

Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!

A Sermon Preached by the
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Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

Unlike many American families in the 1950's, we didn't document our lives with home movies. We had plenty of photographs, to be sure, albums full of small, fuzzy, black and white images of babies being brought home from the hospital, Easter dresses, the first day of kindergarten, new kittens, family travels. I didn't think there were two more photographed children in the world than my sister and I – until we had those two granddaughters!

And while some members of the family moved from the Brownie box camera to Polaroid and then to 35 millimeter color prints, nobody seemed inclined to make the leap to the next level of technology with home movies. Even today, only our son has a video camera – rarely used I might add – although we couldn't do without our cell phones and Blackberrys and digital cameras.

Instead, my home movies were the ones that played in my imagination, through the family stories told by my grandmother and the re-creation of every 1950's movie musical that came out. No one was better at producing basement musicals than my sister and I, and we re-created every scene from "White Christmas" to "Carousel" to "Trapeze" – not a musical, but one of our favorites because it involved elaborate trapeze stunts, like jumping off the bed and swinging around the laundry post. And, of course, "The Wizard of Oz." Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

Nobody wanted to be Judy Garland more than I did, but being the younger sister, I usually ended up being the Scarecrow or the Tin Man or the Cowardly Lion, or sometimes even Toto, depending on which scene we were re-enacting at the time. Even Glinda the Good Witch was out of my reach, since we usually needed flying monkeys about that time.

Now once you've become proficient at playing a variety of characters in these home movies, you become very adept at improvisation. When you don't actually have a lion costume, you make a mask out of a brown paper sack. When you can't remember all of the dialogue, you make it up, when you can't remember all the words to the song, you hum!

And, in some ways, that's not all bad, because it requires you to be a little more creative, to think about how you might have written the story or played the part. I always feel that way when I read the Gospel of Mark, because Mark leaves a lot of room for interpretation or sometimes even imagination. The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell essentially the same story, but Matthew and Luke go into much more detail, they often finish stories that Mark leaves unfinished – go back and read the resurrection accounts – they don't leave us trying to read between the lines quite as much as Mark does.

The lesson from the Gospel of Mark this morning reads like the Cliff Notes for Matthew and Luke. In seven short verses, Mark covers the baptism of Jesus, the temptations in the wilderness, and the start of Jesus' ministry. It takes Matthew over 22 verses and Luke about 16 verses to tell the same story. If reading Mark is like looking through that old album of fuzzy, black and white photographs, then reading Matthew and Luke is more like watching the home movies of the same events, and we need both. You can watch the home movie of bringing the baby home over and over again, but you never quite get that singular moment in time, the look of absolute wonder and joy on that new mother's face when she walks through the door carrying the baby into the house for the first time, the moment that is there for all time in one photograph.

The one place where all three of these Gospel accounts converge, the one-moment-in-time photograph, is the story of the baptism of Jesus. In every one, the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and the voice from heaven says, "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The whole purpose of this account was, of course, to identify Jesus as the Son of God, child of God. Now remembering that the Gospels were written anywhere from seventy to ninety years after the death of Jesus, some scholars have asked the question: "When did Jesus become the Son of God?" That may not be a question that's ever entered your mind, but let's think about it for a minute.

According to Mark, which is the earliest Gospel, the baptism was the defining moment. In Matthew and Luke, written some twenty years later, Jesus is the Son of God from conception. And by the time we get to John, Son of God is pushed back into the time before his birth. Matthew and Luke include genealogy and birth narratives, John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," Jesus being the "Word." Mark essentially begins with the baptism of Jesus as an adult by his cousin John the Baptizer.

Writer and theologian Marcus Borg provides some clarifying ideas for us to think about. He reminds us that Son of God began as a relational metaphor. He writes, "According to Jewish traditions near the time of Jesus, this metaphor could be used to refer to other Jewish Spirit persons. . . (it described) a relationship of intimacy with God."¹ As with so much of scripture, we have no reference to Daughters of God, but presumably women could also be Spirit persons, or those who had an intimate relationship with God, but the language is not inclusive here, so bear with me for a moment longer.

Borg goes on to say, "Most scholars do not think that Jesus of Nazareth spoke or thought of himself as the Son of God; that was a post-Easter development."² He concludes by writing, "Again we see the process whereby Son of God undergoes a development that moves from metaphor to ontological claim,"³ culminating in the fourth century with the writing of the Nicene Creed.

I want to go back to that idea of relational metaphor and our understanding of baptism. Baptism names us and claims us as God's own. It's why, at baptism, we so often use the words from the Gospel of John saying, "See what love God has for us, that we should be called the children of God," and so we are.

I have a friend who says that at baptism we pour the water and God says, "I've got dibs on the baby." It's not just the baby, of course, that makes it so memorable - although you've got to give them high marks for being so consistently adorable. In our tradition, we do baptize a lot of babies, but we also baptize children, teenagers and adults, so there's more to this than cute babies. We use the very same words of inclusion and welcome, and we ask the same

¹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus at 2000*, Westview Press: Colorado, 1997, pp.11-12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*

questions of the congregation for every baptism. If we're going to welcome this person as part of the household of God, made real in this particular community, what are we willing to promise in terms of their spiritual nurture and care? The promises of baptism and the demand for lifelong response are the same, no matter what age we enter the waters of baptism. We become part of a complex relationship that we call the church.

Someone has said, "There is no solitary Christian, no way of doing the faith by a home correspondence course." It is a corporate endeavor, a way of life together. And that endeavor is not noble sentiments or lofty ideals, although there is some of that; and it's not a system of ethics and standards for behavior, although there is some of that as well. It is, rather, sometimes messy, chaotic, smothering and critical. And it is sometimes healing, comforting, secure and calm. It can be the place we most want to get away from, and the place we long to return to. It may be the cause of our deepest hurts, and the reason for our greatest joy. In other words, it's just like a family.

Understandably, there are some who would shy away from the use of "family" as a term to describe the church, so I want to be very careful in my use of that term. Not all families are places of safety and love, and the idea of a church community taking on those connotations may make some of us uncomfortable. Moreover, some would say that they already have a family, they don't need the church to fill that role, thank you very much.

My choice of the word "family" has more to do with helping us remember that the church is an imperfect construct, just like most families. But for all of its imperfections, our family is where most of us learn who we are. And for all of its imperfections, the church is still the place where most of us learn what it means to be part of God's family, part of a faith community.

All of us learn who we are through the stories we tell, and the stories we grow up hearing. In most families, they get hauled out at family gatherings, when we stumble down memory lane together. Of course, everybody remembers them slightly differently, which always makes for an interesting reunion. There are times, when my sister and I are together, that I wonder if we really did grow up in the same family! And all of us have family stories we'd just as soon forget. No family is without embarrassing relatives, inappropriate pets, and incriminating home movies. So it's only human to employ selective

memory when it comes to family stories, if you want to retain any semblance of dignity as an adult member of the family.

Our faith story isn't much different. A thorough read of the scriptures will reveal family stories that would curl your hair. There's probably more violence, rape, incest, murder and adultery in the Hebrew scriptures than in most of today's soap operas – not to mention the wilderness filled with “lions and tigers and bears.” The difference is that in today's average family, those stories would remain part of the “family secrets” that nobody talks about. And yet there they are, written down for generations to tell and read and remember. You almost wonder if the writers of scripture just decided it was better to declare their collective guilt and embarrassment, write it all down, and hope for a merciful God!

The church as a whole hasn't fared much better with its story. Every denomination continues to deal with the fall-out from the stories that didn't get told. Witness how many families were sacrificed on the altar of clergy misconduct before, as a denomination, we began to say, “no more.” We know now that we would have been a much healthier institution if we hadn't been so reluctant to acknowledge the “family secrets” and name the pain they caused. And just think of what clergy abuse has cost the Catholic Church, and not just in financial resources; think what widespread damage is borne by the victims and their families.

All of us, in our individual families or in our church family can think of times and events in the lives of those institutions that continue to cause us pain, or embarrassment, or shame or anger. All of us can think of good reasons to keep the “family secrets” locked up. Even if we can logically explain why it would be healthier not to, sometimes we are so paralyzed by their power that we can't imagine sharing them, even with our most trusted friends.

But being part of the family also means that we share the good news, that the stories we tell are also filled with grace, that they will heal us and set us free. When we hear the story of Jesus' baptism, we remember our own baptisms, and the promises made. Through our baptisms, we all came in through the same door, whether we traveled the same road or not. That alone is cause for celebration, for lifting up what holds us together, and for proclaiming the grace of God in everything we do.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. We're already a few days' journey into the wilderness, on our way to Jerusalem. We travel alone

with our individual wild beasts, or lions and tigers and bears, to fend off or keep at bay; those temptations of body or spirit that threaten to land us in a ditch somewhere along the road. But we also travel together, because we are the church; and the church, that little band of faithful disciples who sometimes seem cobbled together in odd, mysterious and endearing ways, is a gift of God.

So sit back, get ready to sing the familiar hymns, and hear familiar words, because for the next forty days or so, we'll all watch the same home movies, our home movies. We'll hear the traditional Lenten stories, beginning with the one we heard today of baptism and temptations and ministry. We'll re-enact the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we'll fall at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, and we'll wait by an empty tomb on Easter Sunday, because we already know that the story doesn't end with crucifixion; it ends with resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.