

“Who Are These People?”

Revelation 7:9-17

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Ever heard a story that's too good to be true? This is not just a Southern phenomenon, but you have to admit that Southerners do it particularly well. I used to think, for example, that when my husband told a story, freely embellishing certain parts of it while conveniently eliminating others – thus making the story technically inaccurate but rhetorically more effective – that he was cheating. He wasn't *quite* telling the truth. But then I met his father, who has the same talent, and gradually I have come to understand that this is what Southern storytellers do. It's not so much artifice as it is art.

My suspicion was confirmed when I discovered this statement at the beginning of the screenplay for the movie *Big Fish*: “This is a Southern story, full of lies and fabrications, but truer for their inclusion.” And so it is.

Big Fish is the tale of a father who tells stories that are too good to be true – larger-than-life, almost-but-not-quite believable stories. The film chronicles the adventures of his anything-but-ordinary life, through stories of improbable characters and miraculous, mysterious events. There is one signature story, though, that gets told and retold – the story of the day his son Will was born.

It has to do with a very big fish, and it starts like this: “There are some fish that cannot be caught. It's not that they're faster or stronger than other fish. They're just touched by something extra. Call it luck. Call it grace. One such fish was the Beast. By the time I was born, he was already a legend; he'd taken more hundred-dollar lures than any fish in Alabama . . . I'd been trying to catch that fish since I was a boy no bigger than you. And on the day you were born, that was the day I finally caught him.”¹

It pains me to have to leave out so many delicious details, but suffice it to say that Will's father chased that fish clear down the river that day and finally caught him with his most prized possession – his golden wedding ring – which (after a protracted struggle) the fish returned to him by spitting it out into his hand. The story was fantastical – too good to be true – and yet it was full of true things about how much that father loved his wife and adored his son.

Will, however, cannot hear all of that. All he can hear is how this story, and countless others like it, are simply unbelievable. By the time Will is about to become a father himself, and he must return home because his own father is dying, he is angry and bitter because he has no idea who this man he calls his father really is. All he knows are his stories . . . which in Will's book, are as good as lies.

A moment of truth comes one day in the hospital, when the doctor who is attending Will's father – the same doctor who delivered Will – asks him if he wants to know the real story of his birth. Will perks up at that. Finally he is going to hear something true! And so Dr. Bennett tells him the real story. “Your mother came in about three in the afternoon. Her neighbor drove her, on account of your father was on business in Wichita. You were born a week early, but there were no complications. It was a perfect delivery. Now, your father was sorry to miss it, but it wasn't the custom for the men

to be in the room for deliveries then, so I can't see as it would have been much different had he been there. And that's the real story of how you were born."

It isn't much of a story, and they both know it. "Not very exciting is it?" the doctor continues. "And I suppose if I had to choose between the true version and an elaborate one involving a fish and a wedding ring, I might choose the fancy version. But that's just me."²

Dr. Bennett is right, of course, and in the minutes that are left in his father's life, Will comes to realize that the wild story about the fish and the ring has more truth in it than the "real" story could ever hold, because it is a story of true love.

Sometimes you need a larger-than-life story to get at a truth that's bigger than words – to express the inexpressible.

Revelation is a story like that. It's not that Revelation is full of "lies and fabrications," but one must admit that John, who was undoubtedly from the southern region of Patmos, wrote down a story so fantastical that we hardly know what to do with it.

And for good reason, too; for if there was ever someone who needed a story like that, it was John's church. They were puny, they were weak, they were persecuted for their faith. And they were disappointed and disillusioned, because Jesus had told them he was coming back soon, and so far they hadn't heard a peep from him. They did not need a history, or even a prophecy, as much as they needed a larger-than-life story – a vision – on which to stand.

We have just a sliver of Revelation before us today, and it is fantastical enough. It's a scene of heaven, and there are more people there than anyone can count. They are from all over – from every time and every place, great hordes of them, standing before the creator and source of the cosmos. They are wearing white robes – a sign of righteousness – and waving palm branches – a sign of victory – and they are shouting out praise to God while angels fall on their faces and raise their voices in song.

There are twenty-four elders there, too, also wearing white robes *plus* golden crowns. And with them are four living creatures, which John has described earlier. One looks like a lion, one like an ox, one is some creature with a human face, and one is like a flying eagle. They all have six wings, and eyes all around, and they sing "holy, holy, holy" and never stop.

In the midst of this great scene, one of the elders motions to the crowd and speaks to John. "Who are these people, and where have they come from?" he says, and we're glad he asks because we want to know, too.

Luckily for John, the elder answers his own question: "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal," he says.

We are not really sure what he means by this. If he is talking about some sort suffering or trouble or distress, then we can imagine what that might mean. We know about heartaches, broken promises, damaged lives. We know about failures and mistakes we can't erase. We know about terror and we know about war. And while most of us in this room don't know what it is like to be really and truly hungry, some of us do; and we remember that most of the people in the world know that feeling all too well. So if it is earthly suffering that this elder means, we think we might know at least a little of what he is talking about. Perhaps these are the ones who have lived through more than their share of suffering, and have finally been released.

Perhaps, though, this elder is talking about another sort of ordeal – some other

event that we can't quite imagine – some other passage to heaven.

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Kathleen Norris tells the story of a Benedictine sister who is keeping vigil at the bedside of her dying mother. She seeks to comfort her by saying, "In heaven everyone we love is there." But her mother, wiser, tells her differently: "No," she says, "in heaven I will love everyone who's there."³ Somehow she knows that heaven is not merely about the fulfillment of her earthly fantasies. It is, rather, about the very transformation of her will – the burnishing of her soul. Somehow she knows that *she will be changed*. That we will *all* be changed. That the lame will be healed and the broken made whole. That the violent will be quelled and the wounded restored. That those riddled with hate or hurt will be overwhelmed by love. And that even those who have always tried to live good Christian lives will find that, as Flannery O'Connor once put it, even their virtues will be burned away.⁴

Who are these people and where have they come from? They have come through the ordeal. They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, and they have been changed.

And because they have been changed – because *everything* has changed – they are worshipping, and they will keep on worshipping forever.

Now I know that this does not sound like a good thing to some of you – worshipping forever. But it is, and the elder tells us why these people would do such a thing.

It is because there is no more hunger and no more thirst. No more desert wanderings. No more crying and no more pain. There is nothing but plenty – a feast of rich food and well-aged wines, and springs of water that never cease to give life. There is enough of everything for everyone. Justice is a reality; peace pervades, and righteousness is simply the way things are.

So naturally they are singing. They are singing songs of unending praise, their voices blending in the ethereal sound that I imagine can emerge only when every anxiety is put to rest. And how could they not? How could they keep from singing?

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There are those who say these visions of heaven are just pie-in-the-sky in the sweet by-and-by. They say that visions like these make us complacent and keep us from changing the world around us, here and now. There are those who say that no one's going to bring in the kingdom unless we do, and that the world is too full of problems to be sitting around talking about what will be someday, in some distant heaven. There are those who say that what we're doing here right now is one big waste of time, that all of the singing and praying and preaching we can muster is not going to do one thing to make this world – the real world – a better place.

But they are wrong. What we are doing here does not keep us from the real world – in fact, what we do here links us intimately with the real world⁵ – because the real world is not suffering and pain and death, the real world is the one in John's vision. The real world is the reign of God that Christ has already begun with his resurrection and will bring to completion.

That vision, then, is no waste of time. It's that vision that keeps us going, that shows us a picture of the way things are meant to be, that gives us a truth to stand on, and a pattern for the living of our days.

Scholar Eugene Boring reminds us that every week we pray together, “Thy kingdom come,” and it does – “through, not around, the woes of history.”⁶ And so we keep on tending feet and making up cots, lending our voices to those who have none. We keep committing ourselves to being not just the church that the stayed but the church that continues to follow the call of Christ to reach out to those around us – in dorm rooms and loft apartments, in government offices and on park benches – to baptize in his name – relying not on our own strength but on that power that was unleashed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In a few minutes, we will break bread at this table. And in doing so, we will not only say what is true – but we will *act out* what is true, already, in the real world of God: that love is stronger than evil, and life has overcome death. . . . that there is room at this table for everyone . . . and plenty here for all.

For in spite of what goes on all around us, we know a story that is too good *not* to be true. A story so fantastical that it tells a truth bigger than words, a story of true love. A story that gives us not only hope for the future, but a way of life for today. So tell the story and break the bread – act it out here so that we might go and act it out in the world – and sing now as we will sing one day in paradise. Augustine put it best:

Let us sing alleluias here on earth, while we still live in anxiety, so that we may sing it one day in heaven in full security... We shall have no enemies in heaven, we shall never lose a friend. God’s praises are sung both there and here, but here they are sung in anxiety, there in security; here they are sung in hope, there in hope’s fulfillment; here, they are sung by wayfarers, there, by those living in their own country. So then...let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors. You should sing as wayfarers do – sing, but continue your journey...Sing then, but keep going.⁷

Notes

1. John August, *Big Fish: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004), 1.
2. *Big Fish*, 111.
3. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 367.
4. Flannery O'Connor, “Revelation,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 508.
5. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 133.
6. Boring, 134.
7. Norris, 368.