

SERMON TITLE: “I Love to Tell the Story”

TEXT: John 3:16-21

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: September 19, 17th Sunday After Pentecost

Last week James introduced our fall sermon series, where we will be going through our MB Confession of Faith.

Now, I don’t know what you think of when you hear things like “Confession of Faith.” Perhaps you are curious about just what a “confession of faith” is. Perhaps you get excited at the prospect of learning more about what you believe and about the bigger national and international family of which we are a part.

If so, that’s great!

Or, perhaps your mind leaps to unpleasant images of dry, dull catechism classes that told you what to believe and how to believe it. Perhaps you are wondering if the next 10 weeks or so are going to be about us telling you where the peculiar people called “Mennonites” fit on the denominational spectrum and why we are right.

If so, that’s *also* great—because hopefully you will see that this is not the case at all!

Hopefully, over the next ten weeks, through the sermons, through discussions in care groups, and through informal conversations in the foyer or in coffee shops, we will all come to a greater understanding and a deeper appreciation of the story we are a part of.

We will be telling this story from our own unique perspective as a Mennonite Brethren Church. But this isn’t about convincing anybody that we’re right and others are wrong.

Just like two people can read the same novel and be influenced in different ways by different parts of the story, so Christians throughout history have approached the story of God through Scripture and been drawn to different emphases and perspectives. Sometimes we’re right, sometimes we’re wrong.

Whichever perspective we approach it from, as followers of Jesus we always keep trying to learn and tell the story better.

So over the next ten weeks, we’re going explore our confession of faith.

The interesting thing about our confession of faith is that there's actually two, as James mentioned last week. The North American COF is laid out in a traditional series of propositional statements about what we believe (i.e., "God," "Sin," "Baptism").

But the ICOMB Confession (International Community of Mennonite Brethren) is laid out in narrative form.

We are going to be using the ICOMB framework and supplementing it with the North American COF as we go.

And the first chapter in the ICOMB COF is called "God's Redemptive Story." It is meant to be a big picture overview that frames what we "confess."

But what does it mean to "confess" a story? How do you do that?

I spent the first part of this week wracking my brain trying to figure out how I was going to explain this part of our confession of faith—and it wasn't easy, because I wasn't sure myself what it meant to "confess a story."

So over lunch on Thursday, my wife Naomi said, "why don't you have a look at a storybook Bible that we have read to our kids?"

Good idea.

When we want to introduce children to the Christian faith how do we do it? Through stories.

(Come to think of it, stories are how Jesus usually taught as well.)

There were usually lots of pictures and colours, and tales of adventure and excitement. I remember when our kids were younger we would sit down on the couch with them and read them stories about Daniel and the lion's den, Noah and the ark, David and Goliath, Jesus healing people, etc.

Once we become grown ups, however, we supposedly realize that the story was just the *package* that the truths were delivered in—like covering raisins with chocolate to get kids to eat them!

Stories were a good start, but they weren't the "real thing." The "real thing" was "absolute truth," and to describe *that* you need to use big words like "doctrines" and "principles" and "timeless propositions" and "theological statements."

We begin to lay out dense and detailed creeds and lists of beliefs that are to be affirmed in order to demonstrate faith (like the ones James described last week).

But even if we think we are too sophisticated for stories—even if we think our beliefs should have been laid out in solid, academic discourse like they do in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology—this book we call the Bible is fundamentally *a story*.

It is a story about who God is and what he has done and about who we are and what we have done. And it is a story that is going in a particular direction.

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So this morning, I'm going to read you a story—or at least *parts* of a story—from the Bible we read to our kids when they were younger. It's called *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (a wonderful children's bible, by the way!).

You each have a copy of part one of our confession of faith in your bulletins. There are seven statements there. I am going to be reading you stories from the children's story bible. For each part of the story, there will be an image taken from this book.

I will make some comments along the way, and you can follow along with the elements of our confession, but the main thing I want us to hear this morning is our faith as a story.

There's a lot that will have to be left out of the story this morning. We're going to fill in the story over the next 9 or 10 weeks. But it's important to get the big picture.

What I hope we will see in starting our series this way is that we are always confessing **two things**:

1. We are confessing that certain things happened in history, that certain events took place, that God has said and done certain things throughout history.
2. We are confessing that this story is also *our* story. It doesn't just tell us a bunch of things that happened a long time ago that we need to understand and believe in order to be saved, but that this story that we tell or confess tells the truth about *our* lives here and now.

So, imagine you are sitting on your couch before bed... Maybe you've got some hot chocolate or popcorn... Maybe you've got your favourite blanket.

It's story time.

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Part One: Creation

Storybook Bible, 18

We confess that God created the heavens and the earth through his powerful word. God makes life happen.

I think that one of the deepest needs we have as human beings is the need to know that we are not accidents, that we *matter*, that there was some *purpose* behind our being here. We need to believe that we were meant to be and that the beauty and wonder of our world are not just things that happened to come about.

Our story tells us that this is true. There are a wide variety of interpretations of the opening chapters of Genesis, but what our confession of faith states, very simply, is that God created *everything* through his word.

He wanted this world to be. He wanted you and I to be. He intended it. There is a good purpose and a plan behind our lives and our world.

But there is a twist in the story... We all know that things didn't stay perfect in Eden. We know that the deception and disobedience entered the story. We know that there was a tempter who led Adam and Eve astray...

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Part Two: Fall

Storybook Bible, 30, 33-34

We confess that human beings disrupted God's purposed for the created order.

GK Chesterton once wrote that Original Sin "is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved," by which he meant that the fact of sin is "a fact as practical as potatoes."

Throughout history, there have been innumerable theories about how sin and evil are transmitted, whether it is through social causes and ongoing patterns of bad choices and their consequences, or biological causes or any other number of causes.

In truth, it's probably all of the above and more.

But what Chesterton said I think all of us know and experience in our bones. Something isn't right.

We see evil in the people around us. Many of you have no doubt heard the stories over the last few weeks in Calgary and in Pitt Meadows of gang rapes by teenagers that are subsequently broadcasted over the Internet. We are horrified when we hear

these things. What's wrong with people? How can people be so horrible to one another? How can things go so bad?

Something isn't right in our own lives either. Sin affects the decisions we make, the reactions we have, our behaviours and attitudes, the ways that we hurt people even when we don't want to and even when we love them.

Something isn't right in our world either. We see war and injustice and violence and oppression and greed and hatred and we feel powerless to even make a tiny impact.

And what our story tells us is that our choices as human beings *matter* and that from the very first humans, we have introduced pain and disunity and evil into God's good world.

We are responsible for sin. We are "people of the lie," to use Scott Peck's phrase. We believe untruths about our situation—we believe that we can go our own way, that we don't need God or each other. And our world staggers under the weight of the pain we have brought into the world.

The story of the fall is *our* story. But it's not the end of the story.

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Part Three: Covenant

Storybook Bible, 56, 58-59

"We confess that God the Deliverer acted." God began his rescue project through one man, one family, who would become one nation (Israel) out of which would come *another* man who would open the doors for the family of God to include all the nations of the earth.

God starts small, though. And he always works through ordinary human beings. God doesn't just save as individuals, God calls communities of people to be the vehicles for his saving story.

We are a part of God's story. We're right there in the middle of it, moving the plot forward. Regular, sinful, dearly loved children of God sharing his love with the world.

A love that his people discovered would be demonstrated in most unexpected way. Turning the page...

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Part Four: Jesus

Storybook Bible, 176, 204-06

We confess that God *came*. God came to us in Jesus. God sent good news for our bad situation.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the sin and death and evil that we introduced and maintain in the world was defeated.

It is the climax of the story. It's where the hero wins and the villain is defeated. It's where goodness and light triumph. It's where the Rescue begins.

Jesus is God's answer to the problem of a world gone bad.

But it's just the beginning. The darkness still lingers. In Jesus, the victory has been initiated and guaranteed, but not completed. So what now?

On to the next part of the story...

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Part Six: Pentecost/Church

Storybook Bible, 326, 329, 331-32

We confess that God sent his Spirit and established his church to proclaim God's reign and give witness to the new creation.

God always moves the story forward through a community. The church is how the love and the healing power of Christ makes its way into the world. Like salt and light, like a city on a hill, like a mustard seed that grows and grows...

The church is how people meet Jesus. The church exists across space and time and around the world, but wherever it exists, it is to **keep telling the story** of a God who loved the world enough to give himself for it.

The church—here in Nanaimo and around the world—is entrusted with this story, to keep on telling it, keep on living it.

And we know how the story will end. We have clues and images and promises, written down by an old man in a prison cell on an Island two thousand years ago...

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Part Seven: New Creation

Storybook Bible, 348

We confess that “the new creation will be complete when Christ returns.”

And Christ *will* return.

The Author of our Story is the beginning and the end. One day, heaven and earth will be brought together and sin and evil will be judged and finally defeated.

And everything will be more wonderful for having been so sad.

This is our story. This is our confession of faith.

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I’m not going to close with an “explanation,” because I want the story to do the preaching today.

I want to close, rather, with a passage of Scripture. We’ve heard a children’s story this morning, well here’s one of the first verses we ever learn as kids.

John 3:16-21:

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

In many ways, these two verses summarize the story we have heard this morning, the story that frames our confession, the story that we will spend from now until Advent unpacking and explaining and reflecting on.

God loves the world—with a Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.

God sent his Son to save the world.

Those who make this story their story will be with him for eternity.

May God give us the will to learn and to love and to confess God’s wonderful story.

Amen.



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