

BECOMING STORYTELLERS

14 Pentecost – Proper 19 – Year B – September 14, 2003

Grace Church in Haddonfield – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today we hear the story of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. It's a familiar story to us. Jesus asks his disciples who others say he is ... and they offer a variety of responses. Then Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?" Peter announces, "You are the Christ." We have come to the central statement of Mark's Gospel. Who is Jesus? He is the anointed one, the son of God, the Messiah. Jesus goes on to describe what he understands this to mean. He is to suffer, and die. The passage from Isaiah on the "suffering servant" echoes in his words.

Who is Jesus for us? We have just welcomed young Cole into our Church family. He joins his brother, mother and grandfather having been baptized here. What will we tell him about Jesus? We must resist the temptation to make Jesus over in our image. Jesus will not conform to our expectations. What does it take to follow Jesus? Cole's baptism necessitates our answers.

The Gospel tells us that the disciples didn't understand Jesus. The stories that precede and follow the "confession" are two healing miracles. They are about two blind men that Jesus heals. This points us towards the reality that the disciples, and we, are blind to what Jesus is all about. We don't know who he is. What's more, it is not easy to follow Jesus. He tells us to take up our cross. To be a Christian requires intense reflection because of the drastic changes that will come.

What does it mean to confess Jesus as the Son of God? It means accepting God's rule in our lives. It means that we are to be part of God's solution to today's problems. Christians choose the difficult, not easy path. They choose the higher, not simple way. We will need to teach Cole that God has to be a priority in our lives. We will have to help him make Jesus the model of leadership. We must embrace the suffering servant.

All of this has to do with telling the Christian story. Cole has to learn the story. We have to share it with him. I would like to share another story that might help us to understand how important it is for us as Christians to be storytellers. It comes from Elie Wiesel's book, "Gates of the Forest." Wiesel lectures and teaches at Boston University now, but this book was written in the 60's. It's a Hasidic tale that provides a prelude to the Gospel.

A rabbi lived in a small village. Every time misfortune threatened, he would follow the same practice. The rabbi would go to a sacred part of the forest outside the village. He would light a sacred fire and say a sacred prayer. The rabbi would return to the village. A miracle would happen and the misfortune would be averted.

Another rabbi succeeded him. When the village was faced with trouble, he too went into the forest. He said, "O lord of the Universe, I don't know how to light the sacred fire. But I know the sacred place and the sacred prayer. This will have to be sufficient." He returned home. The miracle happened!

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The next rabbi to succeed him went into the forest when faced with trouble. He said, “O Lord of the Universe, I don’t know how to light the sacred fire and I don’t know the sacred prayer. But I do know the sacred place. This must be sufficient.” He returned home and the miracle happened!

Many years later the next rabbi was faced with the misfortune like those who had gone before him. You get the idea now too. You know what is coming! When misfortune threatened the village, the rabbi sat in his chair. He said, “O Lord, I don’t know how to light the sacred fire. I don’t know the sacred prayer. I don’t even know where the sacred place is in the forest. All I can do is tell the story. It must be sufficient.” And it was!

We aren’t any of the disciples, let alone Peter. We can’t go back in time to experience the Caserae Philippi event. We weren’t there to hear or see Jesus. But we can tell the story. We’ve been doing it for 2,000 years. Like those who have gone before us, we must tell Cole and all whom we meet who this Jesus is for us. He is more than a prophet, or holy man, or healer or social reformer. Jesus is the anointed one! We must tell the story! It will be sufficient. Remember that Peter got the identity of Jesus right, but not the meaning of his title. We are to tell the story and pray that it will be sufficient. Then stand back and watch the miracle happen!

To tell the story, we must hear the story. It needs to be encounter. The Gospel is more than history or entertainment. It is life-giving. The story summons us to follow Jesus. If we are to follow him, we are live like Jesus. It means self-denial. It requires taking up our cross. It means resisting to make Jesus what we want, a personal messiah. We get a different Jesus than we expect.

Finally, we will have to help Cole and each other live the story. It is our vocation as Christians to tell, hear and live it. We might ask ourselves what we will do for God. We are charged to participate in the ministry of all believers. We will have to put our faith into practice ... and that means works.

Take the opportunity today to share the story with someone else. Consider it practice for Cole and all the children. The more we can practice telling the story, the better we will become as storytellers. Now, go tell the story!