

“Telling the Story Over and Over Again”

November 12, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Text: *“He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments . . .”* (Psalm 78:5-7, NRSV)



Image Credit: <http://buffalo7.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/storytelling-for-presentations2.jpg>

I was looking for a picture to accompany the cover of the bulletin this morning as I do each week.

This one (pictured above) really struck me. It is from a website in the United Kingdom of a group that works developing power-point presentations for its clients. This picture accompanied an article on its site about storytelling. It is a lovely scene of people gathered around a campfire; a campfire, it seems to me, brings out the stories in all of us. Almost everybody contributes in one form or another to the storytelling that takes place. Sometimes the words begin "Once upon a time . . ."

"Once upon a time . . ."

I wonder if we do that, or could do that with Holy Scripture again, and again, and again . . .

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Telling the story over and over again. . . Jacob Fradin was my neighbor. "Jack" was a professor of accounting at the University of Rhode Island. Every weekday he would go off to school as we did -- though we weren't driving to our school! -- As Jack left his house he would pat the side of the door frame. On that door frame was a "mezuzah" (see the picture belowⁱ). How many of you know what a mezuzah is?



A mezuzah is a little device about four inches long, that is screwed into the doorpost of a home. As Jack came out of his house, he put his hand on it, and then touched his head, walked down the front steps and got into his car. When Jack got home, he got out of his car, walked up the steps, put his hand on the mezuzah,

touched his head and walked into the house. He did this all the time!

Here is a picture that shows what is inside a mezuzahⁱⁱ: a little rolled up piece of paper containing the words, in Hebrew, that come from Deuteronomy, chapters 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. This is what is written there from Deuteronomy 6:



"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Notice the picture belowⁱⁱⁱ: You see a man helping a younger man; each with a little box on his



forehead and leather straps around and down their left arms.

They are literally following the commandment of binding the words to themselves. You will see this sort of thing in use

among Orthodox Jews, especially. These items are called

"phylacteries". Jack and his family were Conservative Jews –

not Orthodox -- a sort of midway point between those who

really try to practice and follow all the commandments (like these two above) and those who are not as observant. What Jack did do was to put the mezuzah on his door. His touching of it to his forehead was his way of keeping these words on his mind.

I want to mention another of the Fradin family rituals I was privileged to see: Every Friday evening, Jack's wife, Estelle, would bring in the Sabbath. It is the work of the woman of the house to light the Sabbath candles, and in waving her arms over them, welcome the Sabbath into the house. It was a beautiful ritual to see. Turing to Deuteronomy 11:13-21, we read this:

If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul— then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshipping them, for then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly from the good land that the Lord is giving you.

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

The Jews are "People of the Book". In fact all of the monotheistic religions and traditions are people of the Book --the Jews first, then Christians, and then Islam. (Of course the Muslims have a

different book -- the Koran -- that is their book.). Each of these groups is called people of the Book because each one is grounded in a storytelling reality. We tell stories. That is how we each communicate our faith. Early on that was how the story was told -- around the campfire! The story of how God was at work in those people's lives.

It was no accident that the storytelling tended to come from the elders in the community. Partly because they had the longest time with the story at work in their own lives and partly because they knew it was their responsibility to teach their children, so they would not forget. It may have been a way for Jack Fradin not to forget, that he would ritually touch the mezuzah, and then touch his forehead on his way out and on his way in.

At seminary, I was taught to call that process of telling the story over, and over, and over again by a fancy German word: "*Nacherzahlung*" -- "*Telling the story again*" -- and how important telling the story is for creating a community that knows who (and whose) it is! The goal of any good story told is to create an identity through telling the story; the story has a way of making a connection! And as that story is shared, whether it is around a campfire, or around the dinner table, it becomes "our" story.

There is a brilliant scene in a crazy movie where you can see this at work. The movie is "*Mad Max, Beyond Thunderdome*"; a post-apocalyptic story about a former policeman "Max" (played by a young Mel Gibson) who has gone rogue; becoming a lone ranger kind of a do-gooder. Having nearly died in the desert, he is rescued by a young woman who brings him into an oasis kind of place filled with young people. After some time has passed, he awakens and is taken aback by the children who are crowded around him; taking in everything he says and does. They call him "Captain Walker" thinking he is the adult-leader who left them long ago saying, "*Wait, one of us will come.*"

They see he is reluctant to engage them, so one of the older boys comes up close to him and says, "*Is this a test, Captain Walker? You reckon we've been slack?*"

Thinking quickly, Max, "*I don't know, maybe you have been slack.*"

The young man replies, "*We ain't been slack; it's all here, everything marked, everything 'membered (remembered).*"

The kids then go through a retelling of the story of why they were in that place and how they had gotten there, and how one day one of them -- Captain Walker -- would return. It was a story told by every member of that group of kids; filled with ritual action, words, and chants. They had told the story so much among themselves that when Max is found, they think he is Captain Walker returned! (Most of them were too young to know the real Captain Walker.) In a strange way, Max becomes Captain Walker, eventually helping the children find their way.

It is a neat story because it demonstrates the importance of retelling the story over and over again; and how important it was that everyone participates in telling the story.

Remember the Bible school stories you used to hear? And the songs you used to sing that went along with them? I remember the one that went like this:

*"I may never march in the infantry,
Ride in the cavalry,
Shoot the artillery,
I may never swoop for the enemy,
But I'm in the Lord's army!
I'm in the Lord's army!
I'm in the . . ." Remember that one? Yes, I'm sure you do!*

How about this one?

*"Deep and wide,
Deep and wide,
There's a fountain flowing
Deep and wide . . ."*

What do you think all that is about -- *entertainment*? Perhaps a little, but it is also trying to connect the story of God's love, of God's grace and of his mercy through Jesus Christ to us in order for us to learn it -- over and over again!

Thanksgiving is coming soon and it is often a family time when generations come together around the great big table for the feast! Inevitably the stories will start; that is to say, the family stories will be told: *Remember when . . .?*" Or *"You know, I remember the first time I saw your grandmother, I*

knew she was the one!" The stories unfold . . . And maybe some of them cause you to shake your head (for no one else to see!), *"Oh no, not that story about Uncle Bob, again!"* Oh, how we tell those stories over and over again. . .

I show my students at the university that clip from "Mad Max" and tell them about the importance of storytelling, and of the idea that identity and community are bound up in the stories that we share. And whether you are members of the lacrosse team, or the women's volleyball team, or a student in a nursing cohort learning anatomy, or you go home on the weekends and are with your parents at the family dinner table, all the stories you share -- in all of those contexts -- mean something important to you!

How many times do you find yourself telling God's story to others? Do you share God's story around the dinner table, or when you are walking along the road, as you go out and come in? Do you tell the story of god's love, so that it is never forgotten? As the Psalmist says,

*He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments; (Psalm 78:5-7)*

The story is so important -- the story of God's love breaking into our lives -- that we need to tell it over and over again. You folks who are parents, tell the story to your kids; you grandparents tell the story to your kids' kids; all of us telling the story of God's love. Think about the ways that you can do that. . . This may mean that you have to start re-reading the story for yourselves . . .

I am amazed how many kids in my classes at the university have no idea what I am talking about when I speak about the stories from the Bible -- "the Book". . . I show them a picture of the famous

statue by Michelangelo and I say, "This is called 'the David' -- who is he?" And out of big class-full of students, I see one timid hand go up -- one student with guts enough to answer, "Ahh, uhmmm . . . he slew a giant, right?" . . . Okay, we'll start there, I guess . . .

The lack of literacy for Holy Scripture is astounding. . . Astounding! It shouldn't be like that.

Have you ever memorized a portion of Scripture? Do you have a key verse? -- A Scripture that is yours? That if you had to, word for word, you could repeat? You should. And I think you ought to share that verse with those you love -- might be a good time to do that this Thanksgiving!

. . . Just a thought.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezuzah>

ⁱⁱ From a YouTube video from the Congregation of Beth Emeth in Herndon, VA, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JP2AaYLdN4c>

ⁱⁱⁱ From the Friends of Sion, "The World of Jewish Scribal Arts," at <https://friendsofsion.org/index.php/2014/08/06/the-world-of-jewish-scribal-arts/>