

John Docherty, Christmas Eve, 2015

A story of peace on earth

The stories we tell ourselves are important.

They reflect how we see the world, and how we see ourselves in the world.

Our personal stories are largely based in history and fact. Certain things have happened to us, and we recount those events to those who are interested in listening.

We tell the stories of the good things that have happened to us, and we tell of the painful experiences.

But our personal stories are not just cold, stark, history and fact. They contain our “myth” about the event. They go beyond the simple details of what happened, to include something of note, or they are imbued with a sense of meaning.

We don't usually tell stories about what we had for breakfast, unless, of course, we're doing it on Facebook ... Dave.

Usually, we tell stories about things that stand out from the ordinary; that we think are memorable in some way; that “mean” something to us.

Without being unfaithful to what actually happened, we sometimes ‘spin’ the story a certain way in order to convey some particular aspect of it; to capture something worth retaining; or to make clear how we feel about the event.

If you're a Scot, among whom story telling is highly valued, you are most likely to look for the comical side of what has happened, along the lines of someone like Billy Connolly. Even painful memories, if they're to make a good story, need to be presented in a way to make others laugh.

When our son Isaac was three years old, we decided to let our kids open one present on Christmas Eve. We reserved to ourselves the right to choose which present to open, and we decided that we would let them open a package containing knitted slippers. Our

thinking was that it would be nice for them to wake up on Christmas morning and be able to put on a nice pair of cozy new slippers to start the day.

Isaac, three years old, as I said, opened his, and, in his unfiltered kind of way, said “Slippers?! What kind of a gift is *that* for a kid!?” then promptly tossed them away, over his shoulder. There were tears of laughter all around, and we still laugh about it to this day, because it gave us a foretaste of what was to come.

No offense to you Russian Mennonites, but if you’re Russian, among whom story telling is highly valued, all evidence points to the likelihood that you are more likely to look for the bleak and depressing side of what has happened, along the lines of someone like Dostoevsky. Even happy memories, if they’re to make a good story, need to be presented in a way to make others see the tragedy inherent in the event.

(told in a heavy Russian accent) “When our son Isaac was three years old, we decided to let our kids open one present on Christmas Eve. We reserved to ourselves the right to choose which present to open, and we decided that we would let them open a package containing knitted slippers. Our thinking was that it would be nice for them to wake up on Christmas morning and be able to put on a nice pair of cozy new slippers to start the day.

Isaac, three years old, as I said, opened his, and, in his unfiltered kind of way, said “Slippers?! What kind of a gift is *that* for a kid!?” then promptly tossed them away, over his shoulder. There were tears all around, and still we cry about it to this day, because it gave us a foretaste of what was to come.”

Our stories are important.

The Christmas story is one we’ve told ourselves for over two thousand years. A story of the incarnation of God; a story of the birth of the one who would bring peace; a story of the beginning of a new era; a story of shepherds in a field, watching over their flocks by night.

It’s the story of the birth of a child who would later be hung on a tree; the story of a peacemaker who sacrificed himself at a critical point in our journey.

On some level, I think we see ourselves in this story – we may not quite identify with the humble shepherds in the fields; or with the poor carpenter and his wife, forced to seek shelter in the stable of an inn; or with the rich kings with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; but every year, we dress up our kids in bathrobes and shawls.

We evoke images of angels.

We pause to consider the mystery of this night.

We tell it as *our* story.

And when we brought that story here to the New World, we brought ourselves along with it.

We spun the story our own particular way, with our own particularly European sensibilities. And we tried to draw our indigenous neighbours into the story in sometimes unhealthy ways.

It shouldn't surprise us, though, that perhaps God was already at work here in this land, among these people, also created in God's image.

It shouldn't surprise us that these people had stories of their own;

stories that embodied their own sense of history, fact and myth;

stories that are not necessarily in conflict with our own stories of how God is at work in the world;

stories in which they are able to see themselves, and see themselves as central characters;

children of God;

not subservient bit players relegated to the edges of the stage.

As an aside, you'll find an article in this week's Canadian Mennonite that speaks to attempts at indigenous / settler reconciliation, and that recounts, in a very abbreviated form, the story we read during the children's time. (The story of the Peacemaker)

Paul, in the second chapter of Romans, says "... ¹⁴When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. ¹⁵They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse *or perhaps excuse them* ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all."

I'm encouraged by that passage in Paul's writings. Encouraged, because I think it recognizes that God is at work in the hearts of all, Jew and Gentile alike.

And on this night, of all nights, I think it behooves us to remember that this story of a child in a manger is not the story of a child born to bring life to the Jews, but the story of a child born to bring life to the Jew, to the Scot, to the Russian, to the Mohawk ...