

## **Sermon - The Greatest Story**

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We are a people that share stories. We share religious stories and personal stories. We share ancient stories and we share stories about what happened to us earlier in the day. Part of the reason that we tell stories is an innate desire to know others and to be known by others. We want to be in relationship and in community and stories help us do just that.

Now stories may be shared over coffee or over a beer. And, we often share our stories in person with one another, but these days many of us share our stories on the computer with Facebook.

In our churches part of the way we share our stories is around the communion table with bread and with wine. We share stories about our God who is relentless in sharing love with us. We share stories that are timeless and eternal. Each year in the Church we share many of the same stories. In particular, and as we just heard, each year we share the story of the Passion of Jesus Christ. It is a story that will be shared next year, and it is a story that will be shared in ten thousand years. Imagine what the universe will be like in ten thousand years, and we will still be sharing the story of the Passion of Jesus. It is a story that is timeless and eternal.

Now, some stories have entered into myth, and they are still important because they teach us about wisdom, and they teach us what it is to be a human being. Some believe this about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They think it is myth, but I am one who still believes that these stories of Jesus are part of the history of our world. I believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus actually happened, and they happened in time and space.

Now, I believe that we each have our own spiritual journey with God and that our various journeys put us into different places. My journey has placed me where I am and yours has placed you where you are. For this reason, I think that we must all develop our own personal theology and personal relationship with God. By extension, that means we must each have our own stories about God. Some of our stories are shared stories, and some of our stories are deeply personal. Some of our journey with God we share with others, and some of our stories of God we never share. Often our spiritual stories are about suffering and death. Suffering and death seem to shape us and shape our spirituality more than almost anything else.

Now, within our Christian stories we have three times during the year that we remember stories about death. This means that we have three what I would call “meta” stories about death.

On All Saints Day or All Souls Day at the beginning of November we remember the deaths of those that have gone before us. We tell stories about the departed so that we might remember them and continue to be shaped by them. In the Episcopal Church our collect or standard prayer for All Saints Day includes the following: “O God, the Maker and Redeemer of all believers: Grant to the faithful departed the unsearchable benefits of the passion of your Son; that on the day of his appearing they may be manifested as your children.”

We also tell stories of death on Ash Wednesday as we begin the season of Lent. On Ash Wednesday we remind ourselves of our own mortality and in doing so work to release ourselves from the fear of death. We tell this “meta” story of mortality so that we might live. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

And today, on Palm Sunday we fast forward a few days to Good Friday, and we tell the greatest “meta” story. It is the story of God’s relentless pursuit of us in love. It is about the horrible death on the Cross of God’s own son, Jesus.

As we retell this story about the crucifixion we hit several hot buttons. The story of Good Friday is a story about our shame. While it was the human beings of two thousand years ago that caused his death, we would not do any differently. We too would put Jesus to death. We too are implicated, just as we are implicated each time any person is put to death. Here in California we seem to still have the death penalty.

The story of Good Friday is also about what happens when one confronts the power structures of the day. Jesus was insistent that those with power, prestige and privilege had to share it and give it over to those who did without. Today, we still don’t do very well with those who confront society. Part of our continuing story is that we figuratively crucify those crying out that there is a better way.

And, the story of Good Friday is also about God suffering a horrible death on the Cross. God is always present with us in our own joys and suffering, but God has gone even further.

Have you noticed that there is always a bonding between those with shared experiences especially difficult experiences, and we are eternally bonded to Jesus through his own experiences of joy and suffering. Through Jesus we are reconnected back to God. And, what could be more important than this connection to God? We

learn a lot from all of these meta stories about death – they help form who we are. And, sometimes we are formed more than we realize.

In his book, “The Secrets of Happy Families”, Bruce Feiler writes about the importance of stories and more specifically the importance of family stories. Feiler writes, that psychologists have noted that when a child and a child who has become an adult know the stories about his or her family, then they are better able to cope and face challenges.

This means that one of the single most important thing you can do for your family may be quite simple: develop a strong family narrative. This family story could include some facts like...

Do you know where your grandparents grew up?

Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school?

Do you know how your parents met?

Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?

Do you know the story of your birth?

A family’s story may also include broader topics about successes and failures and even a family approach to life.

Research has shown that when children and children who have become adults know more about their family’s story, then they have a stronger sense of control over their lives, and higher self-esteem.

Now, the importance of stories is relevant to more than just families. In a New York Times article, called “The Ties That Bind Us”, it was shared that stories are also important for an organization like the U.S. Military.

“The military has found that teaching recruits about the history of their service increases their camaraderie and ability to bond more closely with their unit.... Until recently, the military taught unit cohesion by “dehumanizing” individuals. Think of the bullying drill sergeants in the movies “Full Metal Jacket” or “An Officer and a Gentleman.”

But these days the military spends more time building up identity through communal activities. For example, at the Naval Academy, graduating seniors take incoming

freshmen on history-building exercises, like going to the cemetery to pay tribute to the first naval aviator or visiting the original B-1 aircraft on display right there on the Naval Academy campus.”

Now, I think this is something that our religious communities have recognized for a long time. Stories shape us on many levels.

And, in our Churches we have stories about everything under the sun and then some. We have the Bible, which shows God’s relentless pursuit of us in love. Some of our stories are myth and metaphor, and we learn from them. And, some of our stories are actual parts of history. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus have changed the universe in ways that we can only begin to fathom. That is why the Passion story will still be told ten thousand years from now. And, maybe this meta story about death will be told in some very distant worlds.

May this story of the passion of Jesus be part of your own story. May it get inside of you so that you never forget of God’s love and grace for all of us.