

CHOOSING OUR STORIES

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Guest Preacher

Bloor Street United Church

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Readings: Acts 1:1 – 9; Luke 24:44 – 53

We live in stories. We come to know God, ourselves and each other in stories. We tell them, we hear them, we read them, we teach them, we embellish them, we remember them, forget them. One of the mysteries of memory is that I can remember a story but I can't remember who I've told it to. It's very hard for some stories to cross cultures. We reinforce our own culture and our memories with stories because we choose our stories.

Here at Bloor Street I'm flooded with memories, with stories. This is the church where my daughter Catherine and my son-in-law Paul were married. This is the church where my grandsons were baptized. When those little boys were born I told everyone that they were the most beautiful babies in the world. You understand the truth that I was speaking: I wasn't speaking literal truth (although in my mind it came close). But you understand. That's the way Grandmas talk. And now I think they're totally awesome young men. Grandmas, stories.

You read that I came to Toronto to teach at Emmanuel College in 1977 but that was actually my second coming. My first coming was in the fifties to teach school, to teach six year olds to read and write. It was Mother's Day, by then they were pretty good at reading and writing and I asked them to write a story about their mothers. One little girl wrote such an extravagant account that I foolishly asked her if it was a true story. She probably heard the skepticism in my voice because she said "Of course it's true. I wrote it myself".

The *Night of the Shooting Stars* is an Italian film that invites us into a young girl's memories of the night that her town was liberated by Allied soldiers near the end of

the Second World War. When the film is set, she is a mother and she's telling the story of the night of the shooting stars to her own young daughter. It's a tender, humorous, scary night seen through the eyes of a child and remembered through her feelings. There's a sad and funny scene of a basket full of eggs, obviously precious because of the shortage of food. The little girl accidentally sits in it and all but two of the eggs are broken. She glared at the two unbroken eggs, grabbed them and threw them on the road. At the end of the film, the mother says to her now sleeping child, "I don't know whether these things happened or not, but I know that the story is true".

Margaret Laurence, whose memorial was held in this church, is one of Canada's most beloved story tellers. In her novel, *The Diviners*, the garbage collector's name is Christie. Why is he called Christie? Like a preacher, Christie yells, "By their garbage ye shall know them. Some of them because I take off the muck for them, they think I'm muck. Well I am, but so are they. I'm carrying off a part of them". Christie takes the garbage off to dump in the nuisance grounds. Why? "Because all that old stuff and rotten stuff is a nuisance and nice people don't want to have anything to do with it," says Laurence. And a lot of nice people in and around Lakefield where Laurence lived didn't want their children to have anything to do with her book because of the language; filth, obscenity, profanity they said. Margaret Laurence was a peace loving and peace-making woman, but in the last five years of her life she fought back. She said, "I didn't make Christie use those words. That is the way he talks". She wrote fiction, but she told the truth.

The gospels, written decades after Jesus died, consist of story after story about Jesus, some history, mostly stories. The begats at the beginning of Matthew are not page turners but you know there's a hidden story even there. The genealogy traces Abraham through to Jesus to make the point that Jesus was in the line of the great king David. The lineage goes from Abraham through to David and on to Joseph and then Jesus. We know the beautiful stories about the birth of Jesus. Joseph didn't have a leading role, but Joseph is the reason that they had to go to Bethlehem.

A literal understanding of the virgin birth has brought grief to many people. The story from Luke tells us that an angel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would give her a child. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin who became pregnant said, "The Lord has done this for me". Genesis tells us that the Lord did for Sarah, Abraham's wife, what he had promised – Sarah became pregnant. It's also recorded that God opened the womb of Rachel and she gave birth to a son. The Bible tells stories of the mighty acts of God, and

sometimes we do too. Many women after months or years of infertility will say that their child is a gift from God. Old and new stories of faith and gratitude. If we try to find the deeper truth of the birth stories, the expression virgin birth has meaning but not as something we think we have to believe when we honestly can't believe it in a literal way. The Bible doesn't expect us to. The story tells us that God came into the world in a new way – a vulnerable baby.

Jesus was born, he walked, he talked, he slept, he was hungry and thirsty. He had friends, he was angry, sad, disappointed. He prayed, agonized, wept. He attracted people, he forgave and he blessed them. He seemed to be a convivial fellow – some called him a glutton and a wine-bibber. He spoke of God in terms of human experience: water, light, flowers, fire, wheat, weeds, trees, storms, fishing, weddings, illness, death, loss, family life. And Jesus often spoke in parables – parables are stories that are not direct – like a ball thrown to you that you have to reach sideways or jump to catch it. People sought him out. They wanted to touch him, listen to him, follow him.

And then he was put to death and there are well-known stories. Jesus said, "I and the father are one". What does that mean? It leads us to the doctrine or teaching that Jesus is not only human but also divine.

The divinity of Jesus can still spark controversy. A few years ago *The Da Vinci Code*, both the book and the film evoked a lot of public interest and controversy by being accused of raising questions about the divinity of Christ. The Roman Catholic organization, Opus Dei, said, "Whether Christ is divine is central". The problem seemed to be that the premise of *The Da Vinci Code* was that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and they had had a child and the church tried to cover this up. I'm one who thinks that if Jesus was married, and there's no reason for me to think otherwise, it was probably to Mary Magdalene. Jesus was a rabbi, not a priest, and anyway celibacy was not an issue or imposed on the priesthood for centuries. Conventional wisdom says that Mary Magdalene was a harlot but the Bible says that she was a sinner. Maybe that's a code word, but it's a failure of imagination to think that the only way a woman could sin was to engage in sexual behaviour outside of marriage. Beautiful stories about Mary Magdalene are recorded in the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Mary Magdalene went early, while it was still dark, to the tomb to care for the body of Jesus. How many of us know the deep, deep darkness after a beloved person has died. There are probably good stories about Jesus and Mary

Magdalene that the church didn't choose for whatever reasons. Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother Mary are the two women we know best.

In order to look at the stories that the church did choose, we have to go the fourth century, an acrimonious period in church history. At the Council of Nicea, decisions were made about the canonization of scripture. Gospels and epistles were left out that might have been included. Some that were included only squeaked in. The canon, that is the Bible as we have it, was not formally closed but nothing has been added or deleted since then. The Bible is said to be divinely inspired, but it was the church fathers who decided which divinely inspired works would be included. Stories were chosen and the divinity of Christ was not discussed calmly. A standard church history textbook says, "The debates at the Council of Nicea made men give up brotherliness and condemn others to chains and death for the sake of a nuance in Christology". Was Christ fully/partly human? Was he fully/partly divine? Tension, anguish and stress were overwhelming. The history of the Christian Church can be understood as its effort to achieve unity.

The Emperor Constantine imposed Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. He was pragmatic – he wanted law and order, peace and unity, especially unity. Constantine himself was baptized on his death bed. His triumphal arch still stands in Rome. Christendom was to Christians the beginning of the church triumphant. Now that Christendom has come to an end, many Christians see new possibilities for a more faithful witness of the little remnant. It's hard to love mercy and walk humbly when you're in charge of everything. We still live with controversy in our church and it's comforting to remember that good theology may come out of controversy.

It is over 30 years ago the sculpture *Crucified Woman* hung below the cross in this church and controversy erupted. But the witness and courage of many women and men were stronger than the negative voices. Deeper understanding of women's suffering and its relationship to Christology grew from this controversy. We continue to create, accept and reject metaphors.

What is divine? Certainly divine has to do with God. The Bible says that God is love. Why do we ask if God is dead? We wouldn't ask if love is dead or does love exist? Wisdom, comfort, forgiveness, a parent, one who heals, helps, waits, glimpses of divinity that are also glimpses of humanity. We have to use human language to talk

about divinity. We can, however, say something about what divinity is not, because there's another side of being human: sometimes we are hating and hurting rather than helping and healing. To describe fully what it means to be human we use paradox – cowardice/courage, selfishness/generosity, we're delightful and we're nasty, we're the glory and the scum of the universe, Pascal said. We use the word sin. We pray. Deliver us from evil. Evil from within ourselves and evil from without. Jesus is said to be without sin. Is that our way of saying that Jesus is divine? And what does celibacy have to do with sin? Would celibacy make him more divine? I don't think so but I don't have a vested interest in celibacy. In fact, I think giving birth was the most divine thing I ever did. It is through Jesus' humanness that we know him. But in his culture and time why wouldn't he have been considered divine. All kings and leaders were divine. Caesar Augustus was considered divine. He gave peace to the world through his victories. Countries continue to say they will bring peace through war.

The story of the ascension can be a challenge. All of the post-resurrection stories are problematic if we read them literally. But deep theology is not literal stuff. Let's look at it this way. After the death of Jesus the disciples became aware that they could do some of the things that Jesus did, that he was in some way with them. They talked to him and about him. They lived in a three-storey world. Up was good. Down was bad. Like Jesus, they knew their scripture. Elijah, a prophet who performed miracles went up in a whirlwind. Jesus is identified with Elijah and the prophetic tradition. Jesus' disciples would have expected him to go up as Elijah did. So they witnessed his ascension with joy. What did they see? Well, obviously I don't know.

A friend of mine whose husband had recently died, wrote to me from her summer home in PEI. "And now I look out to the Atlantic, listening to the middle Beethoven quartets, watching the purple finches in my little haunted house. We often got the days mixed up down here and now I think I'm mixing up the years. I see Don everywhere – bringing fresh caught trout in the door, making fires, reading aloud to us as we curled up together, walking beside me on the shore, sleeping beside me". A true story. You don't ask what she means. We live in the same world as she does. That's the way we talk.

The way the ascension story is told is the way the Biblical writers talked. They expected Jesus to go up. How could he not go up? The story of the ascension points to the truth that Jesus is one with God. Do you want to hear the truth? God wants us to be a hearing people. The Psalmist (78:1-4) says:

O my people, hear my teaching: listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter hidden sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from our children; we will tell the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

Let us pray that the burdens and losses and complications of our lives do not overwhelm us and isolate us from another, but draw us closer to each other. Let us not live in silence; let us be faithful, wise and comforting in the ways we choose our stories and tell the heart's truth. Amen