

Story, Scripture & reflection questions for worship on March 28th, 2021.

On March 28th which is Palm Sunday, you will need to be familiar with the story below, the scripture reading below and ideally will have reviewed the questions included as well.

As you read this story, I encourage you to reference it with the last study article I provided, regarding Joe Hatch and the “At Home” research project. In the fictional story below, you will recognize (hopefully) some significant resonances between that true article about Joe Hatch, and this fictional story in which the character, George, doesn’t have the provisions of a research project to help him find his feet.

I encourage you also to email, write or call me with any feedback you want to share on these study stories and the reflection questions that are included. We learn from each other through our exchanges in these reflections.

“George in the Garage”

- By Janaki Bandara

“One thing at a time. Just one thing at a time. That is all I can manage, and, if nothing else, life has taught me to just focus on one thing at a time. That one thing I can manage.” This was the run of thoughts going through George’s head, as he walked the residential neighbourhoods of Preston and Hespeler. To look at him, you wouldn’t know that he was anything other than a guy out for a fall walk. Walking had become everyone’s favourite form of exercise by the time fall 2020 came around: it is affordable, social distancing is possible, and really all you need is a comfortable pair of walking shoes.

The rest of George’s belongings were stashed in a safe and slender space between the hedges and the wall at St Peter’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Preston. A space just wide enough to hold a pull-along wheely suitcase. He pushed it way back in there, so that nobody could see it unless they went looking, and he made sure to leave it there before sunrise, so nobody would see him stashing his worldly belongings away.

One thing at a time. Just one thing at a time.

He used this mantra, “just one thing at a time”, to re-establish his cashflow, so his support cheques now went directly to his bank account. He kept his bank card, his OHIP card and his library card on him at all times so he could always access his limited funds, healthcare and (when it was open) the library. Reading continued to be one of the most effective ways to calm his mind; one of the most effective ways to stop the senseless ruminating that would wind him up and eventually unravel him again if he allowed it.

His home address for mailing purposes was The Working Centre, in downtown Kitchener. But he found Cambridge more soothing on his soul – mostly because of the river. The Grand River, given to the Haudenosaunee people, six miles on either side, from source to sea (lake, really) ... this river centred him, grounded him, reminded him that by taking one thing at a time, he would be ok.

George was a card holding member of the Six Nations of the Grand River, Onondaga Nation to be precise. He was one of those considered a “sixties scoop kid”. This wasn’t a formal thing: Sixties Scoop, and it was no flavour of ice cream available at Baskin Robbins either. The term refers to the drastic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system, which accelerated in the 1960s, when Indigenous children were seized and taken from their homes and placed, in most cases, into middle-class Euro-Canadian families. This overrepresentation continues today.

That was George's heritage, and it is anyone's guess what his biological home environment might have been like. His mom and dad had both been students at the Mush-hole, the residential school in Brantford that closed in 1970. His parents, like many others who were taken to the Mush-hole from their family homes, never quite recovered. But there is something in the muscle memory of the heart and soul that remembers, that yearns, that seeks for those roots and that heritage. George's Mennonite adoptive family were good people. They raised him well, he even went to university. It was a proud day when he graduated from university with his B.A. in sociology. Through his studies he had learnt his own heritage too – the settler version of it anyway.

He learnt some of his Onondaga cultural ways, a few phrases here and there. And when he finished university, he got a good job, got married, had a daughter. Life was good in the way that life can be good when you are able to ignore the empty hole in the middle of it. Ignoring those holes of knowing his own heritage was possible before his daughter. He couldn't ignore those holes any longer when his daughter asked about her grandparents, and why she looked so much darker than all her cousins. This began their journey of exploring their Indigenous heritage together. And as he learnt his family history, his mind began to unravel. This was not some distant sociology in a distant textbook. This was his blood, his roots, the flesh from which he came. Too much was coming at him all at once. He couldn't keep it all in balance.

He was diagnosed with anxiety and prescribed Paxil. But instead of helping, it made him manic. A downward spiral began, and he began doing things that were totally out of character for him. Becoming suicidal, violent – even towards his beloved daughter and wife. When his marriage fell apart, his job soon followed. Then ... eviction ... couch surfing. Finally, on the streets. In and out of jail.

But the last stint he had in jail, there was some help. There was some counselling. There was a good psychiatrist available. And finally, the right diagnosis and the right formulation of medication was prescribed. With the new diagnosis, the new medication and therapy, he came to the end of his last jail term more intact than he had been in years. But from jail, back on the streets – this time during the COVID pandemic. He had entered jail in a world unmarred by masks and avid hand-washing, and he emerged in better managed mental health, but into a world scarcely equipped to support people who were down and out.

The best thing that came with his new diagnosis was his case worker. With her help, he got into a shelter, but could not sustain a job, and could not cope indefinitely with the living environment at the shelter: shared sleeping quarters aggravated the paranoia and social anxiety that was part of his mental health condition. He committed to remaining on his medication, to regular checks with his case worker, but soon he was living on the streets again.

Which, truth be told, was ok through the summer and early fall months. It was plenty warm enough, and he accessed the showers at The Vineyard church, and their laundry facilities. He was a regular recipient of lunches and suppers where-ever they could be had. But he knew this living rough could not last forever.

So his fall walks began to be about observing the neighbourhoods as he looked for a place to hunker down for the winter months. He wasn't looking to invade anyone's home, and figured an unused shed or garage would provide ample cover for him. His body was used to weathering the elements, and he really only needed to be sheltered from the deepest cold of nights and winter. He took to walking at sunset, slowly confining his walks to a smaller area until he was assessing a street where a few homes had garages, yet their cars – many a European import, and fancy trucks were usually parked outside. A few driveways even sported a boat, or an RV home. What he wouldn't give for one of those to be his home!

As fall proceeded, and his walks slowed, the season of putting porch furniture away began. COVID extended that season well beyond its usual time as visiting outdoors remained the safest way to visit. So George watched, which garages were opened just to stash furniture away, or put the lawnmower in and out. He saw which garages were full enough that he could hide in and amongst the barely used belongings, stored away for that occasional use. One garage had a canoe hung just high enough, open side facing up to the garage roof, and a short ladder leaning handily on the wall. He imagined himself sleeping in that canoe, in his sleeping bag. His suitcase tucked in behind the mounds of camping gear and storage boxes – the "stuff" that filled the garage. Yes, that garage might be his spot. That garage had a window. That garage had a walk-in door. It looked like an excellent candidate for winter shelter.

He watched more closely, from a bench by the Grand River, in that critical week when the garden was being put down at the canoe-for-a-bed-in-the-garage home. To anyone seeing George sitting on that bench, he just looked like a guy enjoying a peaceful afternoon watching the ducks and the geese drifting by on the calm waters of the river. The owner of the house he was watching seemed to be a single woman. He had seen her mowing the lawn on late fall weekends ... even stopped to talk with her a few times. She was friendly. She had a super-affectionate beagle, named Parker, and he made sure he had a treat for Parker in his pocket anytime he walked this way (the box of biscuits stashed in his suitcase behind the hedge at St Peter's).

So he had built that familiarity and comfort with her. His was a face she knew; their exchanges were familiar to her. On that Sunday afternoon, after a final mow, she was raking fall leaves into bags – a task made so much easier when an extra pair of hands is holding the big leaf bag – George saw the perfect opportunity. He meandered by, made small talk about the weather, giving Parker his biscuit, and a hearty ration of pats. Their little exchange went naturally to the task at hand; as she filled brown bags with leaves, he offered to help.

She said, "I have about six more bags in the garage that need to be put to the curb. And some big items besides. It is big item week this week."

"I'll be happy to help you and Parker" he said.

He walked through the open garage door, using the opportunity to unlock that garage window and the walk-in door from inside the garage. He stayed for a few more minutes after helping, continuing the small talk. Then he wished her a good night, and strolled off.

That night, long after dark had fallen, and the windows on the street winked, lights off, goodnight ... George walked back that way, checked the door. Indeed, it was unlocked, just as he had left it. So too was the window. A bark came from inside, Parker and George both knowing that something unusual was afoot. A short walk back to church, and soon George and his suitcase of belongings were stashed for the night. He settled into the canoe in his sleeping bag, after leaning over the edge of it, to push the ladder back to its resting spot. "Thanks be to God" he thought "for a roof over my head before the snow flies."

He didn't know how long this would last. He just wanted to make sure he kept as straight as he could. He just wanted a peaceful place to rest at night, out of the cold. That would help him figure out the next step. And the next step. Back to a life that fit neatly into society's brickwork of norms, from the rubble pile into which he had descended.

One thing at a time. Just one thing at a time.

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John 9:1-11

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?'

Some were saying, 'It is he.'

Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' [NRSV]

Questions for Reflection:

1. In the articles that were shared about Joe Hatch, you read of a similar context of mental health challenges that resulted in homelessness. Joe had the benefit of the research project "At Home" which ultimately helped him get his life back into society's brickwork of social norms. What alternatives do you see for people like George, when shelter is not available?
2. If you had space in your garage or shed to accommodate a homeless person, would you consider it? Why or why not? How would your consideration change if the space was a commonly held space, like our church building? What safeguards and provisions would need to be in place?
3. How would your considerations for housing someone (whether in an under-utilized space in your home, or in a commonly held space, like our church) be affected if you knew that the person being housed could have the supports they need to move them towards healing and wholeness?
4. In the Gospel reading, the question is asked "who sinned?" ... in the story above, and the articles on Joe Hatch, do you think the circumstances Joe and George found themselves in were a consequence of their own sinfulness? Or the consequences of their parents sinfulness? What is your rationale?
5. Do you think those of us who fit into society's brickwork of social norms are sometimes blind to the circumstances of those who do not fit? IF we have such blindness, is the cause of such blindness a matter of sinfulness? Whether you reply Yes or No, how so? Do you think that Jesus has the capacity to help our vision be restored? Do we have a role to play in that restoration of sight, whether for ourselves or for others? What might that role be?
6. If we were once blind, but now we see, do we have any responsibility to share the story of our restoration?