

January 10, 2021  
The Baptism of Our Lord  
Year B  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Our Story

A few weeks before Advent, I signed myself up to take a writing workshop offered by our Bishop, Jim Hazelwood on Monday nights during Advent. The theme of the workshop was, “Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography”.

Those of you who attended Zoom worship last week or who watched the YouTube video of that service or who read last week’s sermon when it was emailed out might be thinking to yourself. “Wait a minute, that sounds familiar. I’ve heard this sermon before.”

You haven’t, I promise, although I admit that I started last week’s sermon in exactly the same way. But that is where the similarities end. I tell you this week that I took the Bishop’s spiritual autobiography workshop this week for a very different reason than I did last week. During the first session of that three-week workshop Bishop Hazelwood reflected on the practice of storytelling itself. What it means and why people do it? Why do people tell stories?

Think about the stories that you’ve told in your life. Why have you told those stories?

Sometimes we tell stories just to entertain people. We tell them because they’re funny, heartwarming or enjoyable. Sometimes we tell a certain story at a certain event every year, a “Remember when...” story, because there’s a story that has become the fabric of the event itself. For example, ever since I’ve been at Emmanuel, at the Jezebel’s annual Christmas Yankee Ornament swap we tell the story of the time when someone took an ornament from the brand-new pastor

who had only been here for three weeks. That's a story that has become a part of the fabric of the event.

Some of the stories that I love to tell are about my grandmother, my mother's mother. I tell them to my children so that the girls, who knew her for a few short years of the lives, and so that the boys, who never met her, can remember this woman who was such a big part of my life. I'll bet that you tell stories to preserve memories, to enshrine beloved people. Conversely, some people tell stories to explain why there are rifts in their families, people who they don't speak to, relationships that have ended. Sometimes stories are told to warn others about where the danger lies.

Some stories are told to teach. "Here's what I've learned about life." "Here are actions that I've taken and their consequences, good or bad."

Sometimes a story might include a moral or a reflection on the consequences, but sometimes it might not. You could tell your listeners what the story means to you or people might be left to draw their own conclusions. I think we all know that we can make moral pronouncements but sometimes it's better to just tell a story. For example, you can tell someone to be honest, but if you can tell a story about a time when being honest has been a blessing to you or to others. that might make more of an impression.

Stories are told to convey meaning, values, and stories shape communities. Which is why, for me, right now, thinking about stories is very important. Because right now, in our country, it feels like the stories that we are telling, the stories that we are listening to, are stories that are attempting to shape us in specific and dangerous ways.

Like most, if not all of you, I watched in horror as the capitol building in Washington D.C. was breached by people who have heard so many stories, stories about the corruption of our government, stories about a stolen election, stories about cabals and deep state, stories about people coming to take their jobs, to

change their country, to take away from them the things that they value most, that they felt justified in attacking a building that is more than a symbol, but that is the seat of one of the branches of government itself, where people were working, congresspeople and senators and their staffs.

And since Wednesday, I have heard so many stories, stories about how what I was seeing on the news was not truly what was happening, that the people who breached the capitol weren't who they seemed to be, that what happened on Wednesday, was exactly the same and exactly as bad as the protests that occurred all around our country last summer in the Black Lives Matter protests. I have heard stories about people who have been called deplorables, about a mob. I have heard stories about the radicalization of people who took their right to protest to another level on Wednesday when they attacked the capitol building, stories told by their families and friends, by their co-workers and their own social media. I have heard stories about people deeply traumatized by the events at the capitol, either because they were there, hiding under chairs or in tunnels or wearing gas masks or because watching it unfold on TV triggered a trauma response about living through some kind of event, captivity, abuse, powerlessness, that they have lived through in their life. I have heard about life in a post-truth, post-fact age.

What has struck me most deeply this week as I have processed my own reaction to the events on Wednesday and to where we are as a country, my own fear, my own grief, and as I have struggled to manage and address my children's fear and worry and disillusionment is that we're in a place where we simply don't share the same stories. And to me that is a huge problem, because stories are how we human beings communicate meaning and values. Stories are how we create communities.

I have heard a lot of stories about people's anger and fear. And it has been clear to me that no matter where you stand about the riot at the capitol on Wednesday is that most people have approached those events and reacted to those events with anger and fear. Who people are angry at and why they're afraid differs wildly depending on where they fall on the political spectrum but the common denominator seems to be anger and fear. It stems from different sources, but everywhere you look, no matter what media you consume, you can see it, you can find it being reinforced. Anger, fear, and no unifying story.

All over my Facebook world, I have friends and colleagues, of many different denominations who have struggled this week about how to preach, what to say to their congregations. They have posted memes about it, they have posted questions, they have posted anguish, and even there, there has been anger and fear. In response to one of those posts, I saw someone who I know, a layperson in this New England Synod, post, "Not sure what to preach this Sunday? How about the baptism of our Lord?"

Today is a festival in the church, the baptism of Our Lord. The name of the day says it all. Today we celebrate the fact of Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan River. Today we hear the story of Jesus' baptism from the gospel of Mark. Matthew, Luke, and John all tell the story a little bit differently, but at its core, it's the same story. Today I'd like us to think about who besides Jesus was coming to be baptized. One of things that all four of the gospels agree on when they tell the story of Jesus' baptism is that John the Baptist had an active baptizing ministry in the wilderness and that he was baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins.

In the gospels of Matthew and Mark it says that people from Jerusalem and all Judea were going to John to be baptized. It says that even the religious leaders were coming to be baptized or at least to learn more about what was going on; what John was doing, what his ministry meant. Luke's gospel says that crowds were coming to John for baptism. The gospel of John does not, of course, give that kind

of crowd information, because John's gospel is always focused on the story of Jesus in a different kind of way than the other gospels, but still the importance of John's ministry, the impact that it was having on the people of his time, is made clear by the fact that the Pharisees sent priests from Jerusalem to learn more about why John was doing what he was doing. If he hadn't been drawing crowds, if he hadn't been creating a stir, if he hadn't been getting people talking, they wouldn't have needed to go and learn more about him. What was his story?

And the gospels, at least the gospels of Matthew and Mark say that the people, the crowds that came out to John the Baptist for baptism, confessed their sins.

When I think about those crowds who went out to receive John's baptism, I start to wonder. Why did they go? What drove them into the wilderness? What was compelling about John's message? What was John's message?

Prepare! Get ready! Repent! The more powerful one is coming!

It is the cry of the Advent season that we so recently left, "The savior, the messiah is coming." And for the people who first heard it, it was a new story, about the imminence of the savior. It was time to get ready. It was a story of hope, for people who had seen far too many of their hopes dashed on the rocks of empire. It was a story that demanded a response from them, that demanded confession and repentance, a change of life, that demanded morality and honesty in their daily lives as a way to prepare themselves and their community for the coming of the long-awaited messiah.

And for us, as Christians who come to this gathering from different places on the American political spectrum, who have heard and embraced with glee, with tears, with a shrug, or with overwhelming grief, the news of this week, this story, the story of the crowds coming out to receive John's baptism, is the one that should unite us. It should call us to repent, to confess our sins, to examine, not other people and their motives and their words and their actions, but our own, what we media

we consume, how it teaches us to think and to live, how we speak to and about others, how we spend our time and our money, how we listen and how we learn.

Because we don't just have the hope of the coming one to place our faith in, to give us a story that can give us life and direction, that can give our lives and our community meaning in a time when the stories around us, just about all of them, are designed not to uplift, but to tear down, institutions, other people, facts themselves. We have the coming one himself.

He meets us; Jesus meets us, the sinless one, to take our humanity into himself. He meets us in the waters of baptism, he stands with us in the troubled waters of this world and he tells us a new story. He tells us the story of the beloved ones, the people we don't understand, the people whose motives we question, the ones the stories we have invested ourselves in have taught us to hate, he teaches us that they are the ones he loves, the ones he came to die for, just like us. He gives us glimpses of the reign of God, where all are fed, where the sick are healed, where the lowly are lifted up, where the powerful kneel at the throne of God. He tells us to love our enemies and, on the cross, he shows us what that looks like.

He gives us the story that we say that we love to tell, the old, old story, which comes to us fresh and new this day, when we desperately need a story that brings life. It reminds us who we are and who we belong to. We belong to the God who loves us, who meets in Jesus, who stepped into the sin sullied waters of human life for us. We belong to the God who gives us the story of love, the story of peace, the story that turns our mourning into dancing, that gives us hope in place of despair, that can fill us when we feel empty, that can comfort us when we are afraid, that can teach us to walk in a new way. This is our story, God's gift to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.