

Faith Sees God's Hand in Good Times, Bad Times

"You're here to be light, bringing out the God colors in the world" (Matt. 5:14, MSG).

In my research and work on *Jesus Feminist*, I found myself struggling to land the book—and my own self—in the hinterland between "Everything is getting better! Girl power forever!" and "It's a cesspool of despair. We're going to need way more sackcloth and ashes!" which so often permeates feminist discussions, particularly for people of faith.

For every woman I found who had been empowered, there was a woman who had been terribly silenced. For every woman who had a beautiful and redemptive love story, there was a woman who had been terribly and horribly abused. For every "win," there is a "loss." For every church that affirmed women in leadership, there was a church that did not. For every story of global women who rose up together to end war or deforestation or cultural evils, there were women who died broken, alone and unmourned by the world due to civil war or systemic injustice and evil.

The temptation is to listen to only one perspective or the other. We choose sides, and often that "side" depends on the place from which we engage life.

The temptation is to say that our own narrow experience trumps all other evidence or the experiences of others. The temptation, particularly for those of us who operate from a position of privilege, is to gravitate toward the good and ignore the very real and true cries of the oppressed and marginalized or even just-plain-different-from-us of our society, to retreat into the worlds of our own making and the brightly lit aisles of a shopping center and then point to the good stories as good enough for us. We seek our convenience and comfort and safety. Surely these stories of abuse or injustice are anomalies, right?

Or the temptation is to gorge ourselves on sorrow and anger, to fill our hearts and minds only with the tales of hate and evil and horror until we forget the beauty and peace and justice growing and rising like yeast among us. We keep our face toward the darkness, weeping or raging, and we miss the candles bravely flickering around us.

And then our temptation is to turn the other side into a straw-man argument to blithely ignore or burn in effigy. Either way, we don't have to listen to a straw man.

I don't think this is unique to women's issues or to the church or to the Internet. We do it in every corner of our life or with any issue.

Yet the words *right* or *wrong* aren't the proper words for our human experience. Whether it's a story I love or a story I hate, whether it's a story that grieves me or a story that angers me, whether it's a story that inspires me or a story that sickens me, whether it's a story with a happy ending or an unresolved ending, I often don't get to decide whether or not it's right. It simply is what happened. It is the story. It is real. It is true. In our broken world, injustice is just as real as justice.

They are both true: the darkness and the light, along with the reality that most of our lives reflect both. There is no either-or to real life.

I find comfort that in Scripture, we don't see the typical Christian-bookstore version of redemption and justice, with tidy bows and fairy-tale endings. No, we see the mess of the truth of redemption and restoration. It's all true—the beauty and the pain, the suffering and the overcoming, the defeat and the victory, Friday and Sunday and the life lived between, the now of God's kingdom and the not-yet of that same kingdom.

The hard work of peacemaking takes place in the tension between both stories. I want to be a better listener, a both-and listener, because I believe that listening is an

underestimated expression of love. I don't want to ignore my sisters who are happy and settled, who are empowered and strong and thriving. And I don't want to ignore my sisters who are angry and hurting, who are disempowered and marginalized and yearning. We can learn from each other. This isn't a story of one side "saving" another side or of one side "opening the eyes" of another.

The tensions of holding the word *both* in my heart has changed my definition of a "right" story—not only for women but for a lot of the tensions we see around us in the world today. All stories matter because all people matter.

Listening to both kinds of stories and holding them all gently with intention—and hopefully a bit of grace—has transformed me because it's made me realize that the right story is always the real story, God's overarching story that love wins. Love has won, love is winning and love will win. Hope does not disappoint. Faith comes by hearing or listening to the right story, it's true, and the story I look to for context for it all is the story of redemption and renewal, of restoration and hope, that rests only in Christ.

To me, the right stories are in the Word of God—Jesus—as revealed by Scripture, by the community and by the Holy Spirit, and He is a story of life and love and hope for us all, for all the *boths* and the *ands* and the *neithers* and the *eithers*. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one.

The right story is the old, old story of heaven breaking through, of redemption arching, of justice rolling down, of deserts blooming flowers, of exiles planting gardens, of swords into ploughshares, of life instead of death.

The right story is the one to listen to because it's the one that makes room for all of us. This is the story that holds all our stories with the promise of life and hope, joy and renewal.

I don't want to be swallowed by the darkness. Nor do I want to be blinded by the light. No, I want to be part of a people who

see the darkness, know it's real, and then light a candle anyway. And hold that candle up in the winds and pass along our light wherever it's needed from our own homes to the halls of legislation to the church pulpit to the kitchens of the world.

We're a people who build bonfires outside on the shore and send up a few signals to light the way for the ships still coming across the water and the pioneers weary in the walking from the east. We set up tables in the wilderness and invite everyone to come. We're the people who listen.

Faith comes by listening to the right story. It's true. And the right story for me, the ones I turn toward when I'm tempted to choose one side or the other, is the Great Story that holds all of them as precious and worthy of love.

It's the story that ends with these words: "And then all things were made right."

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