

Advent Decisions: In Which Story Will We Stand?

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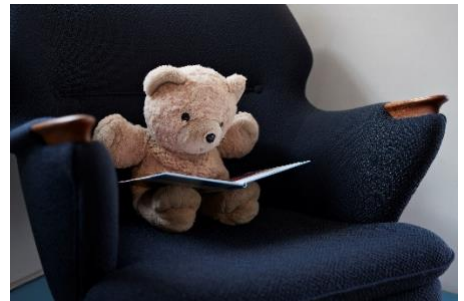
Awhile back I lost a friend I first came to know back in the early 1980's. We met at a small local retreat house and came

together regularly for workshops, retreat, spiritual direction, and occasional dinners as well as outings together to SF, etc. Years later, when she developed Alzheimer's, Margaret continued to remember those times at the center as a watershed period of her life. It was a complete joy for us to step back into that time and share our memories. It was the retelling of these stories especially that allowed her to remain hopeful and faithful in the face of continuing loss and increasing limitation. She rested in these stories and retained a sense of the meaning of her life in this way. Stories can do this. During Advent, as we begin retelling our faith's foundational cycle of stories once again, is a good time to reflect on the importance and power of story in our lives.

It wouldn't be too strong an assertion to say that we are made for story. Weaving stories and allowing others to weave us into their stories is not just a significant need, but a profound drive within us affecting everything we are and do. Everything that is meaningful in our lives is mediated by story – so much so that scientists have concluded we are hard-wired for story. Neuroscientists have even located a part of the brain which is dedicated to spinning stories. It is linked to our ability to imagine ourselves in relation to the world around us, but it also functions to “console” us, to make sense of reality and to compensate us for the loss of personal story in some brain disorders, for instance. Sometimes I heard this at work in my friend as she filled in holes in her own memory so her own story could move forward.

Evidence that we are made for story is everywhere. Whenever we run into something we don't understand or cannot control, something we need to hold together in a way which makes sense, we invariably weave a story around it. Whenever we yearn to move into a larger world, whenever we imagine and anticipate such a move, again we weave a story around it.

Children do it with their dolls, stuffed animals, crayons, and toys of all sorts. Imagine a child explaining what has happened and whispering reassurance to her doll or stuffed animal after a natural disaster puts the whole family in an arena shelter. Watch too as she listens as that special friend cuddles her back and rehearses bits of the story the child needs to hear as it reminds her, “you are not alone and you will not be alone”. Such stories help this child to negotiate the challenges and uncertainties of the present and move into a more viable future.



Fiction authors weave stories that change our lives in a similar way. We love to dwell in the worlds they create, especially when our everyday lives are stressful, but in entering these stories psychologists note that we also grow in real world abilities: empathy, the skills we need to tolerate being alone, and we become better at relationships and dealing with uncertainty as well. Such stories help widen our own sense of self and let us confront the “real world” with a sense of confidence and adventure. Physicians weave stories more subtly, maybe, with a patient's symptoms when they determine diagnoses, treatment plans, and prognoses. Historians use story to explain the significance of events and allow us to engage with the past, present and future when they do this well. Scientists and theologians do something similar when they spin very different but complementary and deeply true stories to explain the nature of reality.



At their very best hearing and telling stories helps create a sacred space and healing dynamic where we can truly be ourselves and stand authentically with

others in the present. When someone we love dies it is natural that we come together to tell stories, including those of Christ and the way he lived, died, and was raised. Doing so helps to knit the broken threads of our stories into something new and promising --- a new and hopeful narrative which eases grief and leads to a future marked by promise and hard-won wisdom. Couples deciding to have a new baby, families who choose to adopt are making the tremendous choice to allow the breaking open and reshaping of their stories as they give these children a name and place to stand in their lives and even in the greater world. Therapists, priests, and spiritual directors help us to hear, claim, and tell our truest stories, especially when they are difficult or overwhelming, unworthy of us, or (at least so far) unable to have fully processed. Especially healing is the way these "pastoral ministers of story" allow us to be deeply heard and to find rest in acceptance, forgiveness, and new beginnings.

So profoundly human and humanizing is our capacity and need for story that the Church's greatest acts of worship take the form of story. Our liturgy of the Word is, of course, made up of stories that challenge, console, and inspire us as only the Word of God can do. And listen today as we recite the Creed together. It is not composed of a series of disparate beliefs or dogmas but is a coherent story in which we find meaning, hope, and peace together as a single People of God. Even the act of Consecration is accomplished by the recounting of a story we embrace and let embrace us in our great Amen of faith: "On the night before he died, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it saying, 'This is my body. . . ' Then he took the cup, blessed it saying, this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. . . ." We are asked then to reenact or retell this story with our lives in memory of Him. In these mysterious and sacred acts of storytelling and our reception of them, the most profound potential of story

is made real among us: viz., our deepest hungers and needs are met and we are made truly human as we accept a central place in God's own life and allow God a place in ours. **In so many ways our capacity for story is a blessing.**

But not always! Sometimes we do get caught up in or substitute stories that are unworthy of us and therefore of God as well. When we do, we are deeply diminished. For instance, when young people opt to join a gang, they are telling themselves and their world a story of status, power, community and belonging rather than the story of relative powerlessness and emptiness they feel caught in. Or consider the kinds of stories adults who choose to have affairs tell themselves --- stories our world colludes in in every way possible, stories about a selfish notion of "Freedom" and love, eternal youth, the importance of physical attractiveness and immediate gratification.

At the same time, think about the realities these folks must deny or suppress --- things like genuine faithfulness, sacrifice, and humility, the importance of patience, generosity, and service --- and all of the other dimensions that are part of the abundant life God wills for and offers us in Christ. Substituting (or as happens in instances of abuse and neglect, being caught up and enmeshed in) partial and inadequate or distorted stories can skew our own lives and prevent us from becoming the persons God calls us to be.



And of course, today we find ourselves dealing with more than one pandemic. The first one is about COVID-19; the second one is

about story-telling-gone-awry. In some ways, this is even more deadly than the first pandemic. There are all sorts of stories being told, and I am sure you have heard them ---from the notion that President Biden is a malfunctioning robot disguised to appear human, to the notion that Lizard People control our politics and feed off our emotions to the idea that our planet is controlled by an evil cult that engages in child trafficking and on and on. Conspiracy theories, false

narratives, a need to blame others, and an allergy to objective truth in a world under threat seem to have nudged that part of the brain I mentioned earlier into outright lunacy. We want to shake our heads and laugh at these stories, but they are dangerous. Yet, because we are made for story, when our lives seem empty, powerless, and without hope we will latch onto stories which feed even the worst tendencies within us at the expense of others which are more worthy of us.



It shouldn't surprise us then that the Genesis account of humanity's "fall from Grace" centers around the fact that, at evil's urging, Adam and Eve swap the story they experience as they walk intimately with God --- the story about themselves, their world, and God's place in it with them -- for another view

of reality they prefer to believe. In THIS story eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (rather than knowing just the truly Good) will supposedly not bring death. In THIS story God is portrayed as petty and a liar. In this story human maturity and responsibility is exchanged for self-consciousness, fear, and a blame game that we recognize replaying in one form and another every evening on some versions of the "news." To choose a false narrative or to be caught up by such a story in this way is the very essence of sin. It separates us from the very source of life and light, it cripples our relationships, and it weakens and even destroys our capacity for truth. Sometimes the stories we embrace and hand on as truth are a curse.

If the fact that we are hard-wired for story is both blessing and curse, then it is also the way home. **You see, it is not just that we are hard-wired for story; IT IS THAT WE ARE MADE, hard-wired even, FOR GOD'S OWN STORY.** The cycle of stories we began just 4 weeks ago says that in our lostness, God comes to us in Christ and in Christ, God works to free us from sin -- the state where we miss the mark of our true humanity --- and gives us a new home -- a new narrative in which we can be our real selves. **Jesus frees us from the distorted, inadequate, and**

unworthy scripts and stories we live by. One of the ways he does this is with the powerful and uniquely engaging stories we call parables. In telling us these stories he offers us a place to stand in God's own story, God's own reign, as he makes our own stories his.

The word parable is made up of two Greek words, para (alongside of, as in parallel lines, parallel parking, paralegals, and paramedics --- lines running equidistant alongside one another and legal and medical professionals who work alongside attorneys and physicians). The second word is balein (to throw down).

What Jesus typically does in his parables is to throw down one set of values, a single perspective, one story or situation his hearers know well and identify with personally. They will begin spinning the story as soon as Jesus, speaking with a wholly unique authority, says The Kingdom of God is like, and follows it with something even as brief as "A man had two sons" or "Ten lepers were coming along the road". In this way the story (and its storyteller!) draws us in and engages our hearts and minds (and so, probably some prejudices as well!). And then, just as his hearers have settled down comfortably in this well-known story Jesus throws down a second perspective or set of values which clashes with the



first in some way. Because we are firmly planted in the first set of values, the first script or story, the resulting clash disorients us and throws us off balance. Being off-footed in this way means Jesus' parables help free us from our embeddedness or enmeshment in other narratives; it creates a moment of "KRISIS" (crisis) or decision; it summons us to choose in which reality we will stand firmly, which story we will make our own. This is what Advent asks us to consider, the question that stands behind Isaiah's invitation that we *Prepare the way of the Lord*.



In today's Gospel, two women, one only 12 years old and on the cusp of marriage and motherhood, and the other beyond childbearing age and barren, have allowed their own

stories to be broken open by the unfathomable mercy of God. In a culture where especially the most "pious" or religious will ostracize, ridicule, and disbelieve them, they were thrown off balance by their unexpected experience of a God who ALWAYS surprises and have regained a new balance by saying yes to allowing (him) to do something qualitatively new in and for our world. Their courage – and God-given fruitfulness - makes our world resonate with a new hope and promise. Like Mary and Elizabeth, and like my friend Margaret (even in her limitations and loss) -- none of us is too young *nor do we ever need to be too old* to similarly accept a new and deeper place in God's story. After all, it is the story we are made and most hunger for, the story which makes us true and whole, the Divine and ultimately, the truest Human Story we are hard-wired for --- the story ***in which nothing is ever lost or forgotten***. This is the great conversion Advent prepares the way for – if only we can bring ourselves to say a whole-hearted YES to making God's story our own. What greater gift can we imagine or be given?