

Now, maybe this is because I'm the type of person that ends up being a priest, or maybe it's because I spend most of my time around church people, but I have a fascination with churchy things. It cracks me up that, somewhere out in the world, there's an Episcopal Church version of Monopoly. I love it that, when I'm watching Netflix, I can pick out which vicar on TV is wearing their vestments correctly and which ones have made a dreadful sartorial mistake. And I love it when I hear famous people accidentally sounding Episcopalian. To that last point, I was listening to an interview with one of my favorite singers the other day, and he was making a point about pain and suffering. He had a deeply moving and drawn out experience that made him wonder. You see, his mother had a painful illness that plagued her for nearly 30 years and ultimately led to her early death. She was a devout Christian, all the way to the end, and this baffled him. How could she possibly stay committed to a God that would do this to her? And, I have to admit, I kind of agree. *That* understanding of God, which is so common in our day and age, is really twisted. But it misses some deep truths in our scripture. Lamentations, for example, says that God does not willingly inflict harm on us. Sometimes, harm just happens. Throughout scripture, we get that message, that chaos is sometimes just a part of life because it is a part of Creation. It's kind of interesting that, some 2500 years ago, our scriptures anticipated a concept as modern as entropy. See, this is what I love so much about being Christian. In just a couple hundred words, our message touches everything. We can sprawl from board games to thermodynamics and still be in the realm of our faith. This should be no surprise. When we talk of God's Kingdom, we mean absolutely everything, so it should be no wonder. But a life of faith is exactly that: a life of wonder.

But this morning, where my brain has landed, out of all the many places it could have landed, is in the story itself. Or rather, who told it. Or maybe even more specifically, who told it to me. I know my mother told me some, though these days, it's hard to remember which parts she told me specifically. But we always had Christian symbols in the house. The big family Bible I talked about a few weeks ago -- the one she picked up on the cheap with another family's name scribbled on the title page. The crucifix at the top of the stairs that always stung to see -- hung right at the top of the stairs so you couldn't miss it, which often made me wonder less about God's generosity and more about humanity's cruelty. The Christmas ornaments with angels and more angels -- some handmade, some store-bought, all homey and imbued with the smells of Decembers passed. I know my uncle definitely told me some. I'd spend the night at his place with my cousin, and he'd read to us from the horribly named Hurlbut's Story of the Bible. It was a shortened thing hitting the highlights, but I remember more the illustrations. Beautiful paintings of epic scenes, detailed woodcuts to set the scene, very European looking heroes and semitic looking villains. You may not have read Hurlbut's, but I'm guessing you can bring these images to mind. My priest in Jr. High and High School taught me quite a lot, especially about love and the unqualified, unlimited grace God extends to all of humanity. This was a lesson far removed from some of the other things I'd learned from family and friends and their churches. God wasn't terribly concerned with what you looked like or who you loved. God was concerned more with how you treated others and how you tried to share the beauty that is this story. There was the Roman Catholic nun, the Buddhist monks, the banal comments, the extremist picketers, the Pride marchers, the ones who claimed to know God's mind, and the ones who would never dare. There were professors, sure, there were classmates, thank God, and there was -- and still is -- my closest friend and my wife. There might've even been a dog or two. I have learned so much from so many about our story, and I continue to learn, continue to grow, and more than anything, continue to delight in what there is to hear about God.

But before I came here, before I preached my first sermon with a collar around my neck, before I felt that first turn in my belly that said I should maybe be ordained, before I met my first bishop, ate my first deviled egg, attended my first combination egg hunt and potluck, before any of that, someone told me the story.

Someone told me about Jesus. Christianity isn't the sort of thing that just springs up in people's minds. Standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon or hiking in snow covered mountains, we certainly feel the draw to something spiritual, or maybe a spontaneous recognition of something metaphysically greater than ourselves, but the story of the Hebrew people that leads to the life of Christ that leads to our recognition of sin and the incredibly generous forgiveness of that same sin...that's a story that has to be told. There are bits of it in popular culture, enough that some folks want to learn about our story just so they can understand all the scriptural references in Shakespeare. But those bits aren't enough to really get it. We have to be told more, someone has to tell us what the point is of getting up early on a precious weekend day off.

And those someones are called evangelists. I know, anything that sounds like evangelism makes us Episcopalians uncomfortable. We imagine, as Dr. MacSwain alluded to last week, we imagine Bible thumping street preachers wearing sandwich board signs proclaiming "The End is nigh!" Or maybe we imagine a politicized, religious strawman. Or maybe we imagine a figure from our own past that talked a good game but still bore some cruelty in his heart. I'll be honest, I imagine all those things when I hear about evangelism. But there's so much more to it. The word evangelism is rooted in Ancient Greek, and all it means is "a good story," or as we're probably more used to hearing it "Good News." Y'all probably know this, but the four Gospel writers - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - they're called The Evangelists, because before anyone else, they shared the good story, the good news of Jesus' life. My mother was an evangelist when she hung those angels on the tree and told me why; my uncle was an evangelist when he opened up Hurlbut's on a Saturday evening; even those Buddhist monks were evangelists when they pushed me to own my part in God's story. Every one of us is an evangelist, or at least, every one of us has the potential to be evangelists. Get rid of the baggage we have around the word itself, and share the story. Normally, we don't hesitate to share good news when we hear it. We don't hesitate to run outside and honk horns and ring bells when election results come in. We don't hesitate to call a friend when a new restaurant opens and "my God, you've just got to try their oxtail stroganoff." We don't hesitate to share the news of a negative test result or the relief of a heavy weight lifted. Shoot, we'll even share bad news. Almost all my conversations over the past four years have started because of something that made the papers. So why on earth would we be so hesitant to share the single most important thing in our lives?

I know it's not quite that simple. I know that people get weird about Jesus and about religion, more generally. But still, seeing and naming God is the single most important thing we do in any aspect of our lives, and it's at the core of every piece of our existence. And it is such a gift. Maybe that's it. Maybe we're worried that this gift is like all the others we receive in this world. Maybe we're worried that, like a brand new Playstation or a fat check from grandma, if I share this gift with someone else, it'll mean I have less of it. Maybe we're worried that sharing God's story and God's grace means the slices of salvation get a little skinnier or less meaningful. Maybe we're worried that this world's way of doing things is more powerful than God's. Maybe that's it. Maybe we're afraid that sharing this treasure enriches someone else while leaving us poorer. Maybe. Or maybe we just don't know enough to know what we have to share. Folks, I can tell you, from what I've seen and felt and lived since moving to this place, y'all know your story, and you live it well. You have nothing to fear. But it is time to start telling folks why we bother with this church stuff, maybe especially this year. Speaking of this year, did y'all catch that line in 2nd Peter - with the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day? Sounds kinda like how people talk about quarantine, doesn't it? See, God's story touches everything. But God's story doesn't tell itself. God's story needs mouths to tell it, hands to do it, hearts to live it.

I mentioned the Evangelists earlier. Well, every single one of the Gospels, every one of them, begins the same way, and it's not with Jesus bursting onto the scene. Every single one of them starts with someone else

telling the story, setting the stage for Jesus to show up. Matthew starts with Abraham and walks through generations of stories before getting to Mary and Joseph with an angel telling them where they fit in this world. Mark begins with the Prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist preparing the way, one story teller laying the groundwork for another to lay the groundwork. John begins with God, a reasonable place to start, and takes us to a man testifying to a light in the darkness - John the Baptist, again. And Luke, Luke starts with a fantastic opening. We get to a priest and his wife and another angel pretty quickly, but before that, Luke starts here: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses ... I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you ... so that you may know the truth." You see, the story of Christ always begins with someone else telling it. Year after year, generation after generation, the story must be told. And it's now our time to tell it.

One last thing. There's an idea in social psychology, you may have heard of it, called diffusion of responsibility. It's a weird phenomenon that happens where an individual is less likely to take on the responsibility to act when there are others present because they assume someone else is already doing whatever it is needs to be done. It's why, if you ever get first aid training, they teach you never to say "Somebody call 911." Instead, you should say, "You, in the blue shirt, you call 911." We can nod our heads all day long that it would be great if more people knew what we know about God. But it's much harder to agree that I should be the one to tell them that story. Or that you specifically should. You in the blue shirt should. Or you down in the screen in the bottom right corner should. I know that. But hard isn't an excuse in our Christian life. It's part of our preparation in Advent to face down the hard things and get ourselves ready to do them. Christmas is coming, soon and very soon. It's time, it's time to tell the story. It's time for you to tell the story.