

Two Stories

1 Corinthians 15:13-22

Sam Wells
St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, United Kingdom

I've heard a lot of people in the last month say the pandemic has changed everything. For many it's turned the world upside down. I was talking with a friend with chronic fatigue syndrome who said, "It's like the whole world has chronic fatigue syndrome and has to be in the house 23 hours a day. Now you all know what it's like." And again, a neurodiverse person said, "I find touch difficult, and I like to crochet through meetings, and these zoom platforms are great, because I get to meet people on my own terms and they can't see me crocheting. Finally the world's set up for the benefit of an autistic person like me." So we've been experiencing a change in the balance of power, and some of the people in charge feel disabled and some of the disadvantaged feel, "At last there's a place for us."

While for many people there's been profound change, for some catastrophic, for others healthy, one thing that seems universal is that this season has intensified existing traits in our characters. The impatient have become more impatient, the lazy have gotten lazier, the hyperactive have gone off the scale, the indecisive have put things off even longer. More precisely, the most poignant parts of life have grown even more significant. It's like these weeks of confinement have become a microcosm of our whole lives, and all the unresolved questions and wonderings have come into sharper focus. It's an uncomfortable experience, but it could be the most important gift of this troubled time. The questions about the virus—why is it here, what do we do about it, how do we balance public good with our own needs, how do we survive, what do we owe one another, how can we flourish—are intensified versions of life's big questions. The way we tell the story of the virus is the way we tell the story of everything.

I want to suggest there are two ways we can tell the story of the virus and of everything. I want to explore each of them with you in some detail.

Here's Story One. The universe began with a big bang. It took a few billion years for things to settle down. The real bang crash was still going on zillions of light years away, but by a strange collection of circumstances, one planet in a minor galaxy developed the conditions for life to begin. A principle emerged called the survival of the fittest, and in a ruthless and brutal sequence of visceral contests, those forms of life gradually became more sophisticated until they started to develop self-consciousness. Once they'd done that, they started to plan, refine, reflect, and make meaning. But such meaning as they made had no larger purchase. It was simply their attempt to recognise and value those features of their existence that rose above their raw animal condition, in which shelter, food, clothing, company, reproduction, and death set the template for life.

Unsatisfied with the mundanity of things, and overwhelmed by the paradox that while individual life ends, life in general continues, these self-conscious beings started to put their existence in the context of something greater, richer, deeper, and more enduring. They talked of a life-force that lay above and beyond the earth and

their existence. They sought ways to communicate with this life-force and discern its purpose. But these were in the end sad, doomed, and tragic ways of failing to come to terms with their accidental, purposeless lives. In truth the only value they reliably found in the years that came between birth and death was the sense of achievement in asserting themselves over one another, and the sense of belonging they felt when they knew they were appreciated, desired, or understood. Everything else in life was a conspiracy of busyness, designed to keep hearts and minds so preoccupied with small battles, easy comforts, and manageable projects that they would never reflect in despair at the pointlessness or meaninglessness of it all.

That's what I call Story One. The virus has been devastating for those who have become very ill, terrifying for all who are most at risk, and disastrous for the many whose livelihoods have been ripped away from them almost overnight. But what I sense has been most deeply troubling about the pandemic is that it's laid bare Story One in the rawness of its struggle for survival and the emptiness of its attempts to rise above that struggle and make meaning and purpose. The busyness and urgency and all the paraphernalia of a full and active life have been stripped away, and there's now no shield from the uncompromising necessities of survival and the unrelenting approach of death. I say that with no *schadenfreude*—no sense of taking pleasure in another's misery: because we all know Story One very well, and spend large parts of our lives in it. When we panic, feel the weight of anxiety closing in, sense despair or depression in our bones, Story One seems to be the only story. That's not the pathology of a few: that's a regular reality for everyone.

But I want to suggest a different way of telling the story. It starts in a different place and it finishes in a different place. Story Two goes like this. There's something called essence. It's outside, beyond and largely incomprehensible to existence. It's made up of three persons in utter, devoted, and dynamic relation to one another. It dwells in forever, eternity, beyond time and space. It chose to create time, space, matter, shape, life, energy, consciousness—what together we call existence. It did so not as an experiment, a game, a challenge, or a breeze—but for one reason only: because it desired to be in relationship with something, someone, outside itself. It created the universe, from one explosive start and waited until all the constituents for life had come into focus: since it's outside time, the odd 14 billion years were as a day. Once human beings had taken shape, relationship began to take on a different dimension. The Trinity, as we call the three persons, began to interact with human consciousness. Eventually it settled upon one people, Israel, with whom to be in covenant relationship.

But the whole purpose of the story was that the Trinity could become known and be in relationship with humanity and the creation in person. In the fullness of time this happened. Honouring the covenant, one person of the Trinity took human flesh as a member of the people of Israel. This fulfilled all the hopes of Israel, and the whole design of the Trinity. That person brought the entirety of humanity face to face with God and the entirety of God face to face with humanity. Yet the virus that had beset humanity from the beginning, the fatal flaw that poisoned existence, dismantling trust and distorting love, got to this relationship too: humanity rejected the utter-human-utter-God and killed him in the most gruesome manner imaginable—the way it disposed of slaves, as a fearsome example to others who might rebel.

And this is the crucial moment in the story. At this point the Trinity might have

abandoned the relationship. Humanity was flawed, its allergic reaction had rejected the purpose of its existence. It had chosen Story One. Despite all its despair, depression, and denial in the face of Story One, when offered Story Two, it had turned it down as comprehensively as possible. And see: if the Trinity had left it there, there would be nothing, nothing at all to stand against those who said that speculation and exploration of transcendence and meaning was just a tragic failure to come to terms with the limitations of existence, and in the end sadder than the cynicism of mechanistic determinism.

But the Trinity didn't leave it there. The Trinity kept the story going, kept the relationship going. The Trinity not only restored the second person to existence, but when that second person, Jesus, had restored relationships with those who'd panicked and fled, the third person, whom we call the Spirit, came to shape all people in the ways Jesus had offered. And when existence finally comes to an end, not just for each one of us but for all things, Jesus will be there again at the threshold of time and eternity, when our consciousness will be suffused by essence, and, with the Trinity, we will finally be taken into the wonder of forever.

That's Story Two. See how Easter is so crucial in this story. Christmas is fundamental, but Christmas was in the DNA of existence from its very inception. There could be no existence without essence, and essence resolved to be with us in Jesus, so there's no existence without Jesus. But Easter's different. Easter comes at the moment that the whole Story of Everything could be lost. Easter reveals God's utter commitment to be with us, however determined we are to reject the offer of love, the source of life, and the purpose of all things. Those who are convinced there's no reason to think beyond or outside Story One would be perfectly justified if it weren't for Easter, for without Easter, God would be like a beautiful sail on a ship that was nonetheless headed for the rocks. It's Easter, not the coronavirus, that changes everything. It's Easter that shows God will never give up on us. It's Easter that demonstrates that this relationship, for which God created the universe and because of which Jesus died, is finally, ultimately, eternally unbreakable.

The virus is a terrible thing which has killed some, damaged many, and impoverished almost everybody. But most of all what it's done is to lay bare the difference between Story One and Story Two. For Story One, the virus is an intense, bleak, and almost unbearable demonstration of what's finally true for us all—that we live short, troubled, and incomplete lives with no abiding value or purpose. For Story Two, the virus is a truly scary example of what life could feel like if Story Two were not true. When Mary turns round from the tomb to the risen Lord, she turns from death to life, from grief to restored relationship, from despair to the one who will finally never let us go. She turns from Story One to Story Two.

This Easter, let's do the same.