for correctness is the desire to communicate the *event*: Calvin appears to believe, and seeks to communicate that belief, that something is happening at the table. We see this most evident in the concluding prayer:

> having drawn us into the communion of Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, whom You delivered to death for us, and whom You give us as the meat and drink of life eternal. Now grant us this other benefit: that You will never allow us to forget these things, but having imprinted on our hearts may we grow and increase daily in our faith.[114]

Calvin's prayer indicates an understanding or belief of a "something" to be communicated. Additionally, Calvin appears to understand that the manner of his communication is not always conveying the "something" he is trying to help people encounter. For instance, in a 1561 letter addressing some of Calvin's desires regarding the Lord's Supper in Geneva, Calvin acknowledges, much like my own acknowledgment above:

> in administering the Lord's Supper I have sometimes used Paul's words, but I preferred to stop doing this because the words could not be repeated to each individual without a long delay; and…scarcely one in ten understood what I wanted understood, and no one grasped the entire meaning.[115]

In this statement Calvin is, in my opinion, pointing to the argument made above. While correctness is at stake given his contextual reality, "scarcely one in ten understood what I wanted understood," there is nevertheless a *something* happening that Calvin is focused on communicating, "no one grasped the entire meaning." While he uses the language of "meaning," the meaning I would suggest is *event.* For instance, in his

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[113] McKee, *John Calvin*, 133. Emphasis added.
[114] McKee, *John Calvin,* 134.
[115] Karin Maag, *Lifting Hearts to the Lord: Worship with John Calvin in Sixteenth-Century Geneva* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 48.

commentary on 1 Corinthians where Calvin very clearly argues about "correctness," he does so because at the core Calvin believes something takes place at the Lord's table, that "the body of Christ is really (*realiter),* to use the usual word, i.e. truly (*vere),* given to us in the Supper, so that it may be health-giving food for our souls."[116] All this to acknowledge that, though Calvin does not fully engage in liturgy as story, Calvin is very much concerned with communicating the *event.*

What we see then in the liturgy of Calvin's Geneva is first that the liturgy has changed. Whereas the *Book of Common Worship* provides a liturgical pattern containing multiple elements, such as the invitation, Great Thanksgiving and Lord's Prayer, distribution of elements, and concluding prayer, Calvin begins with the Words of Institution and uses them as the basis for an extended invitation, and concludes with prayer after the distribution of elements, omitting the Great Thanksgiving and Lord's Prayer. Additionally, though Calvin does not explicitly tell a story, Calvin very much roots his liturgy in the story of his community as it also engages in his understanding of the story of God that is told in the Lord's Supper, an *event* which brings forth unity, where the community grows "into one body." In other words, it appears, at least in this example, that the purpose of liturgy for Calvin is to engage his contextual reality putting it in conversation with the story of God. Additionally, as was discussed above with the language of *lex orandi* as *lex agendi,* the language of Calvin's liturgy speaks of the activity of a community who has encountered God, who "has high resolve and courage to

[116] Maag, *Lifting Hearts to the Lord,* 129.

live in peace and brotherly love with his neighbors."[117] That is to say, liturgy invites activity.

Summary

For some, the language of liturgy can come with baggage, with the feeling of rote repetition, or of meaningless ritual. As has been said, there have been countless moments in my own ministry where I have felt that reality. However, liturgy, as a formative ritual, is at the very heart of Christian worship. In its best form, liturgy is story, serving to stir the imagination by actively engaging the body, mind, and affect. But ultimately, liturgy as story brings about encounter, engaging the *event* of God. In other words, liturgy is not just words or story to help provide meaning, but it should *do* something. While, as Smith argues, the Reformed tradition has engaged a more "heady" understanding of liturgy, we can see in Calvin's liturgical practice the desire to communicate *event,* which subsequently engaged the lived reality and story of his community.

Reformed Understanding of the Lord's Supper

By way of reminder, the core focus of this project is to explore the power of story, which has been examined above, both as a general principle and more specifically as liturgy. While I would, and have, suggested story is a vital element of Christian worship, the stories that will be told in this project will be located in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Additionally, as has been hinted at in Calvin's liturgy, the Lord's Supper is a moment of *event,* an encounter that fundamentally collapses past, present, and future in

[117] McKee, *John Calvin,* 132.

on themselves informing and transforming understanding and making meaning. We must now turn our attention to the nature of that *event,* to understand more clearly what it is that the stories in this project will seek to communicate.

The Lord's Supper as Event

Throughout Christian history there has been much debate on the nature of the Lord's Supper, how we should practice it and the realness of bread and cup. This will not be the focus of this section. Rather, as the title indicates, we will look at the Lord's Supper as *event,* an understanding that can be gleaned from the opening story of this paper.

Again, as was argued above, this idea of the Lord's Supper as *event* is not new. Martha Moore-Keish suggests it is an idea held by Calvin who "understood the Eucharist as an *event* through which the Holy Spirit works to shape people over time into relationships with one another and with God's own self."[118] In other words, the Lord's Supper *did* something. While Calvin cared about correctness or practice, the belief was that something happened when people participated in the Lord's Supper. Frank Senn is helpful in understanding what this might look like.

Senn begins by focusing on the language of *anamnesis* used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Senn argues the remembrance that occurs is not just the remembrance of the meal, that we engage simply in a "dramatic reenactment," but rather the *anamnesis* occurs when we "'do' the supper Jesus had *with* his disciples."[119] In other words, there is an expectation in the words of Paul that Jesus is still present. This is evidenced further

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[118] Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, 16. Emphasis added.

[119] Frank Senn, "Do This: Eucharist and the Assembly's Liturgy," in *What Does It Mean to "Do This"?: Supper, Mass, Eucharist* (Eugene: Cascade Books, n.d.), 2. Emphasis added.

through Paul's language. When Paul recounts the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians he recites the words of Jesus in the present tense, indicating not a historical remembrance of a past event but rather "a present reality."[120] That is to say, in Senn's understanding, when Paul spoke the Words of Institution to the Corinthian church, he proclaimed them not as a moment of historical memory the community was invited to engage with, but rather Paul was inviting the people to hear Jesus speak to them.

While Senn comes to this idea by looking at the grammar used by Paul, it is not only an argument of grammar. Karl Barth, when speaking of the reality of God suggests:

> In God's revelation, which is the content of [God's] Word, we have in fact to do with [God's] act. And first, this means generally – with an *event*, *with* a *happening*. But as such this is an event which is in no sense to be transcended. It is not, therefore, an event which has merely happened and is now a past fact of history. God's revelation is, of course, this as well. But it is also *an event happening in the present, here and now*.[121]

Barth starts from the premise that "God is" and we can only understand who "God is" by means of revelation, which is the "Word of God," and if we believe this is revelation, then it reveals God's being, "God is who [God] is in [God's] works."[122] Those works, as revealed in God's Word, are fully and completely revealed in the "the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ," and in this *event* God is "subject, predicate and object; the revealer, the act of revelation, the revealed; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the Lord active in this event."[123] What is running beneath the surface of Barth's argument is the activity of God in Jesus Christ. God's activity is *event.* If that is the case, then when Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper and participates in it, he creates *event.* Though he does not

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[120] Senn, *"Do This,"* 3.

[121] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1:262. Emphasis added and edited to use gender-neutral language for God.

[122] Barth, II.1:257, 260. Edited to use gender-neutral language for God.

[123] Barth, II.1:263.

make the argument this way, this is what Senn sees Paul doing in the use of present tense language. To be fair, this is not an argument Barth appears to make but is a step that others such as T.F. Torrance and George Hunsinger will make.[124] In this way, when we participate in the Lord's Supper we do not *re*enact, but rather Jesus' "completed and perpetual self-offering, as sacramentally *re*-presented in the Eucharist, serves as [the faithful's] means of eternal access to the Father of all mercy and righteousness."[125]

To view the Lord's Supper as *event* is to acknowledge the ongoing activity of God within the sacrament. This *event* is also, as Hunsinger says, a perpetual self-offering which brings us to God, which as Calvin, Root, and Barth suggest should result in change. Whether we are speaking of *event* or some other form of encounter, when we as humans experience said *event,* it has an effect. It is finally to this idea that we turn.

The Effect of Event

In this section I knowingly tread lightly. Within the language of *event* is the idea of encounter with God, and as such that encounter will have an effect. However, to argue I or anyone knows how that *event* might affect any person would be a bold claim, and one that has been used in churches throughout history to marginalize various people groups by forcing conformity. Additionally, as stated above, there is a tendency in the Reformed tradition to lean into "correctness." This section is not meant to argue for a "correct" understanding of the effect of *event* or a complete understanding of the effect of *event,* rather, to explore the potential benefits of *event.* In this way, we can turn again to Calvin

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[124] George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth on the Lord's Supper: An Ecumenical Appraisal," in *What Does It Mean To "Do This"?: Supper, Mass, Eucharist* (Eugene: Cascade Books, n.d.), 39.

[125] Hunsinger, "Karl Barth on the Lord's Supper," 43. Emphasis added.

to name three such benefits: the engrafting into Christ, awakening of gratitude, and building of community.[126]

Engrafting into Christ

Calvin begins his discussion of the Lord's Supper in Book IV of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by plainly stating, "God has received us, once for all, into [God's] family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons [and daughters]."[127] According to Calvin, being engrafted into the family of Jesus is to become heirs with Jesus, that "whatever is his may be called ours."[128] Calvin comes to this understanding of engrafting into Christ by focusing on the language used in the Words of Institution, "Take, eat, drink; this is *my* body, which is given for you; this is *my* blood, which is shed for forgiveness of sins."[129] In other words, in Calvin's view, Jesus is offering us what already belongs to him. To be fair, Calvin speaks of the engrafting in a vague sense, he does not explicitly state what this looks like or what it means to be an "heir." I would suggest this is in part because Calvin is seeking to do exactly what this section is doing, argue that the *event* of the sacrament does something. It is not just a mimetic act. Additionally, this engrafting into Christ is not something solely received through the Lord's Supper, as:

> once for all, therefore, [Christ] gave his body to be made bread when he yielded himself to be crucified for the redemption of the world; daily he gives it when by the word of the gospel he offers it for us to partake, inasmuch as it was crucified, when

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[126] B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 125. John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 144–149.

[127] Calvin, *Institutes,* 2:1359. Emphasis added and edited to use inclusive language and gender-neutral language for God.

[128] Calvin, *Institutes,* 2:1362.

[129] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1362.

> he seals such giving of himself by the sacred mystery of the Supper, and when he inwardly fulfills what he outwardly designates.[130]

For Calvin it appears that the giving of Christ's body has a dual meaning, both in the crucifixion and in the offering of the bread of life in the Lord's Supper, and while they are not the same, they are also inseparable. In this way then, Calvin leans into the idea established by Moore-Keish, *lex orandi* is *lex agendi,* the gift of Christ is fundamentally important but our active engaging in that giving through the Lord's Supper is also of grave importance in helping us fully experience our union with Christ.

Awakening of Gratitude

The language of gratitude does not readily appear in Calvin's examination of the Lord's Supper throughout his *Institutes*. However, it is implicit, and it is more explicitly stated within his *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper.* As noted above, Calvin sees a great mystery in the way in which we find union with Christ, but running through his discussion is the reality that it is all a gift from God. We are engrafted into Christ, and we are nourished "throughout the course of our life."[131] Christ offers his very self to us as a gift that sustains and nourishes. The sacrament helps us "grasp the efficacy" of Christ's death, giving us an act that is simultaneously efficacious and enlightening as to the nature of that efficacy.[132] But throughout all this, Calvin acknowledges the mystery, saying, "first, we should not, by too little regard for the signs, divorce them from their mysteries, to which they are so to speak attached. Secondly, we should not, by extolling them

[130] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1364.
[131] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1360.
[132] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1363.

immoderately, seem to obscure somewhat the mysteries themselves."[133] In essence, the mystery is important and cannot be ignored, which means that these gifts are not even things we can fully grasp or achieve on our own. In light of all of this, Calvin suggests the Lord's Supper "urges us and incites us the better to recognize the blessings which we have received, and daily receive, from the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may render Him such offering of praise as is His due."[134] The Lord's Supper is such a gift, and when we realize that, it should awaken in us a sense of gratitude for all that we have received.

Building of Community

The third benefit of the Lord's Supper has already been discussed above when reflecting on Calvin's liturgical practices in Geneva, which focused on the importance of community and more importantly the unity of community as an important benefit received through the Lord's Supper. Calvin states this implicitly when he presents his argument that "The Lord's Supper implies mutual love."[135] Calvin comes to this idea by building on the first benefit of the Lord's Supper, that it unites us with Christ. According to biblical texts such as Ephesians 4:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:17, there is "one body," meaning that all those who are in Christ are brought together. For Calvin, "none of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us, without at the same time, injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do."[136] Again, in the wonderful mystery that takes place in the Lord's Supper, the reality that Christ

[133] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1364–1365.
[134] Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 148.
[135] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1414.
[136] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1415.

gives himself for us means we are not just drawn into Christ but shown the way in which we then offer ourselves to others.

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When we speak of the Lord's Supper as *event* we speak of the action of God in the world, action in which we are then invited to participate. As *event,* it informs our past, present, and future. In light of these realities, we must deduce there is some effect, and in this case, Calvin would suggest there are at the least three benefits. The *event* of God made known in the Lord's Supper unites us with Christ; it is a gift of Christ that makes us heirs with Christ sharing in all he has. This great gift, when we fully hold to the mystery surrounding it and the reality that it truly is a gift, should bring forth in us a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving for all that God has done. When we experience both of these realities and recognize those same benefits are experienced by others in the *event* of the Lord's Supper, we recognize that we are drawn more deeply into community with them.

Summary

As has been made clear, the nature of this project is to explore the power of story, and the way story engages our imaginations and helps us experience the *event* of God. This project is also being located within the practice of a community gathering to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This contextual reality means part of the story being communicated in this project is the story of the Lord's Supper. The story of the Lord's Supper is a story of *event, a* proclamation that we are participating in an act into which Jesus Christ is actively inviting us. That is to say, when we gather around the Lord's

table, we do not tell the story of an event, but we tell the story of the *event* happening in our midst knowing that experience will impact us by engrafting us into Christ, awakening in us a sense of gratitude, and drawing us together as a community in Christ.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the various strands that serve as the foundation of this project. In this final section I will attempt to weave those strands together in part by telling the story that inspired this project.

At a few points in this paper, I have shared parts of my own story, either explicitly or implicitly. I have shared the experience of participating in the Lord's Supper with members of the congregation I serve and seeing people who did not appear to be experiencing what I was experiencing, or appeared disconnected and distant. And I have shared the reality that this project is in part asking the question of what my role is in the story of the church, acknowledging my place as a pastor, the changing landscape of faith in American culture, the growth of secularization, and the rise of those who identify as spiritual but not religious. While there are likely many potential reasons for these cultural changes and practical ways to engage them, my own love for story drew me to think along those lines as a potential practice to engage those various realities. One of the potential reasons for the growth of the spiritual but not religious is the growth of a disenchanted view of the world. This shift led me to begin considering the ways in which stories have captured my attention, engaged my imagination, and at times shaped how I engage the world, in other words, how stories have broken through my own experiences of disenchantment. I also began considering my own experience in church, which has

lacked the practice of storytelling. Rarely, if ever, have I experienced story, in the context of worship, for the sake of story, which—considering the nature of story, the idea that humans are innately wired for story, and that our brains use stories to make meaning—made me question why stories and storytelling are not part of Christian worship. As was said above, we make theology primary, rather than story. This thought was further intensified when I began looking at the nature of the Christian faith and saw story and storytelling. For instance, one of the main protagonists within the Bible is Jesus of Nazareth, who was, among other things, a storyteller. But even more fundamentally, as Bargár suggests, "God is a story."[137] God has put meaning into this world, and we have been invited to participate in that story. And now, Christians gather in worship and read from a collection of texts that try to engage that story of God and the story of Jesus, a story that begins much like many of the children's and fantasy stories we know, "When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste," an opening line that grasps your attention and invites the imagination to begin to wonder what might be happening.[138] And some of those texts, such as Matthew, function in a way that helps connect with our past, inform our present, and envision our future through the use of our imagination. It is this story that brought forth the question that guides this project: can story impact the experience of worshippers? If story is a fundamental piece of our human existence, can it be, and should it be, an active piece of Christian worship?

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[137] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 8.

[138] Robert Alter, trans., *The Hebrew Bible: Book 1 the Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), 11.

As I considered that question, I began to consider how I might then use story in the context of worship, and I began to see there are areas where we both seek to tell a story and have a story to tell. Namely, our liturgical practices and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. As James K. A. Smith argues, the very nature of liturgy and worship is story, and it, just like fiction, helps engage our imagination.[139] I have identified traces of this in Calvin's own liturgical practices in Geneva, which engage the story he and his community are part of and consider the ways in which God's story causes them to see and experience the world differently. In both cases the nature of story is more implicit than explicit. Smith points to the nature of our liturgy in and of itself telling a story, and Calvin is not actively telling a story, but rather engaging story. This led me to think more about how to better and more explicitly engage the practice of storytelling in the context of worship, landing upon the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The liturgy around the Lord's Supper engages story in two ways: first there is the repetition of the Words of Institution, which tell a story of the night when the sacrament was instituted; in our modern Reformed liturgies, we also tell a story through the Great Thanksgiving, recounting the story of salvation. In my eyes, this created an avenue to engage story in worship that was potentially more accessible in the context of worship. There is then the question of the content of the story to be told. The Lord's Supper carries with it some theological beliefs and convictions, such as the awakening of gratitude, engrafting into Christ, and building of community.

It is this story that brought forth this project and resulted in the thesis of this project, asking how story and storytelling in the context of worship, particularly in the context of

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[139] Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 93.

the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, might impact the experience of worshippers. Furthermore, it is this story that brings forth the exploration of the rationale for this project, the reality that story is a fundamental aspect of human life, being both the tool the human mind uses to make meaning and the avenue to engage imagination, a reality evidenced throughout the Bible. And more specifically, using story in the context of the Lord's Supper, as has been suggested above, is also a synergistic space, as both are opportunities for *event,* that is to say, both open the doors for encounter with God.

CHAPTER 3: THE POWER OF STORY

After months of conversations, discernment, and a move from the East Coast back to the Midwest, with a two-week old, I was finally being installed as the pastor in my new call. It was a wonderful service full of friends and family who all came to celebrate my call to ministry and welcome me back home, as I was returning to my home Presbytery. For the majority of the service, I sat and listened to colleagues and friends lead worship, encourage me in my call, and charge the congregation. Finally, the time came for me to step in and lead an element of the service, my first official act as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Sand Springs. I was to preside over the Lord's Supper. I found my place and stood behind the Lord's Table for the first time in my new congregation. As I stood there, I looked out at some familiar faces and many whom I looked forward to getting to know, trying to take in the moment.

Now, I had been serving as an Associate Pastor at a large church for the past several years, so nothing I was doing was new. Though the setting was new, I had probably stood in the same position in a different sanctuary at least 100 times previously. At this point, the movement and the liturgy were muscle memory. So, I stood behind the table and began reciting the familiar liturgy, speaking the invitation that I had said many times before, reciting the Words of Institution as I picked up the bread with my left hand and the cup with my right, and leading the congregation in a somewhat alliterative Great Thanksgiving and Lord's Prayer. After completing the standard liturgical elements, I walked around to the front of the table, where a row of Elders stood waiting to receive elements, to begin distributing the bread. I reached out my hands, as I had time and time again, I took the top tray from the stack of silver communion trays on the far edge of the

table, and I turned and handed it to the first Elder. Then I handed the subsequent tray to the next Elder, working down the row. When I finally reached the last Elder, one of the members of the search committee that had called me to the church, he smiled at me, winked, then very intentionally lowered his head to draw my attention to his hands, which held the plate I had just given to him, a plate not of bread, but cups of juice. I had served the elements in reverse. I was so accustomed to working from the outside of the table in I didn't even look to see where the elements were placed. I just let my muscle memory take over, leading me in a familiar routine with little awareness of what was actually happening. I had passed out multiple trays of juice, which were twice as large as the bread trays, without ever noticing, and likely would have remained oblivious if not for this Elder. Having never experienced something like this I looked at him and said, "let's just roll with it."

At the conclusion of the service, as I gave the charge and benediction, I tried to make light of the mistake, joking about the reality that with a new pastor the congregation will likely experience change, beginning with serving the communion elements backwards. Later, after the service, I joked with colleagues about the theological significance of serving the cup before the bread, joking that I was just leaning into an interpretation of the Lukan tradition. But there, beyond the jokes, was the reality that the experience invited me and the congregation to think about the nature of what was happening, think about what it meant to be and have a new pastor, prepare for change, consider the significance of the Lord's Supper, and reflect on the ways in which our practices and routines shape us as individuals, and a community…Then I posted a picture of how I wanted the table set in the sacristy to avoid this ever happening again.

"Most new pastors think they are going to change the world until they almost get fired for changing the bulletin." – Unknown

The purpose of this project is to explore the power of story in the context of Christian worship to help discern if story can have an impact on the experience of worshippers. While I would ultimately suggest story can be used in a variety of ways within the context of worship, in this project the practice of storytelling took place within the liturgical practices of the Lord's Supper.

As a brief aside, I began this paper reflecting on my own story and the various ideas that grounded this project: parishioners seemingly apathetic when participating in the Lord's Supper, the growth of the "nones" and spiritual but not religious, and my own love of story. While I had hoped to develop a project that would engage all three elements fully, placing the project in the context of the congregation I serve does not allow for that. While there are those in my congregation who are deeply enmeshed in disenchantment, one of the reasons leading to the growth of the "nones" and spiritual but not religious, those in the congregation are also choosing to be part of a religious community. In essence, even if they might hold views quite similar to others who identify as spiritual but not religious, they cannot fully fit into that category simply given their involvement in the life of the congregation. This, though, does not mean the project as described below cannot impact how we engage the spiritual but not religious as the project still engages the idea of disenchantment and consists of participants who are enmeshed in disenchantment. In other words, although this project, which is in the context of my congregation, does not fully allow me to explore the use of story and

storytelling with those who identify as “nones” or spiritual but not religious, the project still engages some of the core understandings of those groups, and therefore can still provide some insight as to how those enmeshed in disenchantment may respond to the use of story and storytelling, even if those groups of individuals are not active participants in this project.

As has been examined above, at the core of this project is the belief that story is an important aspect of being human, and therefore is an important tool to engage humans, as it engages our imaginations which in turn help shape and inform our past, present, and future. More specifically, this project will replace the standard or known liturgies of the Lord’s Supper that the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Sand Springs is accustomed to with a variety of stories over the course of five Sundays spanning from the first Sunday in November 2023 to the first Sunday of December 2023 in order to explore what impact story and storytelling might have on the experiences of congregants in connection to the Lord’s Supper. In the end the research will reveal, through the collection of surveys and open-ended interviews with a focus group, a rise in engagement during the Lord’s Supper both in terms of active participation and active imagination.

I will now explore in more detail the project itself, the implementation of the project, and the results of the project.

Project Overview

As stated, the core of this project is the telling of stories. In this section I will explore the formation of the stories told throughout the project, the various steps leading up to the

implementation of the project, and the processes through which I collected research during the project.

While the focus of this project is the implementation of storytelling in worship, the first hurdle that needed to be engaged was how and when these stories would be told.[140] Very early in the process of creating this project it was decided that the act of storytelling would take place within the context of the Lord's Supper; in part this began as I reflected on the connection of two ideas. First, in reading the *Book of Common Worship* and the *Book of Order,* I realized the Great Thanksgiving, though a prayer, was telling the story of "God's acts of salvation through Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return, as well as Jesus' institution of the sacrament."[141] Additionally, the reciting of the Words of Institution is the telling of a story, as I often speak them: "on the night our savior was arrested and betrayed he gathered around the table with his disciples…" is telling the story of a particular night. While these elements of story are present, the experience of congregants, as illustrated in the opening story of this paper, is one of disconnection. Second, as I considered some of the guiding ideas in which this paper is rooted, the growing disenchantment in Western society, I saw the Lord's Supper in particular as a practice that stood in contrast to the view of disenchantment, especially when I began perceiving it as *event.* This ultimately led to the desire to use story more explicitly in the context of the Lord's Supper to explore if it in fact helped people better experience the Lord's Supper as *event*.

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[140] I have spoken several times regarding the power of story and the desire to use it as a tool to engage things such as disenchantment at this point so I will not reiterate those arguments in this section.

[141] *Book of Common Worship*, 10.

However, I then needed to decide how and when this project would take place. This specifically was a challenging piece of the organization of this project. Simply based on the logistics of the timeline I was working with, focusing the majority of the project in the fall of 2023, it was most logical for me to ask the congregation to celebrate the Lord's Supper over consecutive weeks in a short period of time. Initially, I had hoped to accomplish this in October 2023 as it had five Sundays in the month and would then give me six weeks to explore the use of story. Additionally, I wanted to avoid an overlap with the Christmas and Advent season in December to not influence the data due to being in a season that carries with it some mystical and magical feelings. However, ultimately the implementation of the project was delayed until November of 2023. That, however, was not the end of the conversation, on two fronts.

First, I needed to think about the reality that I was going to implement a significant change in my congregation. This chapter began with a humorous story that I have seen on memes and various social media posts throughout my time in ministry acknowledging the difficulty and cost of change. This is particularly relevant for me as I have previously invited a congregation in which I served to participate in the Lord's Supper on consecutive Sundays for a season, and although it did not cost me a job, it was not received well. Several members of that congregation refused to worship during that season and others stopped giving to the church. Although the voices of those like Calvin, who thought the Lord's Supper should be celebrated regularly were encouraging, in this instance I wanted to ensure the shift in practices did not negatively impact the experience.[142] To manage this issue, and avoid a similar experience, I began speaking of

[142] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1422; Maag, *Lifting Hearts to the Lord*, 49.

the nature of this project with the members of the church's Session early in 2023. This was also important as it helped navigate the second major issue, namely that as a Presbyterian congregation, the Session needed to approve the celebration of the Lord's Supper. While I initially did not have specific dates, beginning in Spring of 2023 I began regularly speaking with the Session regarding the nature of my project, informing them of the overall plan, and discussing some of the research I had been doing to that point. In light of this, the Session approved the celebration of the Lord's Supper on consecutive Sundays in November. This was also important because it helped navigate some of the natural logistics that resulted from celebrating the Lord's Supper on consecutive weeks, such as setup, and having elders sign up to help serve the elements. Upon getting the support and approval of the church Session, I then informed the congregation about what would be taking place, making several announcements in the context of worship in the weeks leading up to the implementation of the project, going so far as to acknowledge that the experience would be different than anything we had done in my tenure at the church, but also that it would be short term and it would not impact the Advent season.

While these events were occurring, I began considering the way in which story would be engaged within the liturgies of the Lord's Supper. Again, given the humorous, and somewhat true, story that began this chapter, I wanted to structure the use of stories in a way that, as the project began, helped things feel more familiar in the beginning and progressed from there. In light of this, I developed the stories as follows:

Week 1 – I wanted the first story used in liturgy to be the most similar to a regular worship experience.[143] To accomplish this, I turned to a liturgy that had previously been

[143] See Appendix A.

used, from *Feasting on the Word,* a resource I regularly use in planning the liturgies for worship services. As noted, the Great Thanksgiving, though a prayer, tries to tell a story. In light of that, I took the Great Thanksgiving, as presented in *Feasting on the Word* for liturgical year A, and adapted the language so that it would feel more like an explicit story. For instance, I changed the tone and tense of the prayer, shifting it from a prayer giving thanks for what God has done to focus more on telling the story of what God has done. In using an established liturgy, I followed a pattern and language the congregation was, at least in part, familiar with. Additionally, within the story I attempted to include elements of the standard liturgy such as an invitation, the oblation, the epiclesis, and the Words of Institution. In other words, rather than multiple sections of the liturgy around the Lord's Supper proposed by the *Book of Common Worship*, I attempted to consolidate all of these elements into a single moment of storytelling. Ultimately the purpose of the story was to ease people into the idea of liturgy as story, start working some of their imaginative muscles, and speak to the story of faith in a way that awakens a sense of gratitude.

Week 2 – The second story used intentionally built off the principles of the first story.[144] Again, it was a story that tried to follow the pattern of a Great Thanksgiving, telling the story of creation and fall, God's steadfast love shown through the prophets of old, God's steadfast love shown through the coming of Jesus, and the story of Jesus' life. Additionally, it too tried to incorporate pieces such as the invitation, Words of Institution, oblation, and epiclesis, within the telling of a single story. Further, while the first story used the language of a provided liturgy that was then adapted, this story was original.

[144] See Appendix B.

When I began writing the story that would be used, I leaned into the theme of story and the proclamation of that story from the beginning of creation through the present moment of celebrating the Lord's Supper. In essence, I sought to illustrate through story Bargár's claim that God is a story.[145] To accomplish that, I tried to lean heavily into the idea of God speaking, or serving as storyteller. I attempted to use vivid and imaginative language, such as describing God as "coming close enough to humanity that they could feel the very breath of God." I also tried to write a story that portrayed Jesus as a storyteller, point to the words he explicitly spoke, as opposed to the general image of God. I did this in order to help draw attention to the idea that the story we participate in at the Lord's Supper is a story Jesus is simultaneously telling and participating in. In other words, rather than speak the Words of Institution as a separate story or another idea that takes place, I attempted to include them in the story in a way that helped people hear them as if Jesus was speaking them. The ultimate goal of this story was to maintain a pattern or structure that felt "normal" to the congregation, while also inviting them to more deeply use their imagination.

Week 3 – The third story took the greatest turn from what was known and expected by the congregation.[146] Knowing the third week of story would take place the Sunday prior to the celebration of Thanksgiving, I attempted to create a story that engaged people's memory of that experience. In this way, rather than telling the story of faith, which is done in the Great Thanksgiving, I was using story in a more parabolic way. In essence I told a story within the premise of "coming to the Lord's Table is like

[145] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 8.
[146] See Appendix C.

Thanksgiving dinner." Again, seeking to engage mind, body, and affect while also engaging past, present, and future, the focus of the story was recalling the experience of a Thanksgiving dinner, the joy, the difficulty, the awkward moments, the feeling of family, and the feelings of safety and comfort. In writing the story I tried to speak of general ideas and experiences, often pulling from my own memory, in a way that allowed people to place themselves in the story, assigning their own names to characters. In structuring the story, I began almost solely focused on a Thanksgiving meal, and only after that story was told did I attempt to draw some of those same feelings and images into the story of the last supper, and ultimately the Lord's Supper, by echoing themes and language from the first section of story. Also, thinking about the nature of imagination as engaging body, I planned on inviting the congregation to bodily participate in this story. Given the proximity to Thanksgiving I intended to invite the congregation forward to gather around a large table set for a Thanksgiving meal, where we would pass the bread and cup just as we might pass plates around a table later in the week. Lastly, while the previous two weeks engaged elements of standard liturgy through the language of the story, such as "we come to this place" and "we come to this table" to help invite images of the invitation as well as a more explicit epiclesis and speaking the Words of Institution in a more traditional way, this week avoided some of those elements or engaged them more loosely. For instance, there was no real moment of invitation, as the invitation would be embodied as the congregation comes forward to gather, and though the Words of Institution would be present, they would be said in more of a conversational tone with some interpretative additions as to how I heard them said when I imagine Jesus speaking them.

Week 4 – This week I attempted to explore the impact of storytelling.[147] In my experience, outside of a few responsive moments in a liturgy, the worship leader or pastor is the primary voice. In the instance of the three previous weeks, I would function as the storyteller. For this week I attempted to invite the congregation to see themselves as the storytellers. To accomplish this, I turned to the story I would use in week 2, but I would invite the congregation to tell the story, breaking the story into seven sections each beginning with a short prompt followed by a longer response. I will confess that I contemplated inviting the congregation into the telling of the entire story used in week 2, however, realized that given the length of the story it may get confusing, or people may get lost in the reading. Like the story from week 3, this story will break from the norm in a very interesting way in that the congregation, rather than the pastor, would say the words of institution. In a way, engaging story like this, as a responsive telling of the story of faith, is stepping into the Passover practice of Haggadah, which is the "ritual retelling of the story of the exodus from Egypt."[148] In essence, the use of story in this way would also root the story in a larger historical, liturgical, and faith tradition, and open another door to explore the impact and use of story.

Week 5 – The final week of storytelling was a combination of the styles from the second and third week of stories.[149] Rather than telling a broad sweeping story of faith

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[147] See Appendix D.

[148] Joshua Kulp, "The Origins of the Seder and Haggadah," *Currents in Biblical Research* 4, no. 1 (2005): 111. Initially I intended to devote a section on the practice of Haggadah, and the history of storytelling in the Jewish tradition, within this paper, but space did not permit that discussion. However, it is worth noting, especially in the context of Lord's Supper, which is rooted in the Passover meal, that story would have been used, and likely used in a way similar to the storytelling in this week, which one voice asking questions regarding the activity and symbols being engaged and other voices telling the story of faith that is depicted in the actions and symbols. While the practice of Haggadah was typically done with a younger person asking the questions with an adult telling the story, and in this instance that practice is reversed.

[149] See Appendix E.

(week 2), I wanted a more particular story of faith. Considering this, I chose to engage the story of Zechariah, who would be the focus of the sermon that week. Therefore, I attempted to retell his story, depicted in Luke 1:1–23, and imagine his encounter with an angelic messenger while working in the Temple. In doing this, I attempted to tell the story of Zechariah where I would play the part of Zechariah working in the temple. To accomplish this, I spent time reflecting on Zechariah's potential thoughts and feelings, as a minister, a husband, a hopeful father, and as part of a community. I then considered and sought to communicate how Zechariah may feel upon encountering a messenger of God. The obvious complication that arose in this story is telling a pre-Jesus story and then speaking the words of Jesus. In light of this, I chose to pivot and then speak of the ways in which we, as the hearers of the story, may experience the same feelings and thoughts. Upon drawing the listeners into reflecting on how their reality may match Zechariah's, I then shifted to tell the story of the Lord's Supper in a way that specifically engages those previous thoughts and feelings. In essence, this story would attempt to tell two stories, one to invite participants to engage their imaginations regarding potential negative emotions or thoughts similar to Zechariah's, and a second story to imagine God's gracious response to those thoughts and feelings. Or, to again use the language of imagination, the story sought to invite people into a moment of self-reflective, deconstructive, and reconstructive imagination.

In each case, over the five weeks I tried to create a story that both held the general elements of the expected liturgy, that is an invitation, prayer, Lord's Prayer, and Words of Institution, as well as engaged some of the themes expressed in chapter 2, such as

awaking gratitude, building community, and the Lord's Supper as *event.* Additionally, part of the reason I made the decision to have a variety of stories over the course of five weeks was because it was challenging to engage the totality of what story could be. Again, working within the realm of imagination, engaging body, mind, and affect grounded in past, present, and future, all while making meaning, it became easier to lean into a few of those various elements in each story, rather than try to encapsulate them all well in a single story.

Having established the stories that would be used, I turn my focus to the ways in which data would be collected. Again, the guiding question of this project is, can the use of story in the context of worship, specifically the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, impact the experience of worshippers? In light of this, I chose to engage qualitative research focusing on the use of brief surveys and semi-structured discussions with a focus group. I chose to use a focus group because I wanted regular discussion regarding what was taking place in worship and thought it would be wiser to have a group of people committed to the totality of the experience ahead of time. The purpose of the focus group would be to more deeply engage the experiences of a few congregants over the course of five weeks, giving them a space to share about their experiences and create a space to discuss ideas that arose in light of their experiences. I also wanted to get some more immediate thoughts and feelings after each worship experience. This led to the creation of a short anonymous survey that would be included in bulletins each week for members to complete as they desired, consisting of three prompts: "give a word or phrase to describe your normal experience of communion," "did this style of communion liturgy

impact your experience of God and/or communion?" and "give a word or phrase to express how today's liturgy impacted your experience of God and/or communion."[150] The goal of the survey was not to get detailed data but rather to help provide a broader glimpse of the congregation's experience and provide a kind of control group to examine outside of the focus group. In essence, given the fact the focus group was pre-selected and committed to engaging the project I felt there would be more incentive for those individuals to engage and participate in the experience, which may alter the data, so I wanted to get an idea of what other congregants, who did not know they were going to discuss their experience later, felt and experienced. It should go without saying that this too has its flaws as people are still self-selecting to engage, but in this way I hoped to get a better sense of the experience of the congregation as a whole.

Project Implementation

As stated, the project was implemented over a five-week period. Each Sunday I began worship, prior to our Call to Worship, by informing the congregation that the project was taking place and pointing to the survey in the bulletin if they desired to participate. I chose to make this announcement before the worship service officially began each week as I wanted to ensure that any visitor or congregant who may have been gone for a season was aware of what was happening, especially given we would be celebrating the Lord's Supper outside of our normal pattern. Further, while I wanted to invite people to participate through the survey, I did not want to disrupt the flow of

[150] While the questions remained the same each week, because the final question was specific to each week, I included a header noting which week the survey was speaking of. Additionally, after the first week I added a parenthetical to the first question instructing people not to answer the first question if they had previously answered, to help avoid multiple answers from the same individuals inflating the data set.

worship with information and requests that were not essential to worship. I also gave people a small glimpse of the way story would be engaged that week. For instance, the first week I informed people of the nature of my project, its focus on the power of storytelling and the ways in which stories can be used to engage our faith, I also informed the congregation that the nature of story will feel the most like what they are accustomed to that Sunday. Likewise, the fourth week I informed the congregation prior to worship that we would come to gather around the table as we did the week before, meaning we will physically gather around the table and there would be hymn inserts at the table so they could just come forward, and did not need to worry about bringing bulletins or hymnals. In essence, before the service, I attempted to accomplish three goals: remind people what was happening in the event they had not been in worship or simply forgot, try to give enough information to ease any potential anxieties people had about doing something new in worship – see again the quote that began this chapter – and invite people to participate in the survey. Additionally, I changed the standard language in our bulletins. Traditionally, our bulletins listed the various liturgical elements around the Lord's Supper such as the invitation, Great Thanksgiving, Words of Institution, and distribution of elements. However, for these five weeks the bulletin read "Our Faith Story," distribution of the elements, and included the Lord's Prayer for reference.[151] This change was due in part to the logistics of the stories and the reality that they would contain various liturgical elements, and that those elements may not be in the normal order, so a new general liturgical marker helped to communicate that. In some ways, I was, again, bearing in mind the statement that began this chapter as I considered these

[151] See Appendix F.

smaller adjustments to worship, and attempting to ease people into something new in a way that avoided a negative experience created by anxiety or surprise. Beyond that initial announcement and the bulletin change, I did not speak of the project, trying to let the practice of storytelling feel as much a natural part of the service as possible.[152]

An additional area of consideration that had to take place in regard to implementation is what it meant to function as the storyteller. As a parent with small children, I am quite accustomed to reading stories. But in those instances, I am telling someone else's story, meaning I am trying to convey their ideas or images to the best of my ability, and more often than not I am just reading. This made me consider the storytellers I know and love, such as Brandon Sanderson and J.R.R. Tolkien, and the ways in which their stories are immersive. In other words, it does not feel as if you are being told a story, but rather shown a story. While authors tend to show stories through vivid language, I realized I had the ability to, at least in part, do so through a more dramatic enactment of the story. Meaning, while I did not want to turn the storytelling into an act, I could embody aspects of the story being told through movement and props. This meant that I would also need to consider how I would do that. Could I memorize the story, could I read from a text in a way that still allowed some freedom for movement, or could I tell the stories in a more "off the cuff" fashion? Ultimately, knowing my own abilities and anxieties I decided having something to reference as I told the story would be useful. Considering this, I

[152] The one exception to this statement was the fourth week where I, when the time for the Lord's Supper came, spoke of some of the themes that took place in the liturgies the previous week and the idea that in that particular week I was going to ask the congregation to be the storytellers. This was not a pre-planned or intentional decision, and in hindsight came from, at least in part, my own anxieties as I prepared to invite the congregation into a form of participation, based on previous experiences, I felt they would be the most uncomfortable with.

turned to technology I used while recording worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, using a Bluetooth switch to control a secondary monitor, which functioned as a makeshift teleprompter. Using this I would be able to move around and embody the story being told, but also have a reference point to turn to.

Before looking at the implementation of the stories in worship, I want to focus on the implementation of the focus group. The focus group was comprised of nine people who, though all active participants in the life of the congregation, were not all members of the congregation. I invited this group of people to participate in part because of their diversity, because they were all part of a Bible study that met regularly and had a history of having robust conversation, and they were interested in the work I was doing. Having worked with them on prior occasions, I knew they were thoughtful and had an established relationship making them more willing to be vulnerable or engage in disagreement. The nine participants consisted of six women and three men, ranging in age, who, though all attending our church regularly, were raised Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, and Presbyterian, and covered the theological spectrum. Additionally, their engagement in the church varied, with some becoming active in the church recently and others being long time members. The group already had a weekly standing meeting, and for the duration of the project decided to turn that meeting into a focus group session where they, with my guidance, would talk through their experiences of the Sunday before. While I will focus on the content of these discussions in the following section, I turn to discuss the implementation of the story liturgies each week, only focusing on the discussion of the focus group where necessary.

Week 1 – As we gathered for the Lord's Supper this first week, I positioned myself behind our table, which sits in the front of the sanctuary at the foot of our chancel, as I normally would. Next, I offered an opening general welcome that the table was open to all who feel called by God. I then invited the congregation to engage in a centering practice, inviting people to take a deep breath in and slowly exhale. The intent behind this was to help focus the attention of the congregation on what was taking place and help dissuade distraction so they could better engage their imaginations.

After this brief pause, I asked the Elders who would be helping to serve communion to come forward. I had given them a warning before worship that I would invite them up earlier than they were accustomed to but did not inform them as to why. Finally, I began telling the story. In this instance, I envisioned something akin to a traveling storyteller you might find in the Middle Ages, someone who was deeply familiar with the story, who would make bold flourishes with their body, flowing between acting and telling the story.[153] When I came to the section of the story that talked about Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper, recounting the Words of Institution, I broke the bread when I spoke of breaking the bread and began sharing it with the Elders who stood around the table. Likewise, as I told the story of Christ pouring the cup, I shared it with those standing at the table.

Upon completion of the story, which closed in the reciting of the Lord's Prayer, I invited the congregation to "come take part in this beautiful story," inviting them forward to partake in the Lord's Supper.

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[153] Admittedly, I am not certain this occurred in the Middle Ages, but it is the image stuck in my head as I thought about the way I saw myself as a storyteller that was not enacting but not actor.

After worship was completed. I collected the surveys that had been completed and placed in a small basket in the church Narthex, and later that week I met with the focus group to discuss their experience.[154]

Week 2 – This week functionally mirrored the first week, beginning with a moment to allow people to center themselves, followed by the general welcome of all people, followed by the telling of the story. Like the first week I tried to enact without acting, sharing the bread and cup with Elders who were gathered around the table with me.

Week 3 – This week took additional preparation prior to worship. As this week fell the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the story to be told would use the idea of a Thanksgiving dinner to help create something like a parable. While the congregation was accustomed to coming forward and partaking of the Lord's Supper by intinction, walking down the center aisle of the church, tearing off bread being held by an Elder and dipping it in a cup held by another Elder before walking down the outer aisles back to their pews, this week broke from those patterns. Prior to worship, I set up a larger table where our standard communion table would typically be found, pulling together multiple 8-foot tables. I then decorated the table as I would decorate my own Thanksgiving table, with multiple Thanksgiving themed platters, multiple table settings, and complete with pumpkin and pecan pies.

When it came time to partake of the Lord's Supper, I began by inviting the whole of the congregation to come forward and gather around the table standing shoulder to shoulder. I then began the liturgy as I had the past few weeks by inviting people to close their eyes and take a few deep breaths to center themselves. I then began telling the

[154] As this aspect happened each week I will not reiterate its occurrences in the following sections.

story, a story about family gathering around the table for thanksgiving. Again, I tried to function within the role of a storyteller that I envisioned. However, I also at times spoke about the Thanksgiving table being described as if it were my own, interjecting familial names or nicknames and experiences, rather than generic ideas. Upon completing the story, we began distributing the elements like we may at a Thanksgiving meal, passing plates of bread and a cup around the larger circle of gathered people, serving each other. This, outside of the story, was a unique experience for the congregation as they are accustomed to Elders and pastors serving the elements of the Lord's Supper.

An additional change that was added to this experience was the singing of a hymn around the table together, which was not part of the initial plan when envisioning the stories that would be used. During one of the meetings of the focus group one participant spoke of their love of singing around the Lord's Supper, beyond the normal singing of hymns. They specifically thought about singing a rendition of Psalm 51 as they celebrated the Lord's Supper in previous congregations and how the act of singing while partaking in the Lord's Supper added depth to their experience. In light of that conversation, I chose to adjust the pattern of our normal service to invite a moment of singing where we, following the pattern of Matthew 26:30, would join in song while at the table to help it feel as though it were part of the liturgical experience and part of the story of a family gathering. In essence, I equated it to a Thanksgiving gathering where the family might gather around a piano and sing a song together at the end of the festivities.

Week 4 – This week was an interesting experience that ran into a few complications. First, given the Thanksgiving holiday and staff and volunteers were not as readily available, we did not bring out our formal table but left up the Thanksgiving setup for our

worship service. This created some logistical problems regarding people processing as they normally would. Given this, I copied the model from week 3, inviting the congregation to gather around the table. At the table, I had printed copies of the responsive story the congregation would be telling. In this instance, as the congregation was telling the story, I did not serve as storyteller, rather I tried to simply help guide them in the practice of storytelling. Lastly, given the change in anticipated setup we once again passed plates of bread and the cup around the table inviting people to serve each other.

Week 5 – For the final week of storytelling we returned to what was a more "normal" setup for gathering at the Lord's Table, returning our standard table, and having the congregation process forward down the center aisle and returning by the side aisles when it came time to distribute the elements. While those elements were more "normal" I did choose to enact the story more this week. As noted above, one of the elements of this story was the story of Zechariah in the Temple as depicted in Luke 1. When imagining how I could function as storyteller in this instance I realized that I, as the pastor, was kind of like Zechariah, so I tried to tell the story of Zechariah while simultaneously depicting myself as Zechariah. Within the story, I spoke of Zechariah "busying himself with the work of the Temple, lighting candles, organizing the table on which the bread of God sits, burning incense, offering prayer to God," and as I spoke these words I actively lit the candles on the table that were left unlit, I rearranged the cup and bread which were originally set to the side, and I paused in the midst of the story to begin reciting the Lord's Prayer. From this point I continued telling the story in the style I had in previous weeks, emphasizing various elements through body movements.

Project Results

Before fully engaging the results of this project, I want to briefly focus on the premise of this project. In the opening chapter, I shared the story of coming to the Lord's Supper and feeling as if the congregation was disconnected from the depth of the *event* they are participating in, to the extent that someone was apparently more focused on my fashion sense than the gifts received. While that is something I perceived as true, the first question which must be asked is if that observation is accurate. Based upon the data collected I would suggest, at least in the context of this congregation, that observation is at least partially accurate.

The first meeting of the focus group focused on this idea, asking them to describe how they experienced the Lord's Supper, and all of the nine participants spoke of the Lord's Supper as "routine," the "same words over and over," and "always the same." One participant even voiced the reality that they "were not really engaged spiritually," and another confessing that while at one point in their life they felt "like I'm in the presence of the Almighty" when participating in the Lord's Supper, now "there's nothing there…I don't feel like I'm in the presence of the Almighty." I could even sense the disconnect and discontent as I watched the discussion happen. You could hear in the voices of the participants and see in their body language this desire for the Lord's Supper to be more than what they were experiencing, but instead "it's you get up, and you go, and you dip your thing, and you come back."

While members of the focus group affirmed some of the observations I was seeing, there were also reflections that acknowledged something more. The same person who talked negatively of the routine saying you just get up, go, dip, and sit down, then spoke

of the comfort they have also experienced in that routine "that [the liturgy] is a piece that never changed, that there's always this [practice] that you can come back to that it's going to be pretty similar to what I've always experienced in my life. So, there's, there's that level of comfort, especially whenever you're in different places in your life." In essence, there is a tension between the feeling of routine which becomes mundane and repetitive, and a potential comfort that can come in that repetition. I also saw this tension voiced in one of the surveys that was collected where a person, after acknowledging that finding words to describe their experience of the Lord's Supper is hard, described their experience as "peaceful" and "welcoming" while simultaneously feeling "distracted" and "insecure." Another survey described their experience of the Lord's Supper as "formal/renewing," again pointing to this tension between desire or expectations regarding the Lord's Supper and the lived experience of the Lord's Supper. While this tension was evident in several surveys and permeated the entirety of the focus group, there were those, predominantly in the surveys, who reflected feelings of "comfort," reassurance, and peace, or spoke of the perceived meanings behind the Lord's Supper, such as forgiveness. I point this out to speak to the reality that while there appears to be evidence that my observations are accurate, they do not speak of the totality of the experience of people. There are some who do in fact struggle to find meaning during the Lord's Supper, for a variety of reasons, but there are also those who find the practice very meaningful, even if that is not always observable.

Having shown that there is validity to one of the core observations that began this project, I turn now more fully to reflect on the results of the project. Over the course of

the five weeks of this project, I collected 28 surveys and conducted five meetings of the focus group. Again, the guiding question of this project is, can the use of story in the context of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper impact the experience of congregants? Based on the findings of the surveys and the focus groups meetings, the answer to that question would quite simply be, yes, stories used in the context of worship can impact the experience of worshippers. Over the course of the five weeks people wrote of the way stories helped them "form a connection," were "relaxing, meaningful…challenging, and thought provoking." They spoke of the feelings that the experience felt "intentional," of "enveloping love," and feeling "closer to God." Except for one slightly negative comment that one of the stories was "interesting, but long," comments spoke positively of the experience, not just that the experience was physically engaging, but also that it engaged various aspects of their faith and how they experienced God.

These experiences where also acknowledged within the meetings of the focus group. Within the focus group, people spoke of the ways in which the use of story helped them feel "closer to God" and connect to community, and that participants began imagining themselves in the story. One person went so far as to say, "I felt as if I was with the disciples around the Lord's Table, you're breaking the bread and handing it out to the disciples," a sentiment that was reiterated by another participant in a different meeting who saw themselves "not as a disciple but being with the disciples at the table. And it is very meaningful to me." And in that second conversation this idea was further engaged when another participant spoke of the idea that story helps them "immerse" themselves, letting them "step into" the moment which then "sticks with me for longer."

I share these brief observations to illustrate that the use of story did in fact impact, and positively impact, the worship experiences of congregants. Whether looking at the brief surveys or listening to the conversations of the focus groups, the vast majority of participants, even those who acknowledged the "routine" of the Lord's Supper, reflected the feeling that the use of story deepened their experiences in some way, helping them engage or step into the moment in new ways, or hear familiar words in a new way. With that realization in mind, the question to be asked more specifically is regarding what in particular, if anything, impacted their experiences. To this question I would suggest two answers based upon the conversations with the focus group: focusing upon the importance of embodiment, and the use of imagination. I turn first to the latter idea.

As discussed, imagination is a fundamental aspect of being human, and it is also a useful tool in faith formation by inviting people to explore ideas beyond what they have experienced and open themselves to be reshaped through the use of imagination. However, imagination is not often an idea used in the context of worship in my experience or the experiences of those within my congregation. On the final week of this project, I invited the focus group to discuss their understandings and experiences regarding the use of imagination, and almost immediately the focus group got visibly excited, which was a unique experience over the course of the five weeks. While we have lively conversations, I had not seen this group engage a topic in this way. For instance, while other weeks came to what felt like a natural stopping point in conversation, this week I had to stop the conversation to be mindful of people's time.

One of the conversations that people engaged in was the seeming difference between being a child and an adult. Participants spoke of their tendency to daydream as children,

their imaginary friends, and entering various worlds through reading. However, in adulthood these realms were not as prevalent. That is until one person confessed they thought imagination was "an immense gift from God almighty." They went on to describe how they see imagination used, saying:

> Every invention, I would conclude, or I would imagine, began with an imagination. People imagined, I'm sure Henry Ford imagined, I'm going to build a car – well what is that – he imagines it. I imagine. What would my life be if such and such would have happened or not have happened. We imagined that. I use imagination when I'm out piddling in the garden in trying to imagine what the garden is going to look like after I plant something. I imagined when I was young what my life would be and who I might marry…Imagination is…it's just, it's all encompassing. It's everywhere.

In essence, this participant was acknowledging the various ways in which imagination functions as proposed in this paper, such as the self-reflective and reconstructive imagination. The self-reflective imagination that imagined who they are in their life and the reconstructive imagination dreaming about who they could be and how they could get there. This reflection then led the group to engage the idea of imagination much along the lines of this paper, seeing it as a tool that helps shape and inform us.

One individual began thinking of it in terms of "planning" like you might do when you paint a picture, where you imagine the various colors and how they may or may not fit, and imagine the image being created. Then the conversation shifted again, as people began to think of imagination in regards to faith, and the idea of engaging faith in an imaginative way by asking "what if?" and entering into stories to see if they might act or think differently, and how these moments of imagination may have constructed some of our theological convictions, and our lack of imagination in adulthood as it pertains to faith may because we have been encouraged not to participate in imaginative work. One participant in the focus group began thinking about a local pastor who had recently died

and made headlines in 2004 when they moved from traditional Pentecostal theological beliefs to a more universalist understanding of grace and the cost that engaging in imaginative work brought upon them, and how that cost may prevent us and others from engaging in some imaginative work.[155] Throughout this conversation the participants of the focus group, though initially seeing imagination as childish and for pretend, began thinking about how important imagination is for humans, and how imagination is deconstructive and reconstructive, and vital in thinking about the nature of faith and faith formation. The question though remained as to whether the use of story was influential, and again, the conversations of the focus group would indicate an affirmative answer.

One of the members of the group began reflecting on the use of stories over the past month of worship and acknowledged it had helped them, "because in the past, I never would have put myself in the stories in the Bible. But in seeing all of that coming together, now I find myself getting more deeper into it and relating more and trying to put myself in that place and go, 'what would I do? What if I was there? How would I react to this?'" Even more, when asked by another participant how that experience was making them feel, they acknowledged how enjoyable it has been to enter into those imaginative moments. Additionally, a participant echoed the words of survey responses saying, "I imagined that I was with the disciples, and don't let this go to your head because it was for less than a brief second, that you were Jesus breaking the bread." While that statement is revealing the follow-up statement by the participant is even more revealing. They continued by saying that being in that imaginative space physically impacted them, creating a real emotional response; they "saw it as the Lord's table," "felt what the

[155] The pastor in question being Carlton Pearson who had died just the week before.

disciples…were feeling," and "what Jesus was feeling knowing that it was his last night." Again, this experience falls in line with what was explored in Chapter 2, that our imaginations can create real emotional experiences. This understanding and experience was then echoed by another individual, who, as they were engaging the story, dipped the bread into the cup and had some drip on their hands and suddenly began to imagine it truly was the blood of Jesus on their hands, that they in some way participated in the crucifixion of Jesus. Again, a moment of self-reflective imagination which led to deconstructive and reconstructive imagination as they then considered what their "hands are supposed to be doing now."

Lastly, while the conversations this week spoke of the depths and importance of imagination and their experiences through the use of story over the previous weeks, these ideas and experiences were unique. That is to say, when explicitly asked if the participants used imagination in worship regularly, outside the context of this project, they acknowledge they did not regularly use their imaginations in the context of worship. One participant said there were times when they, when hearing a story in scripture may put themselves in the story; however, the majority of participants did not actively engage their imaginations. This leads me to the conclusion that, at least in the context of this congregation, the use of story was fundamental in engaging imagination which in the end, according to several voices, helped people feel "closer and deeper" with God and broaden their understanding and experience of the Lord's Supper.

The second pronounced idea in the conversations of the focus group and the surveys was the idea of embodiment. This was, admittedly, not a result I anticipated, or was even

looking for. However, it should not have come as a surprise as it falls in line with the work of Bargár, who has been a primary conversation partner in this project. Bargár suggests that, as has been stated repeatedly in this paper, to be human is to have a story and participate in storytelling. Further, storytelling is not just a verbal activity, it also contains a nonverbal aspect.[156] Bargár goes so far as to say "stories *must* also be ritually enacted, dramatically performed – and embodied through one's own life."[157] Additionally, this embodied nature of story should be something we expect, at least in terms of Christian theology, as the nature of the incarnation, or the embodiment of God is "revelation of the divine in the human story" in a bodily way.[158] In some ways, that is what I attempted to do during the telling of some of the stories as I enacted the story being told. During one of the weeks, I intentionally invited the congregation to engage the story bodily, to gather around the table, to pass the bread and cup to each other, and to act as if they were present at a Thanksgiving table and the Lord's Table.[159] As I observed people in this moment I could visibly see an increase in the level of engagement across the congregation. For instance, I began this paper reflecting on an experience where people passed announcements via note during the Lord's Supper, commented on clothing rather than the grace of God, and generally had a blasé affect. However, the third week, as I told a story about a Thanksgiving meal, I could see people engage. There was laughter, there were people nudging each other acknowledging the truth of the story in their own experiences, and there were people engaging with each other in the shared

[156] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 18.
[157] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 19. Emphasis added.
[158] Bargár, *Embodied Existence,* 35.
[159] I say intentionally as I did invite people to gather around the table the following week as well, however, that was not part of the original plan and was done mostly because of practical logistics.

experience of the moment – reflecting on the newness and uniqueness of the experience compared to how we "normally" experience the Lord's Supper. These observations were echoed in the surveys from that week as well, sharing feelings of "family, love, and laughter" that people felt "as if I was with the disciples."

Turning to the focus group, the idea of embodiment was one of the most prominent themes that came up in discussion, even coming up in the very first weeks, before I actively began inviting people to embody the stories being told. In reflecting on the current experiences of the Lord's Supper, one participant in the focus group said of their general experience of the Lord's Supper that it "wasn't until, I as an elder, gave communion. And it was through intinction, and that just, I was almost in tears that hit me so hard in my heart…the reality of what this is, and I am in a position to be serving others. It was life changing for me." This was followed up by another participant who had a similar experience when invited to serve the Lord's Supper to other congregants, and another participant began recalling moments during things such as youth camps where at the end there was a service and "we were serving each other." In these particular moments of embodiment, where people were actively engaged in the story of the Lord's Supper "it felt different." In essence, even though it was not experienced in the stories of this project at this point, various participants acknowledged that embodying the story of the Lord's Supper in some way, such as sharing the bread and cup or serving it to others, deepened their experiences in the past, and more interestingly, even though those experiences had been experienced, those experiences did not perpetually change the experience going forward. For instance, the same elder who spoke of the impact serving the Lord's Supper to others made on them later reflected on the routine feeling of the

Lord's Supper that made if feel somewhat empty. Additionally, though people did not spend much time discussing it, there was also a connection made to the first story when I embodied the Words of Institution by breaking the bread and handing it to the various elders who would later serve, an act not normal to our worship experience. Participants spoke of seeing that moment slightly differently, of experiencing those words in a new way through the embodiment of others.

After the participants had a chance to embody the stories in the coming weeks this theme became a central part of the future conversations. Again, the participant who spoke of the impact of serving the Lord's Supper, and the disconnect in the repetitive routine, then spoke of the way they felt as if they were a disciple around the Lord's table, breaking bread and handing it to the other disciples. Another individual, reflecting on hearing the story while standing around the physical table acknowledged that the proximity to the table and standing there, rather than the normal practice of making the loop from seat to table to seat, was more meaningful, they began to "imagine that the disciples were there." Again, after hearing this, another participant echoed the sentiment saying, "when I have communion around the table I can imagine myself not as a disciple but being with the disciples at that table."

Lastly, another aspect of embodiment spoken of that was somewhat unexpected was the way the embodied practice of gathering around the table and physically participating in the story created a stronger sense of welcome and accessibility. One participant of the focus group who is a newer participant in the life of the congregation spoke of previous experiences and the "baggage surrounding organized religion and churches" they carry. This was especially notable regarding the Lord's Supper, where

they were previously confronted with "orange cones and keep out signs." For them, the combination of story and embodiment created a space where they could enter into the experience through introspection via the story, but then the embodying of the story by gathering around the table and serving bread to each other helped by "dismantling barriers." It is as if the story creates space for a person through the use of things such as the various forms of imagination to enter into an experience, considering how they have and are experiencing the event, but then embodying that experience, moving from imagining welcome to participating in it, helped this individual to better experience those realities and continue to engage a reconstructive imagination about what Christian community can look like.

Conclusion

The focus of this project was to explore the impact that story and storytelling could have on people, particularly focusing on the context of the Lord's Supper. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, story is a fundamental aspect of being human as it helps to create meaning. Similarly, imagination is a fundamental aspect of being human, as well as a useful tool to help us engage the world and create meaning. As a means to explore some of these ideas and how to engage them in the context of Christian worship I engaged in the practice of storytelling, located in the context of the Lord's Supper, to explore the impact it would have on worshippers. I chose to locate it in the context of the Lord's Supper, as the liturgy of the Lord's Supper tends to engage in storytelling already, even if some in the pew are unaware. Additionally, I saw the Lord's Supper as a deeply impactful *event* that Christians can participate in, while also observing a lack of

engagement from congregants in a variety of settings. Over the course of five weeks, I used the practice of storytelling, both through my own words and inviting the congregation to tell the stories, as a liturgical tool. I then conducted weekly surveys and held a weekly focus group to engage in conversation around this practice to discern the ways in which this practice impacted the experiences of worshippers. As the data above shows, stories did in fact have an impact on the worship experiences of worshippers, sometimes visibly so. While the conversations of the focus group did not delve into the deep end of the theological water that is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, they did speak of the ways in which the practice of storytelling engaged their imaginations, a reality that is not readily experienced in worship.[160] That engagement of imagination for some helped bring new life to the sacrament. As one participant noted during the speaking of the Words of Institution in the stories, they began to feel those words very personally, as if the words were being spoken to them. One participant began to imagine those no longer present at the table and feeling like "your loved one is with you, a person that you miss very much" who is now standing next to them at the Lord's Table. Additionally, one of the aspects that also helped engage imagination was embodying the stories in some capacity, and more specifically, inviting the congregation to embody the stories. There are many ways in which we embody the story of our faith in worship regularly: we stand and pass the Peace of Christ, we eat bread and drink from the cup, or we sometimes wave palm fronds. These embodied moments help us act out elements of

[160] While the main effects of communion spoken of in Chapter 2, engrafting into Christ, awaking gratitude, and building of community were not heavily prevalent in the discussions, I did find various glimmers of them brought out in the discussion, some of which have been hinted at in the above section. For instance, several focus group members spoke of feeling connected to others when gather around the table in a way they had previously experienced, and multiple people in both the survey and focus group voiced that this experience helped them feel closer to God or Jesus.

the faith we profess. However, when participants began embodying the stories told, watching elders become disciples, acting as disciples themselves, it brought new meaning to the stories and helped kind of jump start their imaginations to experience the moment differently. It helped them see themselves, others, or God in a new light.

I began this project by asking the question, can the use of story and storytelling impact the experience of worshippers. I asked the question broadly, thinking about the secularization of culture and the growing number of the spiritual but not religious, and I asked it in the context of my own congregation, a congregation where people at times seemed to be missing some of the depth and beauty of what takes place in worship. Ultimately, based on the conversations held and notes and surveys received, I would suggest stories can have a great impact on the experience of worshippers. While I am sure there were some in the congregation who did not have this experience, the overwhelming majority as I looked out each Sunday felt more present than I have ever experienced in my time in ministry, and other than the one note saying the experience was long, and a note on a survey that said one story made them feel "sad," every note and conversation spoke of a deeper experience.[161] While this result does not fully answer the first reason behind the question that guides this project, as the majority of the congregation would not fit in the spiritual but not religious category, I do think the results are hopeful as they show people who, through the use of stories, were able to engage their imaginations in the context of worship in ways they had not done previously. In the end,

[161] The week the surveying reflecting sadness was submitted was week 3, where I told a story focusing on a Thanksgiving meal, and the feeling of family present, and those who are no longer present. So, while the language itself appears negative, I believe it was more a reflection of the feelings the story brought out in the individual, such as potentially missing family. As the survey was anonymous, I cannot confirm this, but share the information simply to point to the reality that even the potentially negative comments could be further evidence of the impact of story.

that engagement of imagination then helped people to experience the Lord's Supper in a new or more vibrant way, taking something that was once thought of as routine and giving it a new life.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

It's Christmas Eve and I find myself preparing for another service. Christmas Eve services are always interesting experiences for me, this weird and beautiful mixture of tradition, feelings of welcome and comfort, all while preaching and teaching to engage those who come every Sunday to worship and those who only appear once a year. In the congregation I serve one of the traditions we practice is celebrating the Lord's Supper. This, in particular, is one of those moments where the weird and beautiful mixture is most evident. I stand at the table, trying to be welcoming to all, even though there are many faces I don't know, many experiences I have yet to hear about, many beliefs present that I am unaware of, and yet, I speak of God's welcome – that's the beautiful part. But the weird part comes when I engage in our traditional liturgies, asking people to say or repeat words they are unfamiliar with, inviting them into a practice they may not understand or appreciate – and typically I see that reality as I look at those gathered. Squirming kids waiting to get home, anxious parents trying to keep the squirming kids from running off, people with glazed eyes waiting to light candles and sing "Silent Night." Well, this Christmas Eve I decided to be different. After spending a month telling stories in worship, this Christmas Eve I decided to do it again. I had been exploring a commentary resource to help plan worship and came across a small illustration of a young boy in a school play who unfortunately missed out on his desired role as Joseph and instead got the innkeeper who spoke the one famous line, "there's no room in the inn."[162]

[162] "How Does a Weary World Rejoice?: A Sermon Planning Guide" (Sanctified Art, 2023), 17.

So, when the time comes, I stand behind the table and begin telling the story of this young boy, I share his excitement and his sadness, I speak of the hard work he put in to his one line…and then I tell the story of a little boy who decided to change the story. I begin acting out the scene with Mary and Joseph coming to the inn, moving from one end of the table to the other as I speak their lines, knocking on the table as Joseph knocked on the door. Then, after Joseph and Mary ask if there was any room, I pivot and in my boldest imitation of an 8- or 9-year-old, I prepare to speak the words everyone anticipates, except I say, "Sure, I've got the best room in the house, you can stay there!" And the sanctuary breaks out in laughter. And it was at this point that I move from telling a story of a young boy to telling the story of the table, the reality that the words of the child are the words and the story Jesus tells, a Jesus who sat with the vile tax collector and prostitute, a Jesus who made room for those who loved him and those who betrayed him. And I tell the story of the night Jesus gathered around the table with his disciples doing just that.

As I tell this story, I can see people quite literally sitting on the edge of their seat. I can see people deeply engaged in the story, see them experiencing the moment. On a night that is so often full of awe and wonder, in this moment I can feel the sense of awe and wonder very tangibly from congregant and visitor alike. It is as if, on a night we speak of incarnation and God coming to us, here in this moment, those ideas take on new life.

Project Conclusion

I began this project to explore how the use of story might impact the experiences of people. In a world that is moving toward disenchantment, how can we invite people, or create space for people, to engage something outside of themselves. I believed then and based upon the results of this project still believe, stories and storytelling can be a tool to help in that regard. Stories are a fundamental part of the human experience, but stories also allow us to imagine, to dream, to reflect, to deconstruct, and to reconstruct our understandings. Stories allow us to step outside of ourselves into something else to experience something new or in a new way. In light of that, I asked the question, can the use of stories and storytelling impact the experience of worshippers? In particular, I located the action of storytelling in the context of the Lord's Supper, in part to create a somewhat controlled space for storytelling to happen, but also because the nature of the Lord's Supper is in part mystical, it is *event* that informs past, present, and future. Additionally, the liturgy that typically surrounds the Lord's Supper tends to lean into story, even if not done so explicitly. This, in my eyes, created a moment of synergy, where I could explore the power of story, and its ability to engage the imagination within a practice that tends to stand in contrast with disenchantment.

Over the course of five weeks, I implemented the practice of storytelling in worship, invited congregants to complete surveys, and held a weekly focus group to explore the impact of the use of stories. As stated in the previous chapter, the use of story did in fact engage imaginations, helping to create a space where people had new and deeper experiences of God. I began this paper and reiterated the point in Chapter 3 that many who come to the Lord's Table once a month feel disconnected or distracted, they

experience it as routine, and some even lamented the idea that they knew it should mean more and yet they felt nothing. However, over the course of the five weeks, those same voices began to speak of the connection they felt, the closeness of God, and the ways in which story helped them create new meaning.

While I anticipated, or at least hoped, that the engagement of imagination would be a result of the use of stories in worship, I did not anticipate the form that would take. People spoke of feeling in the presence of the other disciples and even Christ. Their imaginations helped them to create new meaning, by creating a space where they could step into the story, they could reflect on themselves, maybe deconstruct some of the ideas they have had, such as the Lord's Supper having to be "somber," and reconstruct a new understanding of God, themselves, or the Lord's Supper through the stories, stories of inclusion and welcome, or stories that helped illustrate deeper theological truths, such as the Lord's Supper as *event*. While I had hoped the use of story would help people, through the use of their imagination, reflect on some of the deeper truths of the Lord's Supper spoken of in Chapter 3, that was not fully the case. That is not to say imagination had no impact on people's theological understandings: there were definitely moments where the use of story to engage imagination created a space for people to ask questions about the theology they held. And as an almost immediate result, the Session of the church voted to celebrate the Lord's Supper every other week, as opposed to just the first Sunday of the month, indicating at least in part a deeper appreciation for the sacrament. Furthermore, I would venture to guess continuing those practices and conversations moving forward would impact theological understandings and create deeper meanings for

people, giving them the time to contemplate more deeply what this experience appeared to stir up in their understandings.

Becoming a Storyteller

As I look at this project and the part I played, I cannot help but think of the 1984 movie *The Neverending Story.*[163] *The Neverending Story* is one of those films in my life that has left an indelible mark, the story of a young story-loving boy named Bastion, escaping reality and the difficulties of life by diving into a fantasy epic about a boy and his horse fighting to stop the "Nothing." Except, the story is not about a boy and his horse, instead it is a story about Bastion, about a boy who unknowingly became the storyteller. In several ways, I see this same story taking place in my own experience. For most of my life, stories have been an escape, a tool to help me deal with the difficulties of life, but as I began looking at the state of my ministry and growing disenchantment, the coming of the "Nothing," I became engrossed in that story, only to realize that part of the story was the reality that I was becoming the storyteller.

I had never, prior to this project, attempted to take on the role of storyteller. As I sat to develop the stories used in this project I had the work of storytellers running through my head that had been influential in my faith journey such as Eugene Peterson, Nadia Bolz-Weber, and Kent Dobson. I remember the first time I read Bolz-Weber's *Pastrix* and being amazed at the ways in which she wove together her own story and faith with humor, vulnerability, and a little edge.[164] And as I began writing I wanted to lean into the

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[163] I hope the theme song has started playing in your head as it has mine. *The NeverEnding Story*, Fantasy (Warner Bros., 1984).

[164] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013).

voices of those storytellers, creating stories that were full of meaning, engaging, and a little fun. However, finding my voice as a storyteller was a process, both in terms of the writing of stories and the telling of stories. In many ways I had to think about many of the claims made in this project, such as the idea that story is primary, and story as *event.* When I began to internalize these ideas, they helped me find my storytelling voice. I found that as I was writing what would be the final versions of the stories used in the project; I was imagining them take place; I was imagining the images I was trying to communicate. Further, when it came time to tell the stories in worship, I became part of them; I was not just telling a story; I was telling my story, or at least a story in which I was a participant. In part, this is why I believe, at least from my perspective, the fourth week was so challenging for me. As I stood to tell that story, I had my four-year-old present in worship who was having an exceptionally energetic day. As I tried to lead the congregation in reciting the story, he was sliding back and forth under the table asking if it was "bread time?" In essence, as I engaged in storytelling, both in the writing and telling of the story, my imagination began to flourish. However, in that moment, I became so distracted personally that it became incredibly difficult to enter into that space, enter into the story.

I share these reflections because as I began this project, having read so many books and lived in stories for so long, I assumed becoming a storyteller would be easy. However, learning to become a storyteller took practice. It took time to find my voice as I had to let go of some of the expectations I held. In a denomination full of robes, I had to unbutton my collar a little and be myself. And lastly, I had to learn the story I was going to tell. While the form of the first two stories told in this project are very similar, they are

also very different stories. The first story is quite literally a story according to all the marks of story outlined in this paper; however, it was not my story. While I personally have no issues with the theology or theme presented in that story, it was not a story I truly wanted to tell. In contrast to that, the second week I created a story that was my own, it was a story I wanted to tell, a story I felt a part of, and because of this, in spite of the similar form, it felt so much more powerful. This does not mean all stories need to be original. This chapter began with recounting a story inspired by another story that I felt was quite moving. However, it does speak to the reality that becoming a storyteller for me began with learning to engage in the stories more deeply, learning to participate in them even before I began telling them. And this took some time to get accustomed to. But in the end, it became a powerfully moving experience that I continue to engage in.

What Comes Next?

As I think forward as to where this insight leads, I am left to consider the various ways story could be used further in Christian worship. Above I shared another experience of storytelling outside of the context of this project, again, given some familiarity now, I located the story in the context of the Lord's Supper, and again, I saw people engage in the experience in new ways. But as was pointed out in Chapter 2, the Christian tradition is rooted in story. From the sacred text we read to the principal storyteller we listen to, story is not only prevalent, but important. One idea that came up in this project which there was not as much space to explore was simply the reality that people, as they read scripture, imagined characters and settings as if they were witnesses to the biblical events, and telling stories in worship and inviting that practice in the context of worship

then validated those personal experiences and practices that took place outside of worship. In a culture and context that pushes for literal interpretations of scripture, pushing against the use of imagination, validating the work of imagination as not only beneficial but necessary held great value. Therefore, creating more spaces for the practice seems appropriate.

This paper began by asking how the use of story and practice of storytelling, particularly focusing on its use in a Reformed Eucharistic liturgy, can impact the experience and understanding of worshippers, and the results were that it helped people engage, it captured attention, invited imagination, and created a space for people to find or make meaning. And in the end, this is just the beginning of a larger story. Therefore, the next question is this: where else might we find space to engage in storytelling, where else can we create space for imagination? In a world that is growingly disenchanted, where can space be made to break through those mindsets, if only briefly, and create space for people to experience something transcendent? I would suggest the answers are limitless; as human beings, we are created for story, we are created to imagine, and there is no place where we cannot engage that. In the context of Christian worship, as James. K. A. Smith suggests, our liturgies and our practices are created to help tell a story.[165] But, what if, instead of alluding to story, or hiding it in our practices, we became overt storytellers? Additionally, what if we created more space for worshippers to become storytellers? I attempted to engage that idea in the fourth week of storytelling, and admittedly it was the most difficult week. Looking back, I think that was in part because the story being told was still my story, not the story of those in the congregation. In

[165] Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 93.

essence, while I took time to learn to be a storyteller, I did not give them the time to learn to be storytellers. However, what if we created space for the stories of others, how might that too serve to engage not only the imaginations of the listeners but the imagination of the storyteller? As I worked on this project and worked on creating the stories for this project, I also began seeing stories everywhere, such as the story that began this chapter. My imagination was engaged in the process, and I believe the same could be true for those in the congregation.

Again, quoting my favorite storyteller, "stories are a special kind of art…I don't think a story is quite finished…until the dream in my head has become a reality (even if briefly) in yours."[166] As Bargár suggested, God is story, and we are participants in that story, so we must continually seek to further the telling of that story.[167] I do not think it matters if those stories are told in the context of liturgies, sermons, or teaching: story is a fundamental aspect of life and faith. The task is to take the story in the mind of God, realized in creation, and bring it to life here in this world.

[166] Sanderson, *The Sunlit Man*, 446.
[167] Bargár, *Embodied Existence*, 8.

APPENDIX A

Week 1 Story - Adaptation of Feasting on the Word, Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, General Use Year A

As we come to the table we remember the beautiful work of God,
Whose breath fills us and this world.
God who reached down creating us from the earth,
breathing the breath of God in our lungs and planting goodness in our souls,
That we might love just a little bit like God.
Having created us, God called our first brothers and sisters to follow.

Yet, our brothers and sisters, like us, were pulled down
By disordered cravings, forgetting the commands of God.
But God bent down to meet them, sowing God's word in Jesus Christ
Who came to grow God's kingdom here on earth,
Drawing people nearer to God.

Jesus came planting mercy wherever he went,
Touching those rejected with hands of compassion and love,
gathering around tables sharing bread with the outcast and despised
healing the brokenhearted,
All to reap greater righteousness.

And then on the night before he died,
He took bread, and having given thanks to God,
He broke it, gave it to his friends, and said,
Take eat, this is my body, broken for you.
After Supper Jesus took the cup, and saying a blessing,
Gave it to his friends and said,
Drink this, all of you:
This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood,
Poured out for you and for the forgiveness of sin.
Do this in remembrance of me.

Invitation:
And so, we come to this same table,
Hearing this story as our story,
Invited by Jesus Christ to come taste and see
The goodness of God.

Oblation:
Remembering Christ's dying and rising,
We offer this bread and cup,
And ourselves in Grateful service.

Epiclesis:
May the Holy Spirit descend upon these gifts
And all of us here today.
We pray this through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ,
Who taught us to pray. (Our Father who art….)

APPENDIX B

Week 2 Story – Self written following the style of the Great Thanksgiving

We come to this place because of a story.
A story full of faith,
A story full of doubt,
A story full of hope,
A story full of lament,
A story full of love.
It's God's story.
And it begins with the words, "*yahee 'or"*.
"Let there be light" -
God spoke, bringing light and life into our world.
A beautiful act of creation, flowers breaking forth from the ground, flashing with color,
Filling the world with the fragrance of rose and lavender,
With buds and branches reaching for the light, reaching out to experience the life God offered.
God then continued the beautiful and amazing act of creation.
Coming close enough to humanity that they could feel the very breath of God,
Breathing into the nostrils of humanity,
Filling them with God's spirit, and life.
It was intimate. It was love.

It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship.
God walking with humanity in a garden.
It was perfection….

Until it wasn't.

Humanity lost its way.
They turned their back on their creator,
Turning away from the one whose very essence filled their lungs.

But did God turn away?

No, God continued to love, continued to pursue, continued to long for the intimacy of that Garden. Longed for relationship.

So, God spoke, through prophets and priests, women and men, to speak life back into the hearts and souls of humanity.
They spoke of God's love, they spoke God's *Chesed*.
They said, "God plans for your welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."
They said, "God took you up by your arms…leading you with cords of kindness, and bands of love."

They reminded humanity that though they turn they shall not fear, because God is still with them, "when they pass through the waters, God is with them, when they pass through rivers, God is with them, when they walk through fire, God is with them. They are still precious in God's sight."

They spoke beautiful, powerful, and sometimes challenging words.
Sometimes humanity heard those words, choosing to turn back toward that Garden where the story began.
And sometimes they chose to continue on, walking by themselves, journeying into the world ignoring the one who spoke to them.

And so, God continued to speak…begetting the most beautiful Word.
The very self-revelation of God. Jesus Christ.
It wasn't enough for God to speak through others, God chose to come down,
To walk with humanity, just as God did in the garden, once again.

Jesus walked with humanity, sat with them, ate with them,
He joined in their joy and their sorrow, he brought hope and peace,
He declared the love of God, saying, "come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest…for my yoke is easy, and my burden light." He reminded people that "if God cares for the birds of the air, and the grass of the field, how much more do you think God cares for you?"
He spoke blessings, he spoke promises. And he also spoke instruction…

One night he gathered his disciples in a room.
He took ordinary bread and a cup of wine.

And he offered a prayer… (epiclesis/Lord's Prayer)

And breaking the bread he said take and eat, do this in remembrance of me.
In the same way he took the cup and pouring it said, this is the cup of the new covenant poured out in my blood for the forgiveness of sins, as often as you drink of it, do this in remembrance of me…

And in the speaking of those words, we are reminded this is not just the story of God, but our story, the story that invites us to come to this table and experience the love and grace of God, to hear God speak light and life into us.

APPENDIX C

Week 3 Story – Parabolic story focused on Thanksgiving

We gather at this table just as we gather for any family meal…and so I invite you to imagine a family meal.

It's been a long week, you've had ups and downs. Work is stressing you out, you've been running around getting family to and from, there's a doctor's visit coming that has you a little anxious. But you pull up a chair next to people we call family to share a meal - Pop's prime rib, grandma's mashed potatoes, roasted broccoli, all served with a nice bottle of red wine. Sometimes you find yourself sitting with family you know well, a mother, father, brother, or sister. Sometimes it's family you don't know well. A distant cousin only seen on special occasions…then there's your sibling's new fiancé, new to the family…. There's maybe some awkward conversation, a little anxiety about what's to come, but also some joy, as you share lives together. Your parent calls out… "Hey, why don't you tell your cousins about your new job?" There's laughter as your uncle starts into one of his crazy stories you've heard a thousand times, and you just smile.

But there's also a little sadness, because you look around and recognize those missing…you see a spot for a loved one who has passed…and the pain grips you in the midst of the joy, the stories of past meals shared, the stories of life shared…but then the first tray comes by and it's your loved one's biscuit recipe…and though they're not there, you feel them present as the smell of warm bread fills your nose.

You look around and though you have so much swirling in your mind, work, life, pain, joy, distractions that demand your attention…and there at that table you feel present, you feel safe, you feel love, and in some weird way you feel empowered to go back out and deal with the rest of life that's trying to pull your attention away from your wonderful family dinner…

So, it was when Jesus gathered around the table with his disciples. Disciples bickering about who's the best, people concerned about what's coming next in the life and ministry of Jesus, a disciple contemplating the way they would betray those they loved…they gathered to remember the story of their faith, of God leading the people out of exile…and there Jesus stops and says to them all - this bread, this is my body for you, this cup this is my blood shed for you…when you come to this table for this family meal, when you come eat and drink of these things, do it in remembrance of me…do it in remembrance of who I am and what I've done.

And so, we gather together drawn together by this family feast, finding our seats amidst the disciples, in the presence of Jesus, who gathers us here to share himself with us.

So let us pass the cup Christ has poured for us and the bread which he broken for us, sharing in the experience of Jesus, sharing in the experience of the disciples, sharing in our common faith, and sharing in the grace, mercy, and love of God.

APPENDIX D

Week 4 Story - Responsive story based on the language of the story from week 2

Why have we gathered here?[168]
We come to this place because of a story.
A story full of faith,
A story full of doubt,
A story full of hope,
A story full of lament,
A story full of love.
It is our story.
It's God's story.

Where did this story begin?
It begins with the words,
"Let there be light" -
God spoke, bringing light and life into our world.
A beautiful act of creation, flowers breaking forth from the ground,
With buds and branches reaching for the light,
reaching out to experience the life God offered.

Why should we speak this story?
It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship.
God walking with humanity in a garden.
It was perfection….
Until it wasn't.
Humanity lost its way.
They turned their back on their creator,
Turning away from the one whose very essence filled their lungs.

But did God turn away?
No, God continued to love, continued to pursue, continued to long for the intimacy of that Garden. Longed for relationship.
God spoke, through prophets and priests, women and men, to speak life back into the hearts and souls of humanity.

And God continued to speak…begetting the most beautiful Word.
The very self-revelation of God. Jesus Christ.

What is the story of Jesus?
Jesus walked with humanity, sat with them, ate with them,
He joined in their joy and their sorrow, he brought hope and peace,

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[168] The bolded sections are said by the leader while the un-bolded sections are said by the congregation.

He declared the love of God, saying, “come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest…for my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”
He spoke blessings, he spoke promises. And he also spoke instruction…

What is the story of this table?
One night he gathered his disciples in a room.
He took ordinary bread and a cup of wine.
And he offered a prayer.

What did Jesus say?
Breaking the bread Jesus said take and eat, do this in remembrance of me.
In the same way he took the cup and pouring it said, this is the cup of the new covenant poured out in my blood for the forgiveness of sins.

Speaking these words, we are reminded this is not just the story of God
It is also our story and our testimony of God’s love for us.

APPENDIX E

Week 5 Story– Story focused on Zechariah

As we come to the table, I'm going to encourage you again, to take a moment and pause.

Close your eyes, breath in deeply – and slowly breath out your weariness, so you can be present here and imagine what God has done, is doing, and will do.

We come to this table much like Zechariah.
Zechariah this temple priest,
Busying himself with the work of the temple,
Lighting candles,
Organizing the table on which the bread of God sits,
Burning incense,
Offering prayers to God on behalf of God' people.
Its holy work.

And yet, as he finds himself in God's presence,
He carries so many burdens,
Am I really holy?
Am I enough?
Is God truly listening to the cries of my heart?
What will bring joy to my life?
What will bring joy to my wife?
The pain and shame are overwhelming.
The sorrow is too much to bear.

And there in that moment the voice of God speaks…

Zechariah, do not be afraid.
Your prayer has been heard.
You will have joy and gladness.

And then we find ourselves here at this table,
In the temple of God, Offering prayers,
Lighting candles, singing songs,

And yet, we too, ask,
Are we really holy,
Are we really loved,
Are we enough,
Does God hear our prayers,

Often the pain and sorrow we experience is too much to carry,

And yet here we hear the voice of God speak to us,
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

When Jesus Christ gathered at this table
He looked into the eyes of his disciples,
Those that fought for power,
The ones who would betray him
And disown him,
Those who didn't fully know the depths of what he taught,
Or love the way he did.

He showed them that his holiness is enough,
That he was love incarnate sent for them, to love them and show them how to love.
He said he was enough.

At the table he gave them a glimpse of the kingdom of God, a foretaste of what could be, and will be,
He offered a window of hope into a world of weariness,

And he took the bread
And blessed it,
And breaking the bread he said, take and eat, this is my body
For you, take and eat, do this in remembrance of me.
And pouring the cup he said, this is the cup of the new covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins,
As often as you drink of it do this in remembrance of me.

He is enough for me,
And for you,
He is the love of God made
Manifest for you, and for the world.

We do this in remembrance of Christ, we do this as a foretaste of God's kingdom, we do this because in this we find our hope.

APPENDIX F

Example Bulletin – Used Week 5

Welcome to Worship

Prelude "Fantasie in G-Dur" by Bach

Welcome

♦ **Call to Worship**

L: Sometimes we feel too small and insignificant to be of any notice to Jesus.

P: Yet the Lord provides a tree for us to climb so that we can see Jesus.

L: That tree is faithfulness, compassion, love, hope, joy.

P: We are given the opportunity to witness to the Savior's presence in our lives.

L: Lord, help us when we forget how much we are loved by Christ.

P: Open our hearts to receive his invitation this day.

♦ **Hymn #481** "Praise the Lord, God's Glories Show"

Time with Children

Call to Confession

Prayer of Confession

Lord of mercy, forgive us when we make excuses for our lack of faith. We let our selfishness and apathy get in the way of illumination and peace. We find ways to duck out of our opportunities for service and witness, claiming that we are too small or too ill-equipped to be effective witnesses to Jesus Christ. How foolish we can be! All of our lives God has been present to us, whether or not we knew it. God's love is always surrounding us. Yet we have not taken the time to recognize it. We whine and complain about the misfortunes that have befallen us and wonder where God is. We want immediate release from our struggles. And when release comes, we again move off in our own realms of self-centeredness. Help us, O Lord. Stop us from being so faithless. Open our hearts with your forgiving spirits that we, having been healed and forgiven, may actually be effective witnesses to your love and compassion. For we ask this in Jesus' Name.

Silent Confession

Assurance of Pardon

L: Rejoice and be glad! Our God is full of mercy, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

P: Through Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

♦**Response**

Glory to God, whose goodness shines on me, and to the Son, whose grace has pardoned me, and to the Spirit, whose love has set me free. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. Amen.

Scripture Reading Luke 19:1-10

Sermon "Zacchaeus" Rev. Joel Wood

♦ **Hymn #355** "Hear the Good News of Salvation"

Life of the Church

Way of the Week

WORSHIP WITH YOUR WHOLE HEART. Worship is not just about singing; worship is a reflection of what you love! Our whole lives, every action and thought, should seek to bring God glory. Embrace the regular opportunity to practice worshipping with your church family!

Offering

♦**Doxology**

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

COMMUNION

Our Faith Story

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us; and do not let us fall into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Distribution of Elements

Prayer

♦**Hymn Insert** (sing 3x) "In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful"

♦**Benediction**

♦**Benediction Response**

God be with you till we meet again; Loving counsels guide, uphold you, With a Shepherd's care enfold you: God be with you until we meet again.

Postlude "Thanksgiving (Kremser-Nun danket alle Gott)" by: Callahan

Looking Ahead:

Each Sunday:
Bible Study at 10 a.m. Worship at 11 a.m.

Each Tuesday:
Bible Study @ 10 a.m.

Sunday, November 19th:
Hanging of the Greens and Meet & Mingle @ 12 p.m.

Wednesday, November 22nd:
Church office closed.

Tuesday, November 28th:
Session Meeting @ 6:30 p.m.

Friday, December 1st:
Sand Springs Christmas Parade. Free Parking, Potties, and Hot Chocolate here at FPC Beginning at 6 p.m.!

Thursday, December 21st:
Longest Night Service @ 6:00 p.m.

Sunday, December 24th:
Christmas Eve Potluck Breakfast @ 10:30 a.m. followed by Lessons & Carols!
Christmas Eve Candlelight Service @ 6 p.m.

Prayer List – Joys & Concerns

Mattie Sue Boone, recovery from broken knee.
Celia Gerfers, recovery from surgery.
Jackie Herweg, Pat Herweg's daughter-in-law, scheduled for a stem cell transplant in the near future.
Bob Koeninger, brother-in-law of Pam & Jerry Smithey, hospitalization- kidney and heart issues.
Butch Bauer, health concerns.
Sam Bates, brother of Allen Bates, health issues.
Dave Kvach, continued recovery.
Thad Cannon, continued recovery.

Our Staff

Pastor-Joel Wood
Organist and Accompanist- Amanda Teachnor
Office Administrator- Amber Brown
Treasurer- Kelly Bowman
Children's Director- Marti Law-Lowery

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(♦Indicates appropriate place for congregation to stand)
Bold Italic Type indicates congregational response in unison.

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