

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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The Story we Love to Tell

Luke 2.1-20

Russ Dean, December 13, 2009



The water came down in sheets. There were no individual drops of rain, just horizontal planes of drenching, drowning, billowing, blinding water. And like that deluge of biblical proportion the water seemed to rise out of the ground as well as pour from the skies. There was no end. The streets flooded. Then bushes and small trees disappeared. Houses were floated loose from their foundations. And the torrents just kept coming. When silence finally overcame the dissonance of wind and gale, it was silent indeed. For no one had survived. No one had survived the Jones Town flood.

Except for one man... who for the rest of his life told the story of how he, and he alone, survived the Jones Town flood. For a while, ears were eager to hear. "Tell us what it was like," they would say. He would gladly recall the mounting clouds, the slow trickle that became a deadly cascade of rising water. And how he, alone, survived the Jones Town flood. But too soon, people quit asking. And then, they would avert their eyes as they passed on the street. Dart down the next aisle in the supermarket, whether they needed bread or not. As an old man, still anxious to tell the story he loved to tell, he rarely had a chance. And then, the last survivor of the Jones Town flood joined the villagers who had perished without him so many years before.

Imagine, then, his great surprise when he arrived at the Pearly Gates, was greeted warmly by St. Peter, received his schedule of events, and learned that in heaven, that very day, a storytelling festival would begin. No matter how long it took, every citizen would get to regale the whole heavenly host with their favorite story. No matter how long it took. Surely this was heaven!

The man anxiously took his place in line and began waiting. The line wound on for miles and the stories seemed to last an eternity. Even in heaven, he grew tired of waiting, so anxious was he to tell how he, alone, had once survived the infamous Jones Town flood. It had been so long since he had told it. He rehearsed every detail in his mind, over and over, so much so that only as he approached the speaker's

platform did he notice the gentlemen who had been standing in line just in front of him. The old man sported a beard, a rather long, flowing beard, and was wearing a long white tunic. He seemed like an old timer. Most of the stories, frankly, were boring, but as they approached, he became curious about the bearded man's tale.

And the time finally came. He would get his chance, at last, to tell how he, alone, had survived the Jones Town flood – and what a stage, and what a crowd, for this great story. But first, one more tale, this one from the bearded man, who rose, moved confidently to the platform, cleared his voice, and spoke with a commanding tone: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Noah...

Do you have a story you love to tell? I hope you do. And I hope you get a chance, soon, to tell it. For storytelling is one of the great human arts; stories one of the great human art forms. When you tell a story, you see – a factual story, a farcical story, a fanciful story – the world changes. Because for one moment, while your world keeps spinning, somehow, mysteriously, you get transported into another world. Someone else's world. Someone else's life. The fabric of time and space bend, to allow you, without missing a moment in your world, to become part of another one, altogether.

In 1947 a new radio show offered its hearers the opportunity to be transformed by the story – in thirty-minute segments. The show featured stories of the life of Jesus, from his birth to his resurrection. It was called "The Greatest Story Ever Told." It may very well be. And today, at last, today, we have arrived at "*In those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed...*" It's the Christmas story we love to tell! Mary, plodding into town on the back of a donkey with old Joseph at her side. The manger and those swaddling clothes. Shepherds, *keeping watch over their flocks by night*. "*Fear not!*" An angel, and then *a multitude of the heavenly host*: "*On earth, peace... to all.*" It is the Story We Love to Tell.

Someone asked me this week about this story – what I was going to do with it, in light of what I'd said about Mark's gospel¹ – that the reason Mark doesn't include a birth narrative, is that, perhaps, there was just no story known at the time Mark wrote. And that maybe the stories as we have received them are more theology than history. "Once you've said that... what can you do with this?" She said. Isn't there a touch of hypocrisy in trying to celebrate a story that may be just that? Isn't there a kind of disconnect between two weeks ago and today? Is it possible from such deconstruction to salvage any meaningful reconstruction?

I think it's possible. I think it's not hypocritical. I think there's no disconnect in reading the story with open eyes and receiving its truth with an open heart. And I think that only if we allow ourselves to go through a sometimes-painful deconstruction of our reading, can we arrive at the stories as they long to be told, in fact, only then can we attain to the deep, rich, spiritual truths they intend to convey. Which is to say, that Luke intends his readers to hear a simple, but remarkable truth, that has been so obscured by Christian dogmatizing, so domesticated by Christian sentimentalizing that we can scarcely comprehend how offensive it is in other ears – maybe especially to others around this world who share a belief in God.

In a baby in Bethlehem. Born under the scornful eyes of a foreign, political and military occupation. Born to a teenage girl, unexpectedly pregnant. Born as an immigrant, in a land where he had no home. Born in poverty. In this child. Precisely this child, and not the one born in comfort down the street, or in the King's palace just up the road in Jerusalem. In this child, wrapped in scraps of dirty cloth, laid to rest among the denizens of the barnyard. In this child. God is with us.

And why tell such a truth to the aristocracy – who are so blinded by their money and their Prosperity Gospel that they wouldn't buy it? Why tell such a truth to the intelligencia – who are so blinded by their skepticism, their sophisticated rationalism, they wouldn't believe it? Why tell such a truth to powers that be – who are so blinded by the lust of their own corrupt influence, they wouldn't be persuaded by it, either? So Luke told his truth, his gospel truth, his Greatest Story ever Told, to a

¹ The sermon, "Lost in the Cantatas," from November 29, 2009, is available on the church website: www.parkroadbaptist.org.

bedraggled band of migrant workers, who smelled too bad for public presentation: God is here. Among us. With us. One of us.²

The contemporary prophet asks it this way:

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us?
Just a stranger on the bus,
trying to make his way home?³

According to Luke's theology... God is precisely that: One of us. Unless, of course, we can't buy it either... Believe it either... Be persuaded by the power of this truth, either. In which case, it'll just be a nice little story. My Advent prayer for you today is that this Story We Love to Tell will be that – and more than just that. I hope it really will be Christmas.

May it be so!

² In Walter Wink's book, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*, based on his reading of the prophetic title, "Son of the Man," and the vision of Ezekiel who saw God as "*something that seemed like a human form*" (Ezekiel 1.26-27), Wink conflates the concepts of humanity/divinity. These texts and the orthodox affirmation of Jesus as "fully human," prompt Wink to suggest that God is better conceived as "Human" than "Divine" (a concept which no human can fully comprehend). "Only God is, as it were, Human." An ocean of ink has been spilled defending (or denying) the "divinity" of Jesus. Even for those who deny a "divine" nature, however, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection can reveal a God who really is "one of us." Human. Among us. For us. With us. ³ Joan Osborne's 1995 album, "Relish," featured "One of Us," which reached a number one ranking on the charts that year.