

“The Power of Story”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
Christmas Eve - December 24, 2018

Luke 2: 1-20
Isaiah 9: 2-7

As I've walked my Advent journey this year, I've found myself coming back to the word, "story." We each have a story to tell - about ourselves, about one another, about our faith. Somehow, when we're willing to tell our stories to one another, we hear the voice of God speaking. And on a night like tonight, we are brought closer to one another and to God through the retelling of both an ancient and modern story.

I first thought of story as I sat in our living room and looked at our Christmas decorations. We don't have lots of decorations up - shoot, we were lucky to get a tree up and decorated before the middle of the month! But as I looked at our tree and our stockings, I couldn't help but think of how they tell our family's story.

First of all, let me give credit where credit is due: we don't decorate the tree; Erin and Heather decorate the tree, and Debbie and I watch them decorate the tree. It's a nice tradition, to be sure! But as they pull out the ornaments and place them on the tree, I can't help but think of the stories they represent. There is the black-and-white photograph of Heather when she was four-years-old, taken by the teachers at Fairview Presbyterian Church's preschool, which captures a moment in time that is precious and innocent. There is the baby picture of Erin and her first Christmas nineteen years ago, and we can recall celebrating that year in the manse of the church we served in in Charlotte, North Carolina.

There are the ornaments that remain from Debbie's childhood and my childhood, which recall our memories of Christmases long ago. There are the ornaments from Children's Christmas Programs here at John Knox, which remind us of experiences with so many here in the past. There are the ornaments made by Joan Love from our church, which she gave to us and many of you through the years, and even though she's gone, they remind me of her faithfulness and service in Christ's name. There are the sand dollar ornaments, which were given to the eight children of my grandmother's generation, as well as all of their children. When I see the two we have they are specifically for my great aunts, Adeline Ostwalt and Marion Weersing, and I remember with great love and fondness their stories of faithfulness, service, and laughter.

And then I look at the stockings hung by our fireplace, and I see visible reminders of our stories. In our family, it has been common for us to have needlepoint stockings that have images which represent different parts of our personal stories. My mom and dad each had one that my father made, and I made one for Debbie soon after we were married. For Debbie, there are images of the state of Indiana, a cello, the German and European flags, the Presbyterian Church's seal, and the logo for Princeton Theological Seminary. Each of those represent friendships, passions, experiences, people and places that have formed Debbie's story.

Each year when we decorate for Christmas, I am reminded of the people God has placed in our lives to form our personal story. Maybe you see it, too, at this time of the year. A nativity set given by a grandparent reminds you of times spent together in your childhood. A photo from an album makes you break out in laughter because you remember how awful your crazy uncle used to dress for family gatherings. A candle in the window reminds you of driving up with great anticipation to your family's house for a warm and joy-filled reunion. We each have a story to tell, and this time of the year offers us a chance to reconnect with that story that has been woven together by a loving Creator.

It is the familiar story of Christ's birth which draws us together this evening. There is a reason we use these scriptures every Christmas - because they are not only familiar and comforting, but they help us center ourselves in a time and place when we most need it. We are forced to stop, to take a break from the chaotic schedules of our lives, to be still, and to listen to God's good news.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus . . ." "Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth to the city of David . . ." "He went with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child . . ." "While they were there, she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

We yearn to hear those words every year, for they remind us of God's incredible story. They give us peace in the midst of great unrest. The angels give us comfort and hope when we hear them say, "Do not be afraid; for I am bringing you good news of great joy - to you is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." We are reminded this night that we are never alone, for God's story is one of incarnational presence; Emmanuel - God with us.

The other thing about story is that sometimes what we have always held as definitive and true in our minds is changed by new knowledge or circumstances. This can happen with both stories we have always heard, and it can happen in our own personal stories. And in both cases, God speaks in ways that enriches and deepens our faith.

I read an article written by Ken Bailey in the [Presbyterian Outlook](#) this month which reframed the Nativity story for me in a totally new way. In it, he looks more closely at the historical and cultural contexts of Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth, which helps draw new images for this familiar story we hear every year.

For example, when the gospel writer uses the word we translate to "inn" in verse seven, that Greek word is actually only used one other time in Luke's Gospel. It is when Jesus is seeking a space to celebrate the Passover meal before his betrayal and death. In chapter 22, he tells his disciples to follow a man into a house, "and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"'" (Luke 22:11). The same Greek word that we have always translated as "inn" is translated in this later passage as "guest room."

Think about that: "She laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guest room." That changes the story, doesn't it? Instead of being rejected by a mean innkeeper, the holy family may have been welcomed into someone's simple home. And even though there wasn't room for them in the guest room, Mary and Joseph were still welcomed into a home. How do we know?

Because in simple homes in Palestine of that era, the homes were designed as split levels, with the raised portion being the living space for the family, and the lower level being the space for the animals. But in the floor of the main family living space, there would be a feeding trough – a manger – which the animals could reach at night if they were hungry. Ken Bailey reframes this familiar story in the following way:

Joseph finds shelter in a simple peasant home. This home has a guest room, but it is full. In the honored tradition of Middle Eastern hospitality, the host provides for his guests. He clears the one-room family living space for the Holy Family to use.

The child is born and placed in a depression in the floor (manger) to keep it from harm. The shepherds are given a double sign. They will find the babe wrapped (an ancient village custom) and placed in a manger. That is, he is in a simple home like theirs; no one will say to them, “Tradesmen to the back door, please!”

The Incarnation itself becomes more authentic – Jesus was born in and into a simple peasant home as any other village boy. The shepherds, outcasts from their society, were given a sign indicating this simplicity. They thereby discover that this Messiah comes welcoming the poor and the marginalized.

The word became flesh indeed. The birth of Jesus most likely took place in the same kind of natural setting into which every peasant is born – in a peasant home. And, after all, it is still possible to sing:

*Ox and ass before him bow,
For he is in the manger now.
Christ is born to save,*

Christ is born to save (Ken Bailey, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 21, 2006, <https://pres-outlook.org/2006/12/the-manger-and-the-inn-a-middle-eastern-view-of-the-birth-story-of-jesus/?fbclid=IwAR3i-tGuhlV8Da1wjYXcy2VOCMafPRxiPss85eJ2ArbPsuGEloObBKYZETk>).

I'm not trying to derail all your notions of what this familiar faith story might be. What I am suggesting is that sometimes, we need not be afraid to look at our faith stories in new ways, from new perspectives, taking into account new information or insights. For in doing so, I believe the Spirit is moving in our midst, to help us see God in a clearer, more powerful way than perhaps we could experience before. As a result, the story becomes richer, deeper, and more transformative.

In our personal lives, there are times that our stories are influenced by circumstances beyond our control. An accident occurs, and we are required to put on hold the normal routine, instead focusing our energy on healing and wholeness. We are let go from our job of twenty years, and we must mentally and emotionally adapt to seeking meaningful employment which supports our family. Rarely do our personal stories follow an unbroken, smooth trajectory. They are often filled with valleys and events that change and influence us in powerful ways.

This evening, this service has always been deeply meaningful to me and my story of faith. Ever since I was a child, Christmas Eve was a sacred time of worship, a time shared with family and friends. Growing up as a preacher's kid, there was something deeply spiritual about witnessing how this night impacted others. Being a pastor, it is one of the highlights of my ministry every year – the music, the

stories retold in scripture, the sacrament of bread and juice, the candlelight piercing the darkness.

That is why it was so jarring and unusual to not be here one year ago. My father died three days before Christmas, after being diagnosed with leukemia three months earlier. And as I have said numerous times before, the greatest gift this congregation and staff could ever have given to me and my family was the gift of being in West Virginia one year ago with no sense of guilt for missing this service. However, it nevertheless was odd, weird, and hard to not be in this place on this night when this had been such a strong, formative part of my personal story.

But you know something? That hard experience with grief and loss also shaped my story in ways I would never have dreamed. It forced me to be present - really present - in a tender, sacred moment as a family, as we said goodbye to my dad. It caused me to understand once again how important it is to rely on others when you are weak or struggling, because so many times God has a way of then strengthening you for a later time when you can be there for them. It shaped my story in a way that I am now more compassionate and empathetic towards those who are experiencing loss or grief. It helped me treasure even more this night - the gift of this evening - knowing that the story which we celebrate and bear witness to this evening is a gift we should never take for granted.

How will your story of faith be impacted by the ancient yet modern story we have heard this evening? How will you live your life as one who comes to the manger - a manger that perhaps is now situated in the main room of a small peasant home? How will you tell this story to others - in word, in deed, in love? How will we continue to be shaped by the Spirit as we listen to one another telling our stories of God's amazing grace in our lives?

May we have the courage and passion of the shepherds, who were not afraid to tell the story of what they had seen: "They made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them" (2:17-18). May we be amazed, too, as we hear God's story told to us once again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.