

“A True Story”

A Sermon based on Luke 21:25-36
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
On Sunday, December 2nd, 2018 (Advent C1)
By David Oliver-Holder

There are few things that move our hearts and minds more than a good story. As good parents through the ages have done, very early in the lives of our children, we begin to tell them stories, to read stories to them.

In our house, our children have Bibles, as well as biblical stories told in creative and beautiful ways. Maybe you have heard of one author we love, Brian Wildsmyth. His retelling of Biblical stories and his art are wonderful. We have other classics, of course: Laura Ingalls Wilder, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien. Everyone must read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*.

And then there is the story by Tomie De Paola, *The Night of Las Posadas*. *Las Posadas* tells a part of the best of all stories: The story of God coming among us in Jesus our Lord.

Here in this season, we rehearse, we prepare, to hear once again, the great story of Emmanuel, to hear the promises which nurture our hope, and our expectation of his return. And as with all great stories, we can't properly prepare for the festival of the Nativity with words alone. We need signs and symbols: Advent Wreaths, candles, banners, greenery, lights, fruit cake, egg nog and crèches. And we need music!

All of these manifestations of human creativity, we need them all to fully express the depth and grandeur of Advent. This season is so rich and beautiful because what God has done for us in the Incarnation is so rich and beautiful, and full of grace and mercy. Indeed, “What Wondrous Love Is This, O My Soul...”

Yet, as we know all too well, this story of God's love for all of creation is not the only story. There are other stories, which tell of very different ways of understanding the world, and of how we should be with one another. Some of these other stories do not welcome the telling, and the embodiment of another story, especially this story.

That is why there can be clash and conflict. Those who have power do not generally like to share it. Where Paul wrote that Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, there are many who believe in the story which says

that power is indeed something to be fought for.

Thus, Jesus and his coming and his way are not always welcomed. He told his first disciples that the world would hate them, just as it had hated him. That would be no excuse, however, for not bearing fruit. Follow him, and obey his command to love one another, and their lives would exhibit the evidence of what story they believed.

Many disciples today hold onto Jesus' command to "love one another," and they are willing to risk scorn, or picketing, and even hate, because they believe the story about Jesus and are committed to his way.

I think of the new initiative along our southern border which is calling itself Texas Impact. It's a statewide religious network. Their objective is to bring religious leaders to the border, where they can watch what goes on, where they can bear witness.

Part of what they do is sit in on court proceedings, and they are finding that the judges are much more circumspect when they know that religious leaders are watching. At the bridges which cross over the border, in places like McAllen, Texas, "we cross over, talk to some of the people who are waiting there in line, hand out water bottles, granola bars... and hear their stories about what they've gone through to get to this place," said Erica Nelson, the coordinator of the Courts and Ports program, and who is a graduate of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.ⁱ

Disciples who do this sort of thing show what story they are shaped by. They show that their imaginations have not been subverted by other stories, false stories, the typical stories of power and might and pride.

And that is the choice that continues to confront disciples today. What story are you going to live out of, embody, be faithful to? As someone wrote this week:

It's not, I think, violence that is the greatest threat to us today, but fear. Fear that drives us to forget who we are, to see people in need as the enemy, and to place securing our safety and comfort above meeting the basic needs of those in distress. Fear is more dangerous than violence because fear can lead us to forget our deepest identity and betray our most cherished values.ⁱⁱ

Instead of giving in to fear, let us hear the truth of the Nativity all over again. The coming of Jesus among us is all about peace and justice. It's all about love and mercy. It is about vulnerability and trust, as God came among us, not in power and might, but in weakness as an infant, and the poverty of a stable. It is about taking us, poor as we are, living in the smelly stables of ourselves, and working miracles even there. Life overcomes death, not from a distance, but right in the grave yard. Light overcomes darkness, not when the sun is out, but at midnight, when no candle can be found.

That's a lot to ask of any story. So we should not be surprised that the truth of God coming among us as Immanuel is hard for Doubting Thomas' to believe. It is so much easier to have confidence in the usual suspects, stories about power and strength, having the right connections with the right people, and having enough wealth to secure ourselves, and enough might and weapons to make us feel safe.

This is why we begin Advent each year with prophecies such as this one we have heard from Luke's Gospel, apocalyptic visions of woe and unrest. Christ's coming cannot be reduced to being cute, precious and cuddly. That makes an idol of the Nativity.

No, Jesus came to bring what we need, and to remove our illusions, and our overconfidence in ourselves. And truth be told, not everyone wants what Jesus came to bring. Many are quite happy with their illusions. Many are indeed willing to fight to preserve their illusions, and to silence any who would resist them. Like King Herod wiping out the infants of Bethlehem, in the vain attempt to protect his kingdom from Jesus, the new-born king.

Prophets, then, use apocalyptic language, which is large language, even extreme language, to try and express unimaginably important events. John does this in the book of Revelation, chapter 12, where he describes a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of 12 stars. She is pregnant and in the agony of labor. She is, of course, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

And who is nearby? A great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, whose tail drags a third of the stars of heaven behind it. And the dragon is waiting to pounce, the instant that the woman delivers her child, so that he can consume it and destroy the promise.

That's apocalyptic language, used to describe the wonder of the Nativity, the Incarnation. Here in Luke 21, Jesus describes two great events at once. One is the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The other is his return, which we still await. Both are unimaginably important. Both are times of great disillusionment, when illusions are unmasked and shown for what they are.

No one welcomes disillusionment. But for us who strive to follow Jesus and his way, for us to abide in Jesus' realm of peace, we all must be disillusioned, shed of our false stories. We express this in our baptismal liturgy, in the renunciations. We promise to turn from the world and its ways, from all other stories and philosophies and illusions, so that we can turn to Christ and his way. For each of us, at some point, it can feel apocalyptic.

It is deadly business, this baptism, as Martin Luther knew. We are supposed to put the Old Adam, the old ways, under the water to drown him, so that the new Adam, Christ, can live in us. Our trouble begins when we don't hold the old Adam under long enough. When we don't kill him off, he keeps popping back up to pull us back into the old ways, that without fail cause havoc, heart ache and all manner of mischief.

That is why we do this every year. That is the wisdom of the liturgical seasons. For we tend to be forgetful people, who are so easily entranced by false stories, and illusions.

We need to hear this story over and over again, so that we remember, so that we can be re-membered as the people who are the body of Christ, citizens of the one true realm of peace and grace and joy. We desperately need to remember how God has gifted us so in the Nativity.

I've been thinking of Zacchaeus this week. He is the man, you will remember, who was short, who wanted to see Jesus as he passed through town one day. So Zacchaeus climbed a Sycamore tree to get a better view.

In this season, as we decorate, we climb trees, in a sense, and literally, in the hope that we can see Jesus better, so that we can make him room. We pray that we will see him, but even more, we hope that he will see us, that he will call us down, and say to us, as he said to Zacchaeus, "Today, I will commune with you."

Do you remember how corrupt, greedy, grasping Zacchaeus responded? He turned from his old ways, from the false story which said that it is o.k. to become wealthy by extorting money from others. And he did more than the law demanded to make right the wrongs he did to so many. He gave himself to a new story, Jesus' story, a story in which he found himself put right with God, and because he had been forgiven and put right with God, he could then work to make things right with others.

Zacchaeus shows us the way. Jesus said in our passage this morning, "People will faint from fear and foreboding...Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Let's translate it to our own circumstances: When people are afraid to be out during the holidays for fear of terrorist attack, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus. When we are too afraid to admit to our country those seeking a safe home for fear they may be terrorists, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus (who himself was a refugee as a child!). When the violence of our city streets push us to abandon civil rights and protections for all people regardless of their race or ethnicity, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is our story, and these are just a few ways we can live as if our lives are based on that story. One history wrote:

[H]uman history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places - and there are so many - where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for

some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.^{iv}

Jesus does not come just for us, as individuals. His grace and his mercy we cannot hope to keep to ourselves. His grace overflows our cups, as David wrote in Psalm 23. Christ's grace, and our gratitude, call us out, to make amends, to make right what has been wrong, and to go beyond the customary expectations in doing so. His grace even calls us to "risk something big for something good."

His is the true story. How can we even think of yielding to another story? And as we will hear soon, from this same Gospel, when the angelic heralds announce the good news that the story of God coming among us in flesh has begun, their first words to the shepherds were "Do not be afraid."

It's an amazing story, the best story, a saving story. Don't you think we need to hear it again? So come. Let us begin the journey to Bethlehem. Amen.

ⁱ Leslie Scanlon, "Presbyterians Help Prepare to Meet the Needs of the Coming Caravan," on *the Presbyterian Outlook* website, November 8, 2018.

ⁱⁱ David Lose, "Advent 1C: Stand Up and Raise Your Heads," blog post on *In the Meantime*, November 23rd, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Howard Zinn, "The Optimism of Uncertainty," in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times*, ed. by Paul Rogat Loeb, (New York: Basic Books, 2014), Kindle location 1583. Thanks to Jill Duffield for the reference to this quote in her lectionary reflections in *The Presbyterian Outlook*.