

Tell me a story

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven pm service, December 24, 2010: The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Based on Luke 2:1-14.*

“Tell me a story.”

Children the world over ask their parents and other adults to tell them a story. We’ve just heard one of the world’s most beautiful stories, and we’ll get back to it in a moment.

But first think about, “Tell me a story.” It’s not a question so much as an order. I need a story. Not just to calm down and fall asleep. I need a story, because you and I build our lives on stories.

If someone asks you tonight, or tomorrow around the tree or the table, at home or in the hotel dining room—if someone needs a story from you, do you have one?

I’ve built this message tonight out of gifts, and I don’t mean presents I’ve unwrapped. I write a short eLetter to about 5,000 people every week. In return I get presents in the form of stories. Even when they’re questions, they’re stories. They’re the things people tell one another when they’re serious about life, or enjoying life, or wondering about life’s mysteries. They are also the things they say or ask about when life hurts.

Last year, after my Christmas sermon, centered on the story Jesus told about the loving father, the older brother and the prodigal son; a woman from far away, someone I haven’t yet met, wrote to me. Her story was about the pain of sitting in a courtroom as her son was sentenced for a crime, a crime that came after years of life of near-crime or crimes he wasn’t caught for. All the heartbreak of those years welled up her as she heard that sentence and as a vision kept coming to her. She saw instead of the tough, troubled adult standing before the judge a picture of that man as sweet little boy.

She remembered that I had said that the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas becomes a real celebration only when you meet the adult that baby grew up to be—the Jesus who taught and lived a life of love, a courageous and self-giving life, a life that revealed a better way to live in a better world, a vision we’re still working to realize.

But in court her heart was breaking. As she watched a rough man, she imagined the gentle child he had once been, and she wondered where things had gone wrong.

I don’t have an answer to her question.

And the truth is there is no one answer, certainly not a simple one.

A birth is a cause for hope. We sing and pray the hope of the Jesus child tonight. But it’s a long way from hope to the reality we live.

Historical evidence says it was a long way from the baby to that tough man with a beard, a man who loved but often shocked those closest to him—shocked them with the truth. It was a *man*, not a baby, who laughed and sweated and had dirt between his toes. Who faced down the powers of this world, and who, *let us be clear tonight of all nights*, ended up in a court himself.

It was that grown up man, whom no one could control, who said:

“Pray for your enemies. For the one who is not against you is on your side. The one who today is at a distance, tomorrow will be near you.” (Matt. 5.44, Luke 9.50)

And in spite of what everyone in the world thought at those times, that man said:

“God causes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good, and sends rain on both the just and the unjust.” (Matt. 5.45)

Does anyone here think that mature man would let us off easily in our security obsessed world when he said more than once:

“Bless those who curse you . . . when someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one as well.” (Luke 6.28-29)

To the rich and poor, to the powerful and the weak alike, he taught and modeled a life of a powerful human being *who knew how to keep his power under control*. What a Christmas it would be if that one truth could become ours!

This time of the year I hear some other difficult stories having to do with crushing expectations and too much forced togetherness and jollity from family who don’t usually get along. It can be a problem at Christmas. Of course, the manger story says angels are singing for

joy and everybody seems to get along, but the adult Jesus knew what it was like when one family member tells the truth too plainly:

“No prophet goes without respect,” he said, “except on his home turf and among his relatives and at home!” (Mark. 6.4)

One of my favorite stories came not long ago from a rabbi in New Orleans who considers himself a great friend of St. Bart’s and what we do here. He liked my digital Christmas hug, and he wrote back:

“Wish I could give you a hug as well, but these few words of good cheer and abiding respect will have to hold us.” And then, knowing that I was probably stewing over the Christmas sermon the way he stewed over his for the High Holy Days, he gave me a charge: “*Give 'em Heaven!*”

Don’t you love it?

But since I’m asking myself and you to get your heads out of the clouds, and not to get stuck in Bethlehem, whose story I absolutely love; or not to settle for beautiful carols, which I also love, let me tell you what that mature Jesus said about heaven.

It is, he said, not a place up in the clouds, *it’s the kingdom we are called to build here on earth.*

Around here we don’t invoke Jesus as our best buddy, who writes a nice little plan for our individual lives. We celebrate him, pray in his name, work hard and give much to do his work, and we study hard to get back to the real teaching of the real man behind the babe of Bethlehem.

When we do, we find that the heaven he talked about is the place is right here on the cold, hard earth on which his manger stood.

It’s a kingdom of the forgiven, of the lost who’ve come back home to a party. It’s the alternate kingdom, way beyond the anxiety that pulls us down, way bigger than the compromises we settle for, way more promising than the bad day that can come to define you.

It’s a kingdom with a very wide open door. It’s a kingdom of nobodies who become somebodies.

That’s my story. What’s yours?

Another gift came from a woman in North Carolina. Reading my letter about the lunar eclipse, she recalled the bedtime story she often recited to her children:

I see the moon
The moon sees me
Shining over yonder tree
Please let the light that shines on me
Shine on the ones I love.

That’s her story. It’ll do. But what’s yours? I know you have one, and I know that you can begin – tonight – in some small way to find it, perhaps when you hear someone say, “Tell me a story.”

A happy and Holy Christmas, my friends, and *Amen.*

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