

The story begins in a garden and ends with a city.

In the beginning, God who was and always will be in communal relationship with Himself – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – created all things good. He breathed life into us, creating us to be relational beings made in his likeness and image. Giving us a task to serve, care for, and cultivate the earth. Darkness and evil, however, entered the story through human sin as the enemy deceived the first humans marring the goodness that God created. This left a devastating rupture in our relationships with God, others, our inner selves, and creation. These separations were in desperate need of restoration, of wholeness.

God, however, did not abandon His creation to destruction and decay; rather He promised to restore the world pulling it out of the darkness and into the light. As part of that purpose, God chose a people, Abraham and his descendants to represent the world. God promised to bless them as a nation so that through them all nations would be blessed. In time, however, they became enslaved in Egypt and cried out to God because of their oppression. God heard their cry, liberated them from their oppressor, and brought them to Sinai where he gave them an identity: as His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy people. Throughout the story of Israel, God refused to give up on His people despite their frequent acts of unfaithfulness to Him.

God's faithfulness brought his people into the Promised Land. Their state of blessing from God was intimately bound to their calling to embody the living God to other nations. They made movement toward this missional calling, yet they disobeyed by replacing God with foreign gods, overlooking the poor and mistreating the foreigner. Prophetic voices emerged from within the community of Israel exposing their indifference while revealing God's heart for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. However, Israel remained ambivalent towards the purposes, which God had called them, and for a time were sent into exile. Yet, a hopeful remnant looked ahead with hope and longing for the renewed reign of God where peace and justice would prevail.

The longings of the prophets and the people found their fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. Mysteriously God became flesh. Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted and set the captives free, naming the arrival of the Kingdom of God, bringing about a new Exodus, and restoring our fractured world. Many, however, rejected Him and His message as He confronted the religious establishment and the empire of Rome. Yet it is through his path of suffering, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection that has brought hope to all of creation. Jesus is our only hope. Through Jesus we have been forgiven and brought into a right relationship with God and God is now reconciling us to each other, creation, and our inner self.

We, however, have not been left alone. The Spirit of God comforts, guides, and empowers us with diverse gifts, fostering unity and interdependence. It is the Spirit of God who spoke through the authors of Scripture to reveal God's intended purpose to all generations of believers both past, present and future. It is this same Spirit who calls us to immerse ourselves in this narrative to both individually and communally interpret and live out the story in anticipation of the return of Jesus.

Presently the church is the embodiment of the resurrected Christ bringing love, peace, sacrifice and healing as together we live out the way of Jesus to a hurting world. The church is a global and local expression of living out the way of Jesus exposing glimpses of heaven to those we come into contact with. In our local expression as IKON we play off the understanding of ikons in Russian Orthodox literature. Ikons are not only works of art but rather sacred objects directly connected to

the actual presence of God. They are the windows from this world into the place of spiritual reality, a window into heaven. This is our role and the part we play in the story.

We, then, work towards Jesus return where he will bring the world to rights -- a total end to injustice, oppression, suffering, and evil -- restoring all things to God's original intent. The earth's groaning will cease and God will dwell with us here in a restored creation, a new heaven and a new earth. Our relationship with God, with others, with creation, and our inner selves will be whole and all will flourish as God intends. This is what we long for. This is what we hope for. This is what we are giving our lives to - living out that future reality now.