



July 11, 2010 Sermon by Kimiko Karpoff
Jesus of Story

Readings: Luke 8:26-39

Will you pray with me...

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer.

This is the **Jesus of Story...**

Once there was someone who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things that people began to follow him. One day they asked him, "who are you?" And he said, "I am the light of the world."

It is through story that most of us first encounter Jesus. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are perhaps the most famous of story-tellers, rolling out the life of Jesus from his birth to his death.

These are astounding tales. A birth under extreme conditions, in a stable, to a poor woman, away from her home. And yet visitors start to come, representing people of different strata and places. Shepherds, the dirtiest and least esteemed in that society arrive first followed many days later by wise and wealthy visitors from the east who were directed by a star. Here is an infant whose birth enrages the ruling king so much that he orders the slaughter of all male babies in an effort to get rid of this one. But he is a child favoured by God and is saved by angels warning his father in a dream to take his family quickly into Egypt.

We mostly lose sight of Jesus until he is a grown man with the exception of one story where, on a visit to the big city of Jerusalem to celebrate the holy day of Passover, twelve year old Jesus ditches his parents and friends in favour of the temple teachers. There he spends three days talking, listening and learning before he is tracked down by his beleaguered parents.

And then he is a man in his thirties getting submersed in the Jordan River. A full body baptism by John who is, in some tellings, his cousin. From there he enters the desert where he spends 40 days fasting and then wins in a showdown of wills against the devil.

All of this before he even begins his ministry.

The teaser to Christina Balwin's book *Storycatcher* notes that "Story is the heart of language. Story moves us to love and hate and can motivate us to change the whole course of our lives. Story can lift us beyond our individual borders to imagine the realities of other people, times and places.

Storytelling is the foundation of being human."1 [Christina Baldwin, *Storycatcher*]

Telling stories is how humans communicate. Sometimes the stories we tell are about actual events, but not always. Sometimes even stories that have a foundation in truth or history are not fully about getting all the facts right, are not intended as history as we would understand that, but are about truths that transcend history. A good story-teller doesn't let mere fact get in the way of the truth.

James Hunter called story "the language of the spirit." It is what we use "when we wish to communicate our faith,"2 he said. It is notable that when Jesus wanted to get a point across, he often told stories. What is revealed in the gospels is a story within a story. It is a story of a storyteller communicating the reality of God's Kingdom through story.

As listeners we are part of the relationship of storytelling. This is not a passive act. Stories are always told *to* someone and as that someone it is our part not to just listen, but to hear.

Jesus models this as well. He listens to the stories that people tell him. When the woman who was haemorrhaging for 12 years touched his cloak, he stopped on his way to heal a young girl and heard her story. That is part of the healing for this unnamed, marginalized woman, being acknowledged through the act of listening. An act of love that Nelle Morton called "hearing each other into speech."3

While story is notably not history, that is not to say that stories do not have an historical context. This is where there seems to be a clash between those who take Biblical story literally but sometimes outside its historical ground, and those who ground the stories in the historical time but know they are much more than simple historical fact.

Context is important. I was watching a television show with my son set in Winston Churchill war-time where they used the v-sign made with the pointer and middle finger. I pointed out to him that this sign meant "victory" at that time, not "peace" as we would typically understand it today. While it's possible that "victory" for Churchill may have translated to "peace," the sign stood for winning the war. Meaning shifts with context.

1 From the cover notes of *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story* by Christina Baldwin. [Novata:New World Library, 2005].

2 James Hunter. "Truth and Effectiveness in revelatory Stories." *ReVision*, Vol.6, No.2 (Fall 1983) 3. Quoted in: Yoseph Wosk. *Storied Reflections: Aspects in the Theory and Practice of Storytelling as an Agent of Psychospiritual Maturation*. [Vancouver:Arjel Publishing, 2001]. 24.

3 from Nancy J Ramsay. *Pastoral Diagnosis: A Resource of Ministries of Care and Counseling*. [Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 1998]. 122.

And so too, the stories of Jesus are not historical, but are set in history. We know they're not historical in any modern sense in part because they contradict each other.

The scripture story we heard today is sometimes known as the Garasene Demoniac. It appears in all of the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Yet, in one version it is set in the country of the Gadarenes rather than the Garasenes. In one version there are two demons, in the others only one.

This does not mean that the story could be anywhere or any time. The Garasene Demoniac is what is known as a wonder story or miracle story of Jesus because of the way he heals the demoniac. For us the healing is amazing. But if we hear it through the ears of the listeners of that time, the focus shifts.

One of the key points actually occurs immediately before these verses. Jesus famously calms a storm by rebuking the wind and raging waves. What's actually key though, is what Jesus and the disciples were doing. They were travelling, in this case across the lake to the land of the gentiles. They are Jewish followers of the one God, going across a lake to the country of gentiles, those who follow other gods.

For most of us that detail is a bit subtle. However for those who first heard this story 2000 years ago, it was likely significant. The people whom Luke was writing these stories for were mostly gentiles who were hearing them after Jesus' death. So to hear a story of him crossing through a storm to their land and healing someone possessed would have been very meaningful to them. Here is Jesus, reaching out to people who were not Jewish. The Kingdom of God, as demonstrated by his act of healing, is not just for Jews but for everyone.

It is also a gentile possessed by demons who recognizes Jesus as the son of the most high God. When asked his name, the possessed man says it is "Legion." This is a significant term for people still living under the rule of the Roman Empire. The man claims to be possessed by a military unit of the Roman army. So the metaphoric meaning of the story is that the Kingdom of God as modelled by Jesus frees all people from oppression.

The Jesus of story is the Jesus who ate with sinners, healed lepers, nurtured women and called children to him. These stories are powerful and they engage us in Jesus' life and ministry.

I like this Jesus. This Jesus is a mentor. He has a deep sense of God and how God wants the world to be. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza notes that we

glimpse the Kingdom of God "whenever Jesus casts out demons (Luke 11:20), heals the sick and the ritually unclean, tells stories about the lost who are found, of the uninvited who are invited, or of the last who will be first. The power of God's [kingdom] is realized in Jesus' table community with the poor, the sinners, the tax collectors, and prostitutes--with all those who 'do not belong.'"⁴

For me this is exciting. When we see glimmers of what the Kingdom of God looks like, then we can envision how we can be a part of it right here and right now.

There's a reason why story is the first way we typically get to know Jesus. Jesus teaches and inspires. We learn the stories as children, and grow with them as our faith and spirituality matures.

The Jesus of story, is still very important to me. I love these stories and value engaging in them over and over. And they do engage because story invites us to enter into a different world, to see and experience in a new way, our own world and condition.

May it be so.

⁴ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her: a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. [New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983]. 120-121.