

CHRISTMAS STORIES AND ILLUSTRATIONS: WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT?

Whenever I think about stories and illustrations I am haunted by a conversation I had with my sister 20 years ago. Her husband had died at Christmas time, leaving her with three tiny children. Six months after his death she told me with frustration and some hurt in her voice, that going to church had become a very lonely experience for her. Not just because her husband was no longer by her side in the pew, but because she didn't feel included in the service. The problem, she said, was the preaching. It seems that every time the preachers told stories or gave examples, they were always about family life with two parents and children. She never heard, she said, a story about a single parent, like herself...or an illustration that described other people whose lives were pained, or incomplete, or less than the ideal--that is, the ideal the preacher had in mind. She was beginning to feel like an outsider in the very parish where we had baptized her children, and had the funeral Mass for her husband.

As a preacher, I'm haunted by that conversation. I'm haunted by it because I put so much stock in stories and illustrations.

Stories are invitations to our hearers to "come on in", "make yourself at home". They are welcome signs, my attempt to say, "I understand your lives" or, "I've been there myself." Illustrations, and especially stories, can do that--or at least I hope they do. But, they can also do the opposite, send another unintended message. They may put up another kind of sign, one saying, "Stay out" "You're not welcome here" "This is our place, not yours". I think my sister was feeling that in her parish. It didn't feel like her community any longer. Just when she needed the support of good preaching, one that addressed her pain, what she got was exclusion, an "unwelcome sign." How powerful are the effects of our illustrations and stories. How unaware we can be of the message they really convey, maybe the very opposite message we intend!

Christmas, it's a wonderful season, a wonderful moment in our church life. It's a time most of our congregations swell in numbers, caused by returning family members; and by those not so frequent church goers who come because it's what you're supposed to do on Christmas.. And we all know there are those out there, even among "the regulars", for whom this holiday may accentuate loss, loneliness, struggle, pain and stirs up dark memories of past Christmas holidays--no glow, just pain.

There are powerful commercial and secular forces pulling on our congregations at this time, setting up false expectations, telling them what Christmas is “supposed to be.” They paint a false picture, one that only accentuates the pain and sense of alienation for some and confusion and false expectations for many. The same forces at work on our congregations do not leave us preachers untouched. We too can succumb to the sentimental and the glitzy, the false cheer and the warm and cozy. At Christmas we do what we try to do year around. We struggle to be rid of the false, to be in God’s world and hear God’s message for our lives. And when we go looking for the all important illustration and story for our preaching, we want to portray God’s world and God’s choice, God’s preference. But we will need to be suspicious. Suspicion about the sources and the influences on us that makes us choose the stories we tell, the illustrations we use. What world are they depicting? Whose values are enshrined in them? Whose story is it anyway? Who is in the story and who would feel left out when they hear it? Do the stories I choose accurately reflect the ones chosen by the Gospel writers?...same kind of folk, same needs, same God same grace, just a different setting?

Go back to the original story and notice the examples and illustrations, the cast of characters the Gospel writers choose to tell their tale. Let them inspire us and guide us. The story they tell is that God chose to be born in a stable, after a pregnancy that must have been suspicious. There were quiet plans afoot to write a writ of divorce. It’s a carpenter’s family, not one of high estate or rank; displaced by a tyrant’s attempt to count heads to levy taxes on a poor and oppressed people. The couple are like a lot of people in our world, there is no room for them, nor for the birth of their child, so they are out in a stable. After the birth, they must flee to Egypt, made refugees by a murderous tyrant bent on maintaining power by whatever show of force necessary.. They will live in a strange land amid people of foreign tongue and customs. The news of the birth comes to shepherds, the despised of their society; the way prostitutes and thieves were despised. These shepherds live on the edge, with the rejected, not in the mainstream with the accepted.

Note the perspective of these Christmas stories and illustrations--the outsiders are welcomed inside; the powerful are rejected. God is to be found among the displaced, with refugees, the disreputable, those who can find no room, who are locked out even in their most desperate circumstances.

Notice again what we have known all along, these stories breathe Gospel breath into places thought outside the pale. As I look for illustrations and stories for my

Christmas preaching, I want them to put out the “welcome sign” of the Gospel. I want my stories to reflect God’s choice and favor and I don’t want to be blind sided by the season, and wind up reinforcing non-Gospel values by my seeming “harmless” Christmas stories.

What’s the source for my stories and illustrations. Of course I draw largely from my own experience. And now to apply, what in my religious tradition we call, “An Examination of Conscience.” What’s my experience like anyway? Is my own world insular and isolated from the “other side” described in the Gospel stories; the side that God seems to prefer when God is planning something new for the world? If I belong to the dominant race, class and culture, I may have to find ways to hear the Christmas story enfleshed among the poor, the refugee, those without political clout, the disreputable, the perpetual outsider and underclass. Not just to get stories for a preaching, but because that may be where my own salvation lies, where my own hearing of the Christmas story may be. Out of these experiences my imagination may come to a new life and I may find myself reaching for stories from my life and the larger world around me that are about the less established and secure. And that is where I and my congregation may hear about the birth of hope in places long forgotten and put aside; places each of us has covered up by the facade of the season. You know, those vulnerable places protected and never admitted, now made open and healed by the story that touches the area marked, “Private do not enter”.

Conclusion: Oh, by the way, here’s an exercise for you. Go back to the opening story I told about my sister. What is the world I described in that story like? What’s the culture and religious baggage connected to the story? I’m sure you picked up things I never planned to say; but then, that’s the nature of story and illustrations, they have a life of their own. Blessings on your Christmas preachings.

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