



Everyone, and I believe this has been true since we humans were capable of speaking to each other, everyone loves a good story.

I had a professor of writing in graduate school who said that a good story was not something like a football game that could be won with a field goal in the last fifteen-seconds. The writer or the storyteller has to get people's attention from the beginning. It is the power and engaging quality of the first few words of the story that let you know whether you want to stick around for what is coming.

Probably one of the most powerful first lines to any story ever told is - "Once upon a time . . ." We hear that and we are hooked.

One of the blessings of growing up without television and having the mother I did was that I was taught and encouraged to read. I have loved reading since I was a child and still do. Because of the lifestyle I now lead I'm very careful about what I read and am always asking people whose reading tastes I admire what they would recommend.

My son-in-law is an avid and voracious reader. I found a gift for him this Christmas which is a mug that has written on it some of the first lines of the greatest books ever.

So, let's take a test. I'll read to you a few of them and you see if you can identify the source:

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

Jane Austin, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1877)

"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly."

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

"All children, except one, grow up."

James Barrie, *Peter Pan* (1902)

"It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

George Orwell, *1984* (1951)

"A story has no beginning or end; arbitrarily one chooses the moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead."

Graham Green, *The End of the Affair* (1951)

"It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York."

Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963)

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four Privet Drive were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much,"

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997)

"I still remember when my father took me to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books for the first time."

Carlos Ruiz Zafon, *The Shadow of the Wind* (2001)

"First the colours.
Then the humans.
That's how I usually see things.
Or at least, how I try.
*** HERE IS A SMALL FACT ***
You are going to die."

Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (2006)

"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 and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything

carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you . . . " Luke 1:1 (perhaps 60)

Though the beginning of a story is important, it is the end we wonder about. Even if we have heard the story dozens of times, as in children loving to hear the same bedtime story over and over, we still want to know how it will turn out.

I will wager that many of you will watch once again the film "The Christmas Story" this year though you have seen it many times before. The boy gets the BB-Gun he craves, the dog eats the Christmas turkey and the family ends up in a Chinese restaurant having the waiters sing "Joy to the World" to them.

Even if we have never heard the story before, most of the time we know how it will turn out. The hero will get the bad guy - and the woman. The ticking bomb that is about to destroy the universe will be dismantled with just seconds left to go. After a while to assimilate the shock and surprise, even O. Henry-type endings turn out not to be that big of a surprise.

Jesus was a master story teller. He told these brief stories that carried such a wallop that not only are they unforgettable but also we are still trying to figure them out.

After his death his followers continued his story-telling ways by not only repeating the stories Jesus told, with their own interpretations and for their own purposes, but also they began telling stories about Jesus.

As time passed these followers of Jesus added to and modified the stories they told to suit their own purposes. Years passed. I don't know how your memory is

but get me some forty or fifty years away from an event and I will have polished a drab fact into a shining event. That sort of lying, by the way, comes with being ordained. It is called "ministerial exaggeration."

The tellers and writers of the Jesus story didn't have the same writing professor I had in graduate school. They were not nearly as interested in getting into the story as they were getting to the end of it. All four of the gospels that we have in the collection of writings called The Christian Testament have some version of the last week of the life of Jesus, even though they disagree with each other over some fairly significant matters about this last week.

As for the beginning of Jesus' life, Paul, the first one whose writings we have never mentions it. Mark begins his telling with Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist and John's gospel does virtually the same thing. Matthew and Luke who tell stories about the birth of Jesus tell really very different ones.

I said last week and in the preview that went out about today that we were going to talk today about "the first Christmas." Actually, today is part one of that topic. We'll do part two next week.

What is the story about Jesus birth?

The vast majority of people who call themselves "Christian," especially in our culture, get their knowledge of religious and biblical matters from three sources.

The first is what I call cultural osmosis.

There are enough things that are said by politicians, popular or prominent preachers who appear on television

and the like that most people have heard of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. People know about David and Goliath.

This is not a reliable source of religious knowledge. In a religious literacy quiz a majority of people thought that Peter and Paul were twins and that the epistles were wives of the apostles. A lot of people think that the phrase "The Lord helps those who help themselves" appears in the Bible - perhaps was even something Jesus said.

Though this line is often attributed to Benjamin Franklin, the phrase is much older than that and is just the opposite of biblical teaching: God helps the helpless.

A second source of biblical and religious knowledge for many people has been their exposure to various teachings from the religious organizations of their youth. You may or may not have as a child gone to church.

This seems to cut in a variety of directions. I grew up in a family where we were expected to be in church three times a week, sometimes more. Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday nights were the norm.

For some this burns them out completely. Or, they hear things that cannot stand up to the scientific methodologies they get exposed to later in life and not having the guidance to see religious teachings as mostly myth and poetic, they toss them. Someone once said to me, "I had to leave church in order to grow spiritually."

Others buy into what they are taught to such a degree that they never leave what we know as the pre-critical levels of dealing with the religious teachings they

received. They may go on to get advanced degrees in other areas but they remain at a third-grade level of understanding religious and spiritual truths.

I personally am so grateful for the church-going background I had. I was wrapped up in a culture of good people who, just like us, given the light and awareness they had, did the best they could and embodied the highest values their consciousness could grasp.

Some of the religious teachings I got there were just awful. Tribalistic, narrow and judgmental. I didn't meet the God of Jesus there but I did get introduced the notion that God was always keeping an eye on me. God was something of a divine Santa Claus keeping a list of who is naughty and nice.

A third source of religious knowledge and biblical information comes to people from movies, television and novels.

One of my university professors was not only one of the translators who worked on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible but also was a consultant to Cecil B. DeMille on the movie "The Ten Commandments." I stood in line to buy tickets to that movie when it first came out in 1956. It frequently appears on television now around Easter time and I shudder to see how god-awful it is.

This kind of movie, and there used to be a lot of them, contributes to what I call "bathrobe theology." It is full of gladiators, full-breasted women and it usually furthers a literal understanding of the Bible. One movie that did this in spades was Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." It was a deliberate attempt to make very literal the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus.

Many of you remember when Dan Brown's book, "The Da Vinci Code," was published. It has been one of the best selling books of all time and had a sure fire success combination of religion, sex, violence and intrigue. Many people took this fictional book as being factually true about church and religion.

Several things accounted for this. The deceit and deception being practiced by both the church and in politics at the time. And, I believe, the deep unconscious hunger people had and have for the Sacred Feminine.

One of the best selling series of books has been the "left behind" series. They are not only fictional nonsense but also about as religiously ridiculous as possible. Yet thousands of people take them as being literally true to the teachings of the Bible.

As I said, there are only two accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. What people know, or think they know, are contained only in these two accounts - Matthew and Luke. Usually the story that is told every Christmas is a meshing of these two stories.

This is amazing because the two versions are so dramatically different that it is impossible logically to put them together. They tell not only entirely different stories but also neither one of them passes the litmus test of historical accuracy.

Let me give you a synopsis of each version.

In Matthew's version Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married when Mary is found to be pregnant. Joseph, suspecting the worst, plans to divorce her, but is told

in a dream not to do so because this is God's doing. So, they get married and Jesus is born.

Wise men come from the East, following a star that has led them. There they ask where the King of the Jews is to be born. King Herod checks with Jewish scholars and finds out that this predicted king is to come from Bethlehem. Herod tells the wise men this and they follow a star to Bethlehem. The star stops over a house where the family of Jesus lives and they offer the child gifts. Then, warned in a dream not to go back the way they had come, which is what Herod had requested, they go home.

Herod, since he is the king, fears a rival so he sends his troops to slaughter every male child two years and younger in and around Bethlehem. But Joseph, who also has a dream where he is warned of danger, takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

After Joseph learns that Herod has died, he plans to return to home but since Herod's son is now the ruler, they decide instead to go to Nazareth where Jesus is raised.

Luke's version is much longer and begins with an angel making an announcement to Elizabeth, a barren woman, that she will give birth to John the Baptist. Later an angel appears to Mary and tells her that she is to give birth to the Son of God.

The Roman emperor Augustus makes a decree that everyone in the empire needs to register for a census. We are told that this is the first census, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone is to return to their ancestral home which means that Joseph, since he was a descendent from David, had to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem. While they were there Mary gives birth to

Jesus in a stable and lays him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Shepherds in the fields are informed of the birth and they go worship the child in Bethlehem. Eight days later Jesus is circumcised. Then many days later Jesus is presented in the temple by his parents to offer the sacrifice prescribed for this occasion. When Mary and Joseph have finished all that was required by the law for the birth of their child, they return to Nazareth where Jesus is raised.

Notice that in neither story are their camels.

The birth stories were not an important part of the early Christian movement. Paul, the church's first theologian, never mentions it. Mark and John don't either. These stories were important to whoever wrote the books we call Matthew and Luke.

Why were these stories important to these writers? What kind of stories are they?

The questions that all of these kind of stories raise are: are these stories factually true or are they fables.

A lot of people think that these are the two choices. Either these stories are things that really happened or they are fables that don't matter much. They are entertaining but you don't really have to take them seriously.

Either of these options misses how edgy these stories are, how politically subversive they are.

There was a time when people heard these stories, or, after the invention of the printing press, read them,

and never questioned whether they were true or not. The focus was not on fact but on meaning.

Then something happened that changed everything. It began around the middle of the 18th century and as this movement developed is referred to as "the age reason," "the enlightenment" and "modernity."

Whatever it is called and whenever it is dated, what happened was a shift in human thinking where there was a critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs and morals. A strong belief in rationality and science began to rule the day. There was a shift in the way that people began to think.

The advantages of this are, obviously, enormous. All of the technological advances we enjoy today find their birth in this movement. Philosophers and scientists alike began to wonder: "How do we know what we know?" and "What is true?"

The harvest we have reaped from these questions being raised has been so bountiful as to boggle the mind. Even those who started this movement could not possibly imagine the benefits we reap now.

I don't go two or three weeks without reading somewhere another startling statistic about the world in which we live.

Just recently I read in, of all places, one of the magic journals I take someone quoting a passage from another journal, Computerworld. Here is the quote: During the next eight years, the amount of digital data produced will exceed 40 zettabytes, which is the equivalent of 5,200 gigabytes of data for every man, woman and child on earth. . . . To put it in perspective, 40 zettabytes is 40 trillion gigabytes -

estimated to be 57 times the amount of all the gains of sand on all the beaches on earth.

Or here is a bit of trivia that comes from the November issue of another magazine I take, Mental Floss: "Google fields 40,000 searches per second."

This "age of reason" thing has also cost us. It has led many people to think that truth and factuality are the same. Because the Enlightenment has led to an emphasis on experimentation and verification, it has led many people to think that truth is that which can be verified and if something can't be verified, it must not be the truth. If something isn't factual, it must not be true. This is called "fact fundamentalism."

All religions have been affected by this - especially Christianity. It has led to the great divide among the way people think about and hold to their faith.

On one side of the divide are those who hold it that if the stories of the Bible aren't factual, then they aren't true and if they aren't true, then the Bible as a whole isn't true. Christian fundamentalism is based on biblical literalism which is rooted in fact fundamentalism.

I encounter people all the time who tell me that the reason they have difficulty with worship rituals, especially the liturgical form we practice, is that they simply can't take the creed as true. They'll say something like, "Every time we say the creed, I have to cross my fingers." That's because they are taking it as factual.

I am convinced the longer I stay with this that if the church doesn't recover the mystical dimension of the faith, doesn't embrace and inhabit the power of myths,

it not only doesn't have much of a future but also it cannot contribute to anyone's transformation and, consequently, to the transformation of the world.

To those who think they are being rational when they say, "But mystery isn't knowable," I want to say, "Quite the contrary. Mystery is infinitely knowable."

What makes the practice of religion and spirituality difficult for all of us, because we are all shaped by the world view of the Enlightenment, is that what we take as real is what operates in accordance with the laws of cause and effect s we know them. There is a much, much bigger view than this. Before the Enlightenment the debate about the existence of God was impossible.

Every year around Christmas week there are numerous television programs on or about the birth stories of Jesus. Almost every year something circulates on the internet that seeks to document how the planets could line up in such a way as to provide a star for the wise men to follow. This is how fact fundamentalism makes some people twist their minds and souls into pretzels in order not to give up a factual belief. Our world view knows that it is ridiculous to think that a single star in the heaven could guide wise men from afar to a stable in some town. Go out tonight and look up into the sky and see if you can find a star shining down on someone's home. If you do, you have a major find on your hands.

In the world in which these stories were first told, their factuality was not an issue. What mattered was, "What does the story mean?"

By the way, and this is very disturbing to many people who hold it that these stories are factually true and

happened just the way they are recorded in the Christian scriptures, miraculous birth stories are a dime a dozen from that period of time. Are they all literally true? Or, just the one about Jesus?

Some people deal with this by saying, "Well, I know things like this don't normally happen but this is the result of the supernatural intervention of God. God can do anything. You don't doubt that do you? If you do, you just don't have faith." This is exactly why belief in the virgin birth has become for many a test of faith.

I've said this many times in here - I just wanted you to know that I know I'm repeating myself - Jesus told parables. Jesus' followers told parables about Jesus.

Jesus told parables. What is important about a parable is its "more than literal truth" meaning.

Jesus made his stories up. No one who heard him tell his masterful stories - as far as we know - ever said, "He's just making this stuff up." Had a person said that, someone would have elbowed him in the ribs and said, "Shut up! You're not getting the point."

The stories Jesus told were so full of truth that we have difficulty really hearing them.

His followers told parables about Jesus. They made them up. Not that they weren't true. They are packed with truth.

Next week we'll come back and look at these in more detail.

Matthew's parable about the birth of Jesus is different from Luke's parable about the birth of Jesus because

Matthew and Luke have different goals in mind and different audiences they are speaking to.

The birth stories are meant to get some of the following points across to those who heard them:

Who is really "King of the Jews?" That was a title Herod claimed and both Jesus and his followers said an emphatic "NO!" to that.

Who brings peace on earth? Not Roman imperial politics or Caesar. Real peace comes from doing God's will on earth.

What is the light of the world? That is to say, where is true wisdom to be found?

Where do we find the fulfillment of God's dream for humanity?

We will not be able to answer these questions unless we move far past the factual level.

Clearly I think it is important for us to be as knowledgeable as possible about what the Christian scriptures really say and intend to teach. But there is more to it than that. These stories stand the same chance as the parables Jesus first told. That is, they raise the question of who really runs and rules our lives and what is of utmost importance.

It is very hard in our culture to hear and to honor what these stories are about. I know it sounds naive but I do believe that a handful of people filled with joy and love and hope can be as transformative to the world as was that handful of individuals who first truly became followers of "the way." It is transformed

people who can contribute to the transformation of the world.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.