

'Tell Her (and Everyone Else)'
A Reflection on the occasion of
Reaghan Bailey's baptism
6 May, 2012
Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-21
Rev'd. Tanya N. Stormo Rasmussen

Prayer:

May I speak in the name of the God who still speaks in new ways; may the words of my mouth and the thoughts in our hearts be acceptable to you, O God; for you are the One who gives us life, and the One our souls are yearning for. Amen.

About ten years ago, I worked with a pastor named Martin Copenhaver, and his daughter, Alanna, was in the confirmation class I taught. Martin recently wrote a story in a daily devotional series that I'd like to share with you, especially because it relates so perfectly to Reaghan's baptism and what we're doing here this afternoon. He wrote:

One day, when our children were still very young, a Beatles song came on the radio. I grew up listening to the Beatles so, of course, I began to sing along. Then our daughter, Alanna, asked, "Who is that singing?"

For a moment, I was taken aback by her question. How could she not know who is singing? Isn't that something that is passed on in the genes?

And then I remember thinking, If she doesn't know about the Beatles, what other things have I mistakenly assumed I would not need to tell her?

Obviously, we cannot assume that our children have somehow brought with them, or will pick up somewhere, the most important things we have to share, including the Christian story of God's fierce and unshakable love for the world. One does not learn the story by osmosis. It has to be told. After all, the Christian faith is always just one generation away from extinction.

In Acts, we read about an Ethiopian official who, after a visit to Jerusalem, was reading the prophecies of Isaiah while he was riding in a chariot (you have to really want to read something to read it in a moving chariot). Philip was inspired to approach the chariot and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And here is the Ethiopian's poignant reply: "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

Exactly. No one is born knowing the story of our faith. It has to be passed on, one generation at a time. So teach your children, or your grandchildren, or the children of your church the story that has been shared with us. And, somewhere along the line, teach them about the Beatles also.

Well, I didn't grow up listening to the Beatles—they were a little before my time. But I did grow up in a family where we read the Bible every night after dinner, and we went to church twice on Sundays and once on Wednesday nights. And I can honestly say that I thought we spent too much time in church and reading the Bible. As a child, I would never in a thousand, million years

have dreamed I'd be doing what I do today. But as I've matured, I've come to realise what a gift I was given, being so thoroughly grounded as I was in the stories of scripture.

What are some of the stories you remember best from the Bible?

[Some possible answers:]

Adam & Eve

Noah & the ark

Moses—burning bush, escape from slavery in Egypt

Abraham & Isaac

Jacob & Esau

Joseph

Ruth

Jonah

Job

King David

Solomon

Samuel

Samson & Delilah

Elijah

Israel's judgment & destruction, told by Isaiah(s)

Jesus

Paul's journeys

Peter's story

Narratives about the disciples (fear on the boat in high tides; feeding of the five thousand)

The Prodigal Son, The Good Samaritan, other parables

Can you remember where you heard those stories?

And one final question: what do you think is the point of the stories? [Most likely to be rhetorical question; I don't think many, if any, will answer.]

The point of the stories is to tell us who we are, and whose we are. Lots of people dismiss the Bible as being irrelevant and outdated to a 21st-century world. But if you're willing to spend a little bit of time reading and thinking about the narratives, you'll discover that they talk about many of the kinds of dynamics that you and I encounter every day with siblings or parents, friends, neighbours, colleagues, or total strangers. The point of the many stories in scripture—not to mention the overarching purpose of the entire Bible—is to help us understand more about what it means to be fully human, to be fully alive, to live in healthy, life-giving relationship with others and with God. Jesus said, "I came so that [you] might have life, and might have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

Reaghan doesn't know it yet, but you and I do: life is often hard work! Sure, there are lots of amazing moments, full of bliss and wonder, giddiness, laughter, and awe. . . and more often than not, it's in the presence of a child like Reaghan that we're reminded of those wonders and delights. But families and partnerships and friendships and work relationships and neighbours—these daily connections that we engage in with other people, they can be really, really challenging. Come to think of it, our relationship with ourself can sometimes be exhausting!

How we answer questions about the meaning of it all, or about why we're even here, how to be happy in a deep and lasting way. . . how we answer questions like these matters, because our answers shape who we are, and the texture and depth with which we live our lives. And the beauty of the Bible, and of participating in a community of Christians who are trying to understand and live according to the teaching of this ages-old book, is that it connects us in meaningful ways to an

ancient past as well as to a promised and hoped-for future.

Being a person of faith, or identifying as someone who believes in things that can't necessarily be proven, is not the most popular thing to be or do these days. But I can tell you that there are an awful lot of people who long for a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, who simply lack the grounding in a narrative that helps them understand why they're here. And, unlike that Ethiopian eunuch who was a little bit curious about what the Biblical stories might mean, many of those searching individuals of today have rejected the Church as having anything meaningful to say without ever asking questions, or challenging the clichéd understandings of what the Church stands for or believes.

We're here because God loves us and wants us to experience and share unconditional divine love. And Christian communities exist because there are groups of people who have realized that love can be hard work, as can faith in a God whom much of the world immediately around us doesn't experience or encounter because they don't believe in God. We gather as church communities in order to tell our stories, and to tell the ages-old story of how God has always been at work creating and loving creation, and inviting us to talk about it and live it out.

We're here because of Reaghan: today she's being baptized, which means that she's being initiated into this community of people who believe in the truth and power of divine love, especially as it was demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Reaghan needs to hear that story. She needs to hear the story of God's love for her, and how it will be shown to her through each of you, and through people she doesn't know yet, and some she'll never know. She needs to hear how, even though human love will disappoint and even fail her sometimes, God's love never will.

But so do we: you and I need to hear and be reminded of the story of how much and how tirelessly God loves us and wants us to know and share that unconditional love. We need to hear it as much as Reaghan does, even if we've heard it twice on Sundays and once on Wednesday nights, and every night after dinner.

So tell her, and tell each other. Tell it with your words and tell it with your lives . . . because when you think about it, it's that truth and narrative that matters more than anything else, isn't it? And if you *don't* tell the story, how will anyone know?