

The Power of a Good Story

Rev. Dr. Peter G.
James

Christmas Eve

John 1:14-18

Sermon Series:
Gifts from the Heart
of God

*If you really
want to know
someone, you
need to know
his or her
story.*

Tell me a story, my kids used to say. So, I learned to tell stories. When my daughter was in preschool, I used to drive her and her playmates to school each day. I couldn't get them to sit still, so I began to tell stories. Whenever I told them a story, they became unusually quiet and still. My stories were an amalgam of fairy tale characters I had retained from my past, Lilliputians, trolls, hobbits and every manner of talking animals.

Children aren't the only ones who love stories. Older people enjoy stories, too. Sit with older members of your family this Christmas, and it won't be long before they start telling old stories. I have heard these stories so often, I could tell them myself. "Did I tell you what it was like to live during the depression?"

"Yes, dad, hundreds of times!"

Bring two people together and soon they will be exchanging stories. If you really want to know someone, you need to know his or her story.

MySpace and Facebook represent a digital form of storytelling. The pictures and captions posted on these social networks are designed to tell someone's story.

Poet Muriel Rukeyser said, "The universe is made up of stories, not atoms." Life unfolds more like a story than a math problem.

Sometimes, our life resembles a tragedy, sometimes a comedy. Some days it feels like a soap opera.

Moviegoers can see the first installment in a trilogy of fantasy movies called *The Golden Compass*, based on a book with the same title by Phillip Pullman. The book and movie have created quite a buzz, since Pullman allows his atheistic leanings to influence his book. He has rather unflattering things to say about God and the church. I'll have more to say about him in January. There is, however, one point on which we agree. Pullman said, "'Thou shall not's' may reach the head, but it takes 'once upon a time' to reach the heart."

Seventy-five percent of the Bible is composed of stories. This book could be called a theologically narrated story. The Bible is essentially a story told at three levels. At its most basic level, the Bible is a story about people, thousands of stories about people. At a deeper level, the Bible is also a story about the people of God, Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. At its most profound level, the Bible is quintessentially a story about God.

Jesus was a master storyteller. He created stories from real life situations to teach deep, spiritual lessons.

What is your favorite book or most cherished movie? I'll bet what

***...God
sometimes
shows up at
the strangest
places, among
the most
unlikely
people.***

captivates your attention is the power of a good story.

Nearly every good story, whether fairy tale, western or mystery, follows pretty much the same story line. Once upon a time, life was good. Then, something dramatic or awful happens. As a result, a climactic battle must be fought or a decisive journey taken. At just the right time, sometimes at the last possible moment, a hero appears to set things right again.

Have you every wondered why so many good stories follow the same story line? Could it be that every good story borrows from a larger story?

Every good story has three essential elements: A good beginning, a villain and a hero. Allow me to elaborate.

Every good story has a good beginning. Every good story begins with the equivalent words, "Once upon a time." Once upon a time, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...." Once upon a time, "There were four children, whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy." Once upon a time, "Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies...."

The Christmas story has such universal appeal precisely because it's a great story. Once upon a time, a young peasant girl named Mary, barely 16, is betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. Hardly the sort of people you would expect God to target to make His grand entrance into human history. The angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she has found favor with God. "You will conceive in your

womb and bear a son and you will call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33).

"How can this be?" Mary asks (1:34).

Honey, "Nothing is impossible with God" (1:37).

Joseph is regarded as a decent fellow, so when Mary announces she has been impregnated by the Holy Spirit, he resolves in his mind to divorce her quietly. But the angel also visits Joseph, directing him to proceed with the wedding as planned and keep his mouth shut (Matthew 1:18-21).

Some months later, they arrive at Joseph's hometown to register for a Roman census. They would have stayed at the Bethlehem Inn, but it is booked solid, so the only lodging available is outside with the live-stock. That same night, Mary goes into labor and delivers her baby. I tell you, God sometimes shows up at the strangest places, among the most unlikely people.

Every good story has a good beginning, just as every good story has a villain. Anakin Skywalker is seduced by the dark side of the Force, only to re-emerge later as the dreaded Lord Darth Vader. You knew right from the start his sinister nature, given his black helmet, cape and heavy breathing. The Land of Oz is haunted by the Wicked Witch of the West. The White Witch casts a dark spell over Narnia, decreeing

Every good story has a good beginning.

Every good story has a villain.

...every good story... has a rescue.

that it will always be winter and never Christmas.

Our idyllic Christmas story is soon shattered when the wise men visit Herod's palace. "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and have come to pay homage" (Matthew 2:1-2).

The news of a rival king sets Herod's teeth on edge. He consults with his religious advisors about the birthplace of this Messiah King. The prophets foretold his birth in Bethlehem, so Herod orders his servants to search diligently for the child, so he may come and worship. Liar, liar, pants on fire!

The wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. When Herod realizes he has been duped, he orders every child in Bethlehem massacred. This "slaughter of the innocents," sets in bold relief the dark side of human nature. There's evil in the world, my friends. It's dark and sinister and menacing.

Every good story has a good beginning. Every good story has a villain. But every good story also has a rescue. Dorothy and Toto follow the Yellow Brick Road all the way to the Emerald City, where the Wicked Witch of the West meets her doom. Luke Skywalker blasts Darth Vader's Death Star out of the sky and rescues Princess Leia, thereby saving the Star War Galaxy from the dark side. Aslan announces to Susan and Lucy upon his improbable return to life, "Although the witch knew the Deep Magic, there

is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge only goes back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim, who had committed no treachery, was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward."

Joseph is told that Mary "will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). His death saves us! He rescues us.

A 4th century Christian theologian, Gregory of Nazianzus writes: "He hungered—yet he fed thousands. He thirsted—yet he exclaimed, 'Whosoever thirsts, let him come to me and drink.' He was tired—yet he is the rest of the weary and burdened. He was overcome by heavy sleep—yet he goes lightly over the sea, rebukes winds and relieves the drowning Peter. He pays tax—yet uses a fish to do it; indeed, he is emperor over those who demand the tax. He prays—yet he hears prayer. He weeps—yet he puts an end to weeping. He is sold, and cheap was the price—30 pieces of silver—yet he buys back the world at the mighty cost of his own blood. As a sheep, he is led to the slaughter—yet he shepherds Israel and the whole world as well. He is weakened, wounded—yet he cures every disease and every weakness. He is nailed to a tree—yet by the tree of life he restores us. He surrenders his life—yet has the power to take it up again.

***...some of us
are running
from our own
rescue.***

He dies—yet by death destroys death. He is buried—yet rises again.”

If every good story has a good beginning, a villain and a hero, shouldn't it necessarily follow that everyone will live happily ever after? It may be true in the Land of Narnia and Oz and Star War Galaxies, but not here on planet Earth.

You see, some people don't want to be rescued. If truth be told, some of us are running from our own rescue.

I read a news account of a woman driving home one evening. She noticed a huge truck behind her that was driving uncomfortably close. She accelerated to create distance, but the truck remained behind her. She became frightened and exited the interstate, but the truck stayed right with her. She hoped to lose her pursuer in traffic, but the truck ran a red light and continued in hot pursuit. Reaching a state of panic, she whipped her car into a service station and fled, screaming for help. A man jumped out of his truck, yanked her car door open and pulled out a man hidden in the back seat.

You see, the woman was running from the wrong person. From his high vantage point, the truck driver had spotted a thug in the woman's car. The chase was not to harm her but to save her.

Many people similarly run from God, fearing what He might do to them. “But surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with

hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

You don't need to run. You can stop running. You can come home to God. Dorothy's right after all. “There's no place like home!”

I am indebted to John Eldridge's book *Epic*, which contributed to this sermon.

