

3 Epiphany January 23, 2022

## Epiphany Storytelling

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If you have ever taken a creative writing class or studied literature, I am sure someone taught you there are patterns or genres that stories follow. For example, perhaps some of you are familiar with the academic breakdown of the *Star Wars* movies by George Lucas and how they follow the pattern of the hero journey. The surprising twist George Lucas used in *Star Wars* was the person we thought was obviously the villain was really the hero, whose love for his son saved everyone in that galaxy far, far away. There are other kinds of genres like the quest, comedy, redemption, and romance. Recognizing the pattern helps us understand the story.

Although the Bible is sometimes included in literature classes, the way the Church tells the story of Jesus does not follow those predictable patterns of storytelling. Just like the Church tells time differently than academic, financial, agricultural, and lunar calendars, the church has its own way of telling about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the people who followed him. The way the Church shares the story of Jesus invites us to enter into his life, death, and resurrection while relating them to our life today as individuals and a parish community.

The Church year does not begin with the telling of Jesus' birth like a biography. It begins with the harsh reminder of the injustices and troubles and suffering in the world and no matter how good we try to be, we can't fix everything. So, we wait; we yearn for God to step in and show us how much God loves us and the world. We long for a savior who will finally restore the world to the dream God always intended for it. That is the season of Advent. Then we celebrate Christmas, and the joyous birth of Jesus that reveals God came to be with us not as a knight in shining armor on a magnificent steed, nor an alien from another world with unique abilities, nor a hero in tights and a flashy cape who fights on our behalf, but the same way all of us entered the world: a vulnerable baby. God incarnate is God with us as one of us.

Now we are in the season after Christmas called Epiphany, a time, like the word suggests, that is about shining a light, revealing who and what Jesus is. That is why during this season we might jump around with our Gospel readings. Like last week we heard about the wedding at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine, revealing the Messianic age had begun in him. Today we are in a different Gospel, the Gospel According to Luke, where we find Jesus in his hometown after

he had been baptized, and after the temptation in the wilderness. Like in John's Gospel from last week, this is Jesus' first public act concerning his ministry in Luke's Gospel. It is a defining moment for him and tells us a great deal about who Jesus is and what he is going to do.

The first thing today's Gospel tells us is Jesus was not alone when he returned to his hometown. I'm not talking about the disciples who followed him. The first thing today's Gospel reading tells us is Jesus was "filled with the power of the Holy Spirit." The same Holy Spirit that appeared at his Baptism and led him into the wilderness was with him when he taught in synagogues. It is the same Holy Spirit that perhaps inspired Jesus to choose the passage from Isaiah included in our Gospel today when he was given the honor to read from the scrolls in the synagogue in Nazareth, the place where he grew up.

Then Jesus read aloud a passage from the prophet Isaiah that described their vision of the Messiah as God's servant that will heal all the suffering in the world by proclaiming good news to the poor, releasing captives, recovering sight for the blind, relieving the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord, a time when all debts – financial, physical, spiritual, - will be forgiven. Then he did something that got everyone's attention: after only reading a few lines, he stopped, rolled up the scroll, handed it off, and sat down.

Sitting didn't mean Jesus was done. In his time, that was what religious teachers did before preaching or teaching. Some religious traditions continue this practice today. There are even some Episcopal parishes like St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco where the priest sits to preach a sermon. When Jesus sat down, he was getting ready to teach, just like he had in the other synagogues he had visited. His sermon was short. "Today, this scripture was fulfilled in your hearing." That was it.

Jesus was saying he is the embodiment of what he had just read. He is the proclamation of good news to the poor. He is the liberator of the oppressed and captive. He is the recovery of sight to those who cannot see. He is the forgiveness everyone longs for.

It is also perhaps important to note what Jesus left out from that passage in Isaiah. Biblical scholars who are familiar with the book of Isaiah in the Bible can tell us there is more to that passage and it is about God's anger and God's plan to act violently and punish the people who do not follow God's ways. Jesus left that part out. Perhaps because Jesus is revealing something important about the Messiah. Jesus as the Messiah is something that is deeply rooted in Scripture, but not restricted or confined only to Scripture. He is also inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Messiah is not the embodiment of God's rage. The Messiah is the

embodiment of God's love and God's grace with the Spirit. The love of God is not violent or oppressive. The love of God is all the things Jesus read about in Isaiah: good news, restorative, liberating, forgiving.

That means those who were waiting for a Messiah who was going to fulfill their violent, revenge fantasy of punishing their enemies with death and destruction and give them the power and prestige over others are going to be disappointed. God's love isn't another form of war and oppression against the people you despise. God's love is much more creative than that. God's love is more liberating than that. God's love is more beautiful than that.

God's love is salvation found not in violence but in healing. God's love is justice that looks like restoration not punishment. God's love is grace none of us deserves, and that is good news. Good news that there is another way to live that doesn't insist on selfishness that leads to suffering and power grabs and mindless consumption. Good news that human beings are beloved not despised by God. Good news that God forgives out of love, not merit.

This doesn't mean the liberation God gives us implies we can do whatever we want. That is just the selfish stuff of sin. The liberation of God is freedom from the sin, from the lie that the only way to live is to grab everything you can for yourself, to kill or be killed, to make enemies out of those we disagree with so we can blame someone else for our anger instead of seeing the complex problems of society, family and community and recognizing our place in it. When we are liberated from seeing people as enemies and our sight is restored and we can recognize they are part of complex systems where they are suffering too, then we are one step closer to healing divides. It sounds hard, but it is possible, with God's grace, with God's forgiveness, with the Holy Spirit, fulfilled in Jesus' life and death and resurrection lived out in our parish.

That is how hope is born and lives in a world that still clings to selfishness and greed and uses pain to enforce oppression. When we can shine the light of Christ in the world, as individuals and as a parish, whenever we embody the love of God in Jesus through generosity that emasculates greed, through inclusion that contradicts supremacy, through restoration that heals division, there is hope. I've seen this manifestation of Christ in this parish many times. Most recently when the vestry decided with me to try a new form of ministry, sharing money set aside in a fund to help children in our area. We don't have the funds to permanently eradicate poverty, but we can provide opportunities for children who tend to get lost in the system to feel seen. A week or so ago our Senior Warden learned some of those funds gave a family of color something that many of us take for granted: rest. Rest so the mother can heal, rest so the children can be cared for, rest so the

family can make the changes health challenges sometimes demand. Is this a small thing? Not to the people who are receiving it. For them this is liberating. For them the gift is restorative. For them it is good news embodied.

This is what happens when we listen to the Holy Spirit in our midst: the love of God is fulfilled through our lives, our words, our choices, our actions. And the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection continues through us. Thanks be to God.