

Horses on Parade XVIII: A Year of Stories

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
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James 2:1-10, 14-17 and Mark 7:24-37

Once upon a time. Once upon a time.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”
(A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens)

“In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing.” *(A River Runs Through It, Norman Maclean)*

“Call me Ishmael.” *(Moby-Dick, Herman Melville)*

“You better not never tell nobody but God.” *(The Color Purple, Alice Walker)*

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”
(Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy)

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense." *(Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, J.K. Rowling)*

Or these:

“Rosebud.” (“Citizen Kane”)

"I'm 36 years old, I love my family, I love baseball, and I'm about to become a farmer. But until I heard the voice, I'd never done a crazy thing in my whole life."
("Field of Dreams")

"The key to faking out the parents is the clammy hands. It's a good non-specific symptom; I'm a big believer in it." ("Ferris Bueller's Day Off")

"I believe in America. America has made my fortune." ("The Godfather")

Or this:

"Come and listen to a story about a man named Jed..." ("The Beverly Hillbillies")

"Space, the final frontier..." ("Star Trek")

"Here's the story of a lovely lady/Who was bringing up three very lovely girls..."
("The Brady Bunch")

Or, finally, this:

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." Genesis 1:1

All of those words prompt something in your imagination. You imagine Celie in *The Color Purple*, or Don Corleone, or even Jed and Granny and Jethro and Elly May. Something deep within you is tapped when you sense that a funny story, or a sad one, or a meaningful one, is coming.

Welcome to a Year of Stories. It's an annual theme different than some. We have had topics, and good ones. A Year of Stories is less of a topic and more of an activity, an action, a thing.

We tell stories. We hear stories. We share stories. About ourselves. About our loved ones. About work, and play. About triumphs, and tragedies. From the distant past and the far-off future and the right here and now. Some are fact. Some are fiction. They grab us. They have power.

That is what we will do. Tell and hear and share stories. Some will be from the Bible, of course. Some will be from our past, including this church's past. Some

will be about others, beyond this church community. But many will be about us – you and me. We will tell them in worship and in other gatherings. We will share them in writing. We will share them online – Facebook and Twitter. We will create new stories, together. We are living into a new story even as we gather here this morning.

Why stories?

The writer Jeff Goins says this:

“Story is where we came from. Story is where we’re going. Story is what connects us and binds us to each other. It is in the story of humanity, amongst love and fear and failure, that we make meaning of our lives.

Story is what defines us and sets us apart. It’s what allows us to connect with each another, to truly know and *be* known.

A good story has conflict, but ultimately resolves. A story is messy and full of confusion, but there is meaning and completeness to it. A story is about people and places, not ideas and concepts.

Stories are concrete, absolute, and certain. Yet, they are *mysterious*. Stories have natural momentum to them, fueling our passion to find out more from the teller.”

The scientist Edward Wilson asserts that “the universal love of stories is not a coincidence; our brains function by constructing narratives. Adults and children alike live, learn, and relate to others through stories.”

"The story," according to educational theorist Kieran Egan, "not only conveys information and describes events and actions, but it also engages our emotions.”

Jessica Fox and Don Cohen write that “a good story reliably communicates essential knowledge so it is not only understood but absorbed and embraced.”

We see how this all works in this morning’s gospel lesson from Mark’s gospel. We could read a propositional account of how we are called to be mindful of those in need, in particular those on the fringes of society. Rather, we have a woman, a Gentile woman, no less, so an outsider both because of her gender and religion,

teaching Jesus a hard lesson about justice. Then Jesus teaches us an important lesson about inclusion and diversity as he restores the hearing of a deaf man. Those stories resonate when a theological lecture or sermon can't, as we place ourselves in the middle of them, imagining ourselves in the crowd, or the woman with the sick daughter, or the man unable to hear. The modest, profound power of story.

It feels like a simple proposition, but it is in no way simplistic. Here is what I think it looks like.

We each have a story – our life. It is a gift of God, and because it is just that, it is a story worth telling. It's worth it to your own soul to tell your story, so don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

And because we each have a story worth telling, we are called to tell it, in all its human honesty. That might mean simply whispering it to yourself, if you've been conditioned to believe that your life is a story not worth telling. But it may mean more than that, and we will feature ways to do that this year.

And it means, therefore, that because each of our lives is a story worth telling, that we are equally called to listen to the stories of others. We are not a very good culture when it comes to listening, it seems to me. So this is a counter-cultural invitation, to listen, to hear, as well as to speak.

That brings in an ethical component to all of this, of course. There are many, here, in this room, or in our city, or in our world, unable to tell their own stories. It may be for a personal condition, very individualized. Or it may be for a worldly condition, an unjust imposition. What can we – we who know the liberating power of story – do to help remove obstacles to others, so that all of God's beloved children can tell their stories, can tell and share and be heard?

That is what we hear from James this morning, I believe. "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" That is to say, if someone doesn't have what they need – food, clothing, shelter – or if they are subject to the forces of racism or sexism or other forms of

injustice, if they are impeded in any way to live the full, God-given story of their life, our calling is to respond.

So we tell our stories, and we listen to the stories of others, enabling them to do so when they can't find their own voice.

But it is more than that.

Whether it's the 21st century, or the last 100 years, or 500, history, and culture, and politics, has lifted up the individual. We know better. We know, and affirm it deeply in our faith, that our stories are woven together, intermixed and intermingled. The communion of saints, our tradition has called it. People we will never meet, people we might not like if we did meet them. No matter. Our story is bound to theirs, and theirs to ours. It begins in church, which is one reason this worship gathering matters, and then it permeates through and beyond these walls. We share a common story, which is even more than a collection of individual stories. We do better as a human family when we remember that.

And one thing more, of course. The same God in whose image we are created, who gives us life and breath, and does the same for every other fellow traveler, continues to write stories, on human hearts and in the world created and called good. Our individual stories flow in and between and around the stories of others, and ultimately flow into God's story. Its rough outlines are captured in the biblical pages, which begin, as I am sure you noticed, with a story and not a theological proposition – creation and redemption and salvation. It culminates in the Jesus story but involves countless woman and men and children, some whose names we will know and some whose names are surely written on God's heart. But it does not end there. Though it is a tagline from the United Church of Christ, who apparently have a more clever marketing team than we Presbyterians, we can still affirm it: "God is still speaking."

God's story is not yet finished. God is still speaking, through God's own voice and through the lives and voices and stories of all of God's children. Including us. Here. Now. Amen.