

Heir Apparent

John 1:1-18 Ephesians 1:3-14

January 3, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

John 1:1-18 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*

Ephesians 1:3-14 *³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of*

him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Some friends have a grandson who has become quite the teller of tall tales about his courageous exploits in the wilderness. This is unusual, as David is only in kindergarten and hasn't the guile, the strength, the experience, the courage or the long life to have become a man of legend. But, nonetheless, there he is, six years old and already full of stories in which he is the featured hero. Indeed, many of these stories in which he stars occurred several years before he was even born. He is a pre-school novelist who earnestly and enthusiastically regales anyone who will listen with detailed accounts of how he outwitted the great quilled rodent of the woods.

My friends have some of David's performances on video where he acts out what happened long ago when a porcupine raided the campsite kitchen. On screen you can see him gesturing as though throwing rocks or wielding a stick. Occasionally there is a halt to the action as he pauses to check his facts with the adults in the room, and then he slides back into the fiction that he, not they, routed the beast who tried to steal his Fruit Loops.

What's going on here? Is he trying out to become a Liar's Club Cadet? No, he's doing what each of us needs to do in order to build an identity. He is appropriating his family's history. He is borrowing from the pool of his parents' experiences. And, in the process, he is becoming a character in the story.

In part, the process of growing from a child to an adult can be understood as the process of transcending our own tiny experience by

becoming a part of the interlocking experiences of our family. A family, after all, is not essentially a biological entity but a community of shared memories.

The child who, as he grows, either does not learn or unsuccessfully connects with the larger family's story will always be left feeling like an outsider. Each of us needs to become a character in the story as we become part of the community, and only by becoming part of the community are we able, one day, to tell the stories that help the young discover who they are. Novelist Philip Roth says that nothing new happens in life until we get lost somewhere along the way and have to find our way out. Stories give us maps to follow even if we've never been that way before.

This is one of the primary functions of the Bible. From one perspective, the hero of the Bible's stories is always God. From another very perspective, however, the Bible is a collection of stories the family of God tells, and by the telling and retelling of them, we – as part of that family – appropriate the family's history and become part of the story. My friend's grandson David, by telling the story of the great porcupine battle, claims a piece of the mystery of community and the shared memory of family, and explores the tender lessons such stories hold, such as bravery in the wild, an amused outlook toward disturbed sleep and things that go bump in the dark, and a restrained assertion of strength and individuality.

Above all, David is being *entertaining* as he tells his stories, and I use that term advisedly in a sense very different than our modern understanding of the word. A common contemporary model of *entertainment* has us sitting passively before a television set. We sit there coolly detached and incapable of influencing or participating in the on-screen action even if we wanted to, and usually we wouldn't want to. Modern secular life imposes strict protocols which assign the roles and functions of entertainer and spectator. And, as is

typical of our American manner of thinking, we usually understand the relationship economically – that is, the entertainer is paid to amuse, shock, or gratify us, and we, the spectators, owe the bill. As usual in relationships of this type, the entertainment is judged critically on its ability to thrill or titillate and cynicism occupies a powerful chair.

But the root and the original understanding of the word *entertain* has an entirely different character. From Latin, by way of Middle Age French, it's a compound word composed of *inter* = *between* and *tenere* = *hold*. To *entertain* means *to hold together*. To *entertain* is to strengthen ties. It is to build community. It is to explore, expose, and repair the bonds of common experience that makes for family. That which entertains may be funny, but it may be tragic. It may be thrilling, and it may be very dull. It may be warm, but it may evoke the cold, empty spaces of past experience – but it always seeks to discover that which mends, heals, helps, and holds together.

And thus I offer to you this understanding of baptism: it is entertainment in the profound theological sense. In baptism, as in Bible reading and faith sharing and worshipping together each Sunday and thinking together about what it all means to be a family of God, the good news of God's love for us entertains and delights, challenges and stresses, comforts and discomforts, stretches and mends and gives us stories to rehearse so that we never forget how it is we belong to a plan and a purpose that is universal and never-ending.

In exploring the mysteries of God and faith, each of us is like David, the child, building in one another a sense of what it means to be part of a heritage of experience that is not our own until we include ourselves in the retelling. Scripture is the spiritual landscape in which we can creatively wander seeking clues about who we are and what our lives are for, how

others like us have been encountered by the mystery of God and how it is we might respond – like those who have gone before, or radically unlike their response. And whenever we retell the stories and insert ourselves into the action like David did with the story of the porcupine he never met at the campsite he never stayed in, we enrich the story and make it even larger, for we have added our lives to it. For, at root our faith is an inheritance such as the Letter to the Ephesians refers. *“He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,”* the text reads. And so we reenact in baptism the baptism of Jesus, as the Gospel According Mark tells the story, as a voice announces, as Jesus comes up out of the water, “You are my son, the beloved...,” for in baptism we become a character in God’s family story.

This is what happened when the early Christians re-read Isaiah or the Psalms in light of their experience of Jesus. When they added their experience to the retelling of the prophet’s ancient words, suddenly Jesus began to make sense in terms of the deep family history of which they were a part.

Think for a moment – did Isaiah have Mary and Jesus in mind when five hundred years before the birth he wrote, “The young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel”? We don’t let the story work if we answer too automatically, “Yes!” A better answer, I would suggest, is that Mary and Jesus were not the answer until Christians started retelling the story, until our branch of the family discovered new implications of an ancient theme brought to light by Isaiah’s own spiritual descendants.

Think about the Christian festival of Epiphany which is observed this week on the 6th. It is the day the story of Jesus – a Jewish child born into a Jewish family, a descendent of David and child of the covenant God made

with the Hebrews – becomes part of the story of the gentile world. Those anonymous men known as Magi, or Wise Men, were from another story altogether, one having more to do with astrology, alchemy, and magic than faith. The Gospel of Mark contains no stories about them. Neither does the Gospel of Luke or the Gospel of John or any of the writings of Paul or Peter. It was Matthew for whom it was important to weave them into the story of Jesus. Perhaps it was only Matthew who read the Old Testament passages about kings bringing gold and frankincense as gifts to welcome the Light of God.

We all come into life as strangers, and by strange twists and turns, by signs and decisions, we come to a place like this, telling stories once strange, but now our own, stories that once belonged only to an ancient Palestinian prophet, then only to an obscure Jewish family in Bethlehem, and then to Jerusalem, Rome, and the world. What a process! How strange it is that we are here, linked by a story, God's story, about what it means to become a child of faith.

So, how do we tell it? How do we live it? What variations on a theme of grace have we developed as the story has become known to us and we have retold it, ourselves now included in the details? First Presbyterian Church members are gathered from many branches of the family tree. We were once Lutherans, Catholics, Jews, Muslim, Methodists, atheists, or nothing in particular. From these diverse backgrounds and distinctive religious traditions, we have arrived here. From the scattered regions of the nation, from families whose ancestors called other nations home, from disparate and sundry backgrounds, we have been gathered together in this place by what appears to be accident but is actually the outcome of sharing a common story. What are we going to do with it: keep it to ourselves, or tell it

again and again so that new members of the family are woven into the story?

For our story is a way of life. We have this identity instead of another one. We are who we are because we explore the mystery of God together, within a tradition, sharing family stories. This is not something to be kept in a well-thumbed storybook once told to the children but now shelved under ancient history. But that's what we may be doing if we are not telling the story to others.

The story of Christmas is not just about welcoming the Christ child; it is about evangelism, which Presbyterians often treat as a four-letter word. Evangelism is not buttonholing someone on a street corner or going door-to-door with tracts. It is telling the family stories out loud. It is being inclusive and open about the welcome of God and the open-endedness of our story. It is helping others find their place in the story.

But I fear that the way we hold in the story, our reluctance to be public about what we know, our hesitation to open up our gifts, as it were, to the broader community in honor of our Lord, we manage to keep the story private, personal, and primitive, in that we're not becoming a character in the story ourselves – we're not adding our experience to what all this means.

The Presbyterian branch of the family, our particular heritage, has kept its flame burning brightly in worship, in service, in study, but not in inviting others to claim the story as their own. We have talked among ourselves, but not to our neighbors. We have taught our children, but not our communities. We have forged an identity, but we have hoarded it out of shyness.

As our denominational rolls have shrunk drastically over recent decades, many have rather petulantly claimed that, after all, faithfulness is not proven by numbers, and certainly that's true. The trouble is, if there are no numbers, sooner or later there is no one to tell the story. No business

people I know would content themselves with the knowledge that as long as the product is of high quality, it matters not at all if there are customers, and there are no educators I know of who believe that their knowledge and skill can best be put to use in empty classrooms.

At the beginning of 2010 this congregation's adult membership is hovering around 430 and our population of baptized members, which includes children not yet confirmed members, adds another 80 to 100. The membership of the church has been reasonably stable, not changing too much over the last several years. But if growth is one of the best indicators of life, "reasonably stable" is not what we should strive for. We are called to live and share the Good News. To not do so seems to me to be reversing the work of the Magi: instead of coming to pay Jesus homage, we are more like thieves stealing from the child his wealth. We take, but do not replace. We feed upon, but do not share. We do not take the first step toward the place where the child was, but wait for him to come to us. We act as spectators; we should be entertainers.

If our faith sometimes seems stale, that its plot lines have become frayed and fuzzed, that it has lost the thread of the story somewhere, perhaps it is because we have not been telling it and retelling it as members of a family whose story we share. Perhaps we have forgotten how we fit in, and we have not rehearsed the stories others told us, and we have not, in turn, told others. The church cannot be the kind of family circle pledged to keep secrets. It is a good news agency with something vitally important to tell. As Eugene Peterson puts it, "Christ is the way as well as the truth and the life. When we don't do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life."

Thank God someone knew how to tell each of us the family tales and

encouraged us to write ourselves into the story. Now, who, as we begin a new year, are we going to tell?