

## **Sermon: In the Beginning was the Story**

**Sunday, January 3, 2010**

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**“In the beginning was the Story, and the Story was with God, and the Story was God.”**

**Once upon a time...**there was a young woman who was studying at a nearby university. And she was *so hungry* for Christian community that she began to attend a very theologically conservative church (that will remain unnamed). And lots of young people went there-- And they had a rock band, and they had ski trips to Mammoth, and they had small-group Bible studies that met at members' homes during the week. But they also put *down* other religions, and they preached *against* same-sex relationships, and they *intentionally* played *down* Jesus' message of social justice.

And one time this young woman (who will also, of course, go unnamed) met a young *man* who also attended this church. Let's call him Larry. But to “make a long story short,” the interesting thing about Larry was that he had [quote] “become a Christian” by listening to the radio. And the young woman found that to be sort of *preposterous* in a way. She didn't understand how *anyone* could *stand* to listen to those radio evangelists.

And I know that we don't do confession here in our church, and I understand a lot of those reasons why, but I *am* going to go ahead and make a confession that is probably pretty obvious by now. The young woman was me. And I remember one night at that church. I left in the middle of the service, and I went out into the parking lot, and I wept. Not because I was so moved by the worship, but because I was so disgusted. Disgusted with the hatred that was being

preached as the “Word of God” with a capital “W,” and disgusted with myself for putting up with it for too long, when I knew better.

\*\*\*And I knew I would never fit in there, and I knew I would never be like those other young women who wondered if it was biblically *appropriate* for them to speak up in front of everyone in church. [ ] But it just makes me think now of all those young people at that very impressionable age and time of life who *are hungry* for Christian community and identity. Who *want* to be part of God’s story, but who have nowhere else to turn, and who *don’t* know any better, and who *never* find another way.

And while I had scoffed at Larry’s radio conversion story, I later came to find meaning in the possibility of radio as a medium for spiritual revelation (though maybe through a different style of program). For instance, I remember well...

**Once upon a time...**I was down in Carlsbad going to pick up some groceries for my mother. And I was in the parking lot of what we call Vons and what you all up here seem to have a fancier version of that’s called Pavilions. And there was a woman on the radio talking about scripture. And she spoke about another option for translating the Greek word *logos* most commonly translated as “word,” as in our text this morning. “In the beginning was the Word.” But *this* was the very first time I heard *logos* translated as “story.” “In the beginning was the Story, and the Story was with God, and the Story *was* God.”

It has a very different feel to it, doesn’t it? That translation ignited a spark of recognition in me that just made so much sense. Of *course* God is in the Biblical story. God *is* that story. God is *our* story.

Whoever the writer of the Gospel of John may have been, either John himself or one of his disciples, he chose to tell this story in a very intentional way. John is the fourth gospel in the

Bible. And its author makes no attempt to give a chronological account of the life of Jesus (which the other gospels do, to a degree), but rather writes so that readers may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Yet what the gospel meant to *John's* audience certainly would not be what it may mean to *us* 1900 years later. John was very influenced by the Greek culture and literary aesthetic of his time. He was writing for a Hellenistic culture from a Hebraic perspective. The idea is that God's word is not only speech; it is **power**. "And we can see what John was doing when he uttered his tremendous statement, 'The Word was made flesh.' (i) He was clothing Christianity in a dress that a Greek could understand.... And (ii) he was giving us a new christology....

In this endeavor, John takes his cue from and echoes Genesis and the first creation story recorded there. God's word had **so much power**, that God only had to speak, and something came into existence. Genesis begins, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness."

And what John has done is used this creation story and inserted Jesus into it as that powerful Word of God. John's goal is to bolster Jesus' identity and give more credence to the claims of Jesus' divinity. So he takes on the audacious task of rewriting the story of creation with Jesus there from "the beginning," as a pre-existent co-creator with God. And in John's version, Jesus himself becomes that light that shone in the primordial darkness.

And yet while from a literary perspective, as much as I can appreciate John's use of metaphor and creative technique, as a progressive Christian, I just can't follow the theological underpinnings.

In last month's edition of the *Christian Century* magazine, a humorous piece appeared that was written as if it were a letter to John from an Acquisitions Editor of a publishing house. And it rejects John's submission of his gospel for publication.

"After working through your manuscript, we have decided that your [quote] "Gospel" does not fit our publishing needs at this time. Your introduction of the central character is disappointingly underdeveloped: what of his youth and his early influences? Did he suffer some early trauma that explains his bizarre self-image?

"It's hard to know if readers are supposed to like this Jesus or be put off by him. Your tendency toward hyperbole and exaggeration works against the credibility of the narrative.

And the absence of characters that women can relate to is a major problem... And remember, romance sells. Put in more women and have Jesus get personally involved with one or more. The episode with Mary and Martha is really a missed opportunity.

I hope these comments will help you say whatever it is you intend to say, and in a way that attracts readers. Speaking of readers, you would do well to define just *who* it is you hope to reach. "The whole world" [you mention in] (chapter 3), that just won't do."

And frankly, if I were John's editor, and trying to fit his gospel into the context of the biblical canon, I'd have another critique to offer as well. "You know what, John? Sorry, this idea of 'personifying the creative wisdom of God'—well that's already been done. You just may not remember, because *last time* that figure you're writing about was conceived of as a woman. Maybe you ought to team up with the writer of Proverbs on a future joint project."

In the biblical book of Proverbs, chapter 8, in the first-person voice of the feminine personified Lady Wisdom, also known as Sophia, it says, "Ages ago *I* was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth...When he established the heavens, *I* was there, when he drew a

circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above...then *I* was beside him, like a master worker...

And now, my children: ...Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds *me* finds life and obtains favor from the LORD; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.”

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Sounds kinda like Jesus? Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether explains that the use of such titles as “Word of God” for Jesus have been co-opted out of their original frame of meaning and they've been patriarchalized. The idea of divine wisdom which grounds and discloses the cosmos and unites the human with the divine, in its remote, pre-Hebraic origins, features a central *female* divine actor.

And though the figure of divine wisdom in Proverbs 8 is theologically *identical* to what the New Testament describes as the *Logos* or “Son” of God, Christianity has chosen the *male* symbol for this idea. Then the female figure of divine wisdom is displaced, as the connection is made between the maleness of Jesus' historical person and the maleness of *Logos* as the male offspring and disclosure of a male God. *Hmmm...*

**And to get back to** where we fit into all of this and to that other translation of *logos* as *story*, that understands the power that has been with God since creation as the *Story* of God itself...well the *Bible itself* of course originated out of an oral tradition of storytelling. Storytelling is how ancient spiritual truths have *always* been passed down through generations.

**Once upon a time**, I went to an event put on by the Career Services Office at Harvard. We were asked to put on a name tag on which we wrote not our name, but our dream job. One of my best friends, who was with me, wrote “Story-teller.” I, of course, wrote “Church Pastor.”

And I understand now, that with this job, I get to be both. And in church community, we all get to be story-tellers as we retell and reinterpret the old biblical stories.

And while John does not present my theology or christology, I do really appreciate the spiritual truth nestled in the way John tells the story of who Jesus is. The most important thing I take from the mystical description of his gospel's prologue is that God's story is still being written and rewritten.

\*\*\*That it is possible for human beings to *enflesh* that story. That we as human beings can *be a part* of that story that is God (and that has been going on since the beginning of time) by the way we live our lives. Because as progressive Christians, our focus is not so much on just *believing* the *Word* of God, but on *living* the *Story* of God.\*\*\*

Though I don't believe Jesus is God incarnate, there are ways in which I love it that that concept has been part of the tradition. Because, more broadly, it makes Christianity a religion of flesh. And we have the opportunity to reclaim what that means for us. Because *I* think it means that we cannot just focus on belief or focus on the book, but we must be together in **community**, and we must go out together to **serve** the wider community. And I know this congregation tries to follow Jesus' example as one who reached out and invited others into community, and that we're trying to do that now, especially with young people (like I was) who are searching for such Christian community, and especially through the work of the newly appointed Task Force on Ministry to Children, Youth, Young Adults, and Young Families.

And this passage from John also really lifts up and celebrates the power of words and language. The idea is that God's word had the power to create the whole world. There is a teaching in the Jewish *Mishnah* that there was one human being first created to demonstrate that

in destroying one life, you can destroy the whole world, and in saving one life, you can save the whole world.

Take a moment to think of the power *our* words and actions have—  
to create, to heal, to love...

But also potentially, to destroy, to wound, to hate...

I love Amnesty International's slogan that "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." And I think it's especially applicable here.

\*\*\*Because we as the church can choose to curse the darkness of exclusionary theological thinking that we may associate with the supposed Dark Ages. Thinking that puts *down* other religions, that preaches *against* same-sex relationships, and that plays *down* Jesus' message of social justice. **Or**, we can choose to light a candle, and to stand in its light of spiritual truth that *does* en flesh God's story of justice where *all* people are lifted *up* and called to be story-tellers to continue this story. We must claim the power of our own words and recognize **how much power** we have to shape young minds by the way we tell God's Story.

Then we *can* proclaim that that story *is* God, and that the story *can be* en fleshed in human form *even here and even now* today, and that since God *is* still speaking, *we* can continue to write, and to en flesh, and to live out God's story. So that the story may be told by many, generations hence, that "**Once upon a time**, we joined this church because it didn't just *believe* the Word but really *lived* the Story." And we especially invite young people, and people of all ages who are searching for it, to come and be part of living this new story with us. Because the story is ancient, but it's also being reborn with our every breath, and utterance, and action.\*\*\*

Our denomination's Book of Worship would call what we are doing here today a Service of Word and Sacrament. We have heard the word from the book. We have discussed and digested the word. And now we turn to receive the sacrament from the table. To taste and to digest the sacrament.

Ours is an open table. *Whoever* you are and *wherever* you are on your journey of faith, **you are welcome here**. Please join with me now as we move into our liturgy of holy communion. I invite you forward, Bil, to preside at our table...

Please join me in the "Invitation to the Table" found in your bulletins.