

Last Sunday after Epiphany, February 26, 2006  
Year B: 1 Kings 19:9-18, Mark 9:2-9  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, CT

Tell Me A Story  
by Jeffri Harre

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

"Tell me a story about your baptism." I was eating lunch with my boss a couple of weeks after starting my job at the Episcopal Church Center. I paused and said, "I don't really have one, I mean I don't remember my baptism, and there aren't any family stories about it." She didn't say a word but went on eating her fruit salad, so I started talking.

I was baptized in the basement of the Episcopal church my parents attended because the parish was in the midst of a building program. I suppose it would have been a private ceremony, like most baptisms were then. My parents left the church a couple of years later, and my brother and I grew up unchurched. I found my way back to church during college and joined the Congregational Church. A number of years later, I returned to the Episcopal Church and had to be confirmed by the bishop. I dug out my baptismal certificate for the Rector and was floored to find that my confirmation was scheduled almost 30 years to the day of my baptism.

She smiled at me and said, "See, you do have a story."

A few weeks later, again at lunch, Robyn looked at me across the table. "Tell me a story about an encounter you've had with God."

"Ummmmm....well...." I mumbled before lapsing into silence. She continued to eat, saying nothing. I did have a story. I just didn't feel very comfortable talking about it. After all, as the old joke asks, "Why is it that when we talk to God we're praying, but when God talks to us we're schizophrenic?" In our society, even in most of our churches, we just aren't comfortable talking about our own experiences with God. We are children of the scientific age, and it's easy to dismiss such stories as bits of fantasy or as some kind of mental aberration. We want to be able to test, measure, and study something before we accept it. We want logic. We want things to make sense to our rational minds.

Yet our scriptures are full of stories about burning bushes, pillars of fire, visits from angels, voices from the heavens. The Season of Epiphany begins and ends with two such stories—Jesus' baptism on the First Sunday, and the Transfiguration, which we read today. In both stories we are told that God spoke, "This is my son, the beloved..." For Peter, James and John, the experience was more than just hearing God speak, they SAW things—Jesus shining, his robe whiter than anyone on earth could whiten it, Moses and Elijah appearing to talk with Jesus. Now how do you go back down the mountain and talk about that? Maybe Jesus had the right idea, "Tell no one..."

The other story we are told in today's readings is just as dramatic. Elijah is instructed to go up on the mountain and wait for God. First comes the great wind, followed by an earthquake and then the fire. Yet, God is not in any of those things we are told. It is only when sheer silence descends on the mountain that Elijah covers his face and goes to the mouth of the cave to listen to God. And how do you go back down the mountain and talk about that experience?

Yet, Christians have been telling stories about experiences with God from the very beginning. It's how we engage the Gospel. It's how we share those stories of the Good News.

And that Good News doesn't stop with the Gospels. If Christ is truly present in our lives, then we will have our own stories to share. And it isn't always easy. Sometimes it's downright dangerous, as we know from the stories of the early Christian Martyrs. Even after Christianity became "the norm" in Western Europe, it could be dangerous. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake because she dared not only to share her story but to act on it. It is still risky today. It means opening ourselves up to others and being vulnerable.

Part of our work in the Office of Children's Ministries and Christian Education is to help people, especially children, share in the Good News, including the telling of it. We want people to know that their stories are part of The Story, and that sharing those stories is part of how we share the Gospel. We do this, in part, by teaching people how to create safe spaces for themselves and others to tell their stories, and we emphasize that listening is as important as telling. Part of creating that safe space is to start with "safer" stories, or by answering a series of questions over time that start us thinking about what it means to be part of that story. When I started working for the office, we were in the middle of preparing a video tape of people's stories to be shared at an upcoming conference. The questions we asked people were:

Do you believe in God?

How did you first learn about God?

How do you tell others about God?

Why do you think people go to church?

Another set of questions you might think about is:

Who am I?

Who are my people?

Who or what is God calling me to be or do?

Or simply ask them to tell a story about their baptism. It's a story we all share. It is, after all, how we are brought into the Christian community.

What Robyn did those first few weeks I was on the job was to create that safe space for us, where we could share our stories with each other. So, here is the story I was eventually able to share with her.

It happened when I was in graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin. It was one of those perfect Fall days. There are days even now when the sky is just the right shade of blue, or the smell of the leaves will take me back to that day. I was standing at a corner waiting for the light to change so I could cross the street. Suddenly—or at least it seemed very sudden—everything seemed to be sharper, brighter. Even now the logical part of me wants to try and explain the sensation away as a cloud moving away from the sun, or a shift in the way I was standing so that I was no longer in the shadow of a building. But I don't think it can be explained away that easily. Then along with that sharpness, that brightness, I became aware of a message—it wasn't exactly words that I heard aloud or in my head. It said, "I need you. You have a ministry in my church." And then just as suddenly, it was just another Fall afternoon on a Madison street corner. Now, how do I go back down the mountain and talk about that experience?

Over twenty years later I am still struggling with the implications of that experience, and what it means to minister in God's church and in the world. I have come back down the mountain and shared the story, sometimes with ease and sometimes with unease. I have been blessed by many people over the years who listened to my story and told me theirs. Together we are finding the many ways to live out God's call to us.

So, tell me a story...