

Menno Mennonite Church
November 12, 2023

It was a Dark and Stormy Night
Psalm 78:1-7

Emily Toews

Once upon a time
A long time ago
In a galaxy far far away
It was a dark and stormy night.

We love stories – I believe we are programmed to respond to stories – from the moment of our awareness to the end of our life – we are drawn to stories. Stories have a way of creeping into almost everything that we think and know and do.

Genres like Fantasy, Science Fiction (some of my favourite genres), Romance, Mystery, Sports Stories, General Fiction, Non-Fiction, Horror and Suspense – all genres of stories are found in our Bible – and that is, I believe, one of the things that makes the stories in the Bible so very relevant for over 2000 years.

Lately, I have been drawn to more of the stories one would read at night – with all the lights on – Maybe its because of the season that we're in. We're at the time of year when the sun sets early, and we are left to ponder the hidden and dark mysteries of life. After all, we're in that particular holy time marked by the ever-increasing darkness and celebrations like "All Hallows Eve and All Saints Day."

Some would call these spooky stories – others would call them Liminal – Autumn is a liminal time. Liminal means "in-between" like standing on the threshold of a house – where you are neither in nor out of the house.

In Christian Spirituality, liminal is a time when the thin veil between death and life invites us to delve into the shadows to encounter thoughts and feelings that we'd rather avoid, but know that acknowledging and examining them will lead to growth and spiritual/emotional development.

Contemplating our mortality, reflecting on the unnamed unfathomable numbers of casualties of war, remembering our loved ones who are now – just a story within us – are just a few of the shadowy subjects that press on us in liminal times.

Our Author, the divine storyteller, wrote in us a love for stories. Jesus, the Word made flesh, wove stories everywhere he went, offering a language, a doorway, a point of entry into a world where knowing God, others, and our deepest selves can be challenging.

Today, as we come together, we are both weary in grief and delighted to be together in community. It is a perfect time to think about story in scripture and in our lives. Stories that shape us – the good, holy, wonderful stories, and the stories that are difficult and uncomfortable.

Telling stories from scripture and our lives is probably the easiest way to convey depth of meaning, and emotional connections. Stories have the power to illuminate the dark corners of our lives and our faith and ask the hard questions of us.

The psalmist, in Psalm 78:1-3 says,
"Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us" (Psalm 78:1-3).

But why do we teach and recount these dark, uncomfortable stories?

The psalmist provides an answer:
"4We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

Why?

⁷so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments; " (Psalm 78:4-7).

The crux lies in our call, not to conceal, but to reveal in our stories – through scripture and through memory of loved ones– to reveal God’s story in us. Our stories, especially the difficult ones, play a crucial role in faith and life formation because within the discomfort of these stories, we are guided to witness the large love of God.

The retelling of difficult stories becomes a source of strength, healing, and assurance that, even in adversity, God is at work. Likewise, we’re not just called to listen to a story – but we are called to HEAR the story – to engage deeply, to lean in, and truly hear the challenging, uncomfortable, and painful stories that have shaped us over time.

In sharing our struggles, mistakes, and challenges, we provide a roadmap for the generations to come. This is precisely why the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is filled with stories that often make us uncomfortable. These uncomfortable stories share space with some of the most wonderful stories and should not be ignored, even when we’d rather throw them away.

We have stories of covenant – like God’s covenant with Noah and his children But the opposite side of that story is that many thousands were killed in the flood – and only Noah and his family survived.

Or God’s covenant with Abram and Sarai – that God would make of their offspring a number greater than the stars in the sky – and that they would be a blessing so that they could give blessing.

But the opposite side of THAT story is the story of Sarah’s slave, Hagar - who bore Abraham’s first son – and then the two were cast out into the desert to die after Sarah had Isaac.

There are stories of triumph over the powers of evil:
The story of Shiphrah and Puah, Jael, Elijah and Samson.

Then there are stories of women who step over good graces and do what they need to do to procure a future for themselves. Women like Tamar or Hannah or Ruth.

And then there's the horrible stories of the powerful abusing the weak and the vulnerable. Lot and his daughters, Jephthah's daughter, Tamar, Bathsheba and David.

Why would the Bible include these dark and violent stories beside the stories of hope and honour and grace? These are good questions – and perhaps the point of including these stories is that they provoke within us introspection and questions and promises to 'Never do that'. Or maybe to remind us that God's mercy and love is far beyond our own capacity to love even those who have greatly wronged us.

And then moving into the New Testament – the parables Jesus taught were meant to make us think. Jesus often rankled the feathers of the rich and powerful, and the religious authorities by his peculiar ability to shine a mirror on their thoughts and actions. He understood that stories could pierce to the heart of the matter far better than a sermon. And he knew that even a little discomfort made a space for growth, reflection and transformation within the individuals who were listening.

One such parable is the one Glenn read for us today - the parable of the bridesmaids. It's a tale that may leave us uneasy, lingering with discomfort. It's the kind of story that keeps me awake at night...thinking of the endless meanings and possibilities.

In this parable, we find ten bridesmaids awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. Five are wise, prepared with enough oil for their lamps, and five are foolish, neglecting to bring sufficient oil. As the bridegroom delays, all the bridesmaids fall asleep. When the cry rings out that the bridegroom is coming, the wise bridesmaids light their lamps, but the foolish ones find themselves in darkness, unprepared and pleading for oil.

At first glance, you may get really frustrated with the characters in the parable. Why did the foolish bridesmaids not pack enough oil – Why weren't the wise bridesmaids more generous? Why did the bridegroom come JUST as they left to get oil refills. And when they came back, why did the host deny the foolish bridesmaids entry?

The uncomfortable tension in this story invites us to reflect on our relationships with others and with God. And, frankly, it can cause some doubts – which is scary. Am I ready to ask these questions that probe ME to go deeper into the darkness of myself?

What if Jesus presents me an opportunity to shine MY light and I'm not prepared? Why am I not prepared? What if those around me aren't prepared – how can I help?

Do I share Christ's light of compassion and grace generously, or do I withhold it – leaving others in the darkness? Ought I help?

What if the foolish people who aren't prepared come to my door? Do I let them in? What if I don't let them in? What if I DO let them in?

Who are those whom I call foolish?

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And what does the oil mean?

Do I even have oil?

As we navigate these in-between, liminal spaces, we must be courageous storytellers. Psalm 78 reminds us not to hide away these stories – the good, the uncomfortable – but to tell them to the coming generations. Through storytelling, we unveil and reveal something and someone crucial – God's story in us.

In this season of gathering darkness, let's gather around the fire and share stories. Let's talk about who we loved and lost, about triumphs and failures, about walls breaking and joy reigning. Let's talk about making rabbit hutches in the mountains of Columbia – likely teaching a whole generation animal husbandry and nutrition. Let's talk about the evils of war – of countless mothers and fathers without their children, and the many children without parents. Let's talk about peaceful marches against the powers and principalities that stole names and rights and land.

Let's talk about freedom reigning and beautiful dreams that are yet to come true.

I will not stay silent – we DARE not stay silent
We are called to utter dark sayings from of old,
³things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.

⁴We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generations
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

⁶that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
⁷so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;

The End.