

In Which We Enter the Story
Joshua 4: 20-24; Luke 20: 9-19
January 4, 2015
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I. Introduction

On Christmas Eve in 1925, the *London Evening Post* published a story called *The Wrong Sort of Bees*. The author of the story, Alan Alexander Milne, was a fairly well-known writer in his day. He was a regular contributor to the *Punch* magazine, wrote a lot of poetry and essays, and was a fairly well-known playwright as well. But this was his first foray into children's stories. And on that Christmas Eve, he introduced the public to a character that we all now know as Winnie the Pooh.

Every January here at Metropolitan, we do something a little bit different which is that we gear our sermon series around a topic that is intended to be invitational to those who are not regular churchgoers. They are a sermon series that are aimed at being a little bit less fraught with theological jargon and a lot of church language and are intended to be an opportunity to invite in people into the life of our church who are on a spiritual quest but may not have found a church that is a welcoming place where they can explore that quest. So, if you're a visitor here this morning, I'm delighted that you're here and welcome your presence. And if you're a regular, this is a great month to invite somebody that you may know who's not a regular churchgoer, who finds church off-putting, to come and join us and see what church can be like in a way that hopefully is a little bit more user friendly, lower barriers.

This month we're going to be looking at some of the wisdom of Winnie the Pooh. We're going to explore the wonderful ways that Pooh has of sort of poking holes in some of our intellectual pretentiousness and some of the ways that Pooh has of warning us against the dangers of pushing too hard on our own agenda. And Pooh is ripe material for exploring, because like all great children's literature, Pooh both speaks to and delights our young folks but also has some deep wisdom to offer us as well.

II. Living into Stories

In that first story on Christmas Eve in 1925, A.A. Milne tells a story about Winnie the Pooh discovering a nest of honeybees high up in a tree and trying to figure out how to get to that honey. He starts off by simply climbing the tree, but it's a fairly tall tree and Pooh slips along the way and falls into a gorse bush at the base of the tree, and A.A. Milne writes these words, "Pooh crawled out of the gorse bush, brushed the prickles from his nose and began to think again and the first person he thought of was Christopher Robin." And then, Milne does a little aside which you can see in the text of the story because it's all written in italics and he says, "Was that me?" said Christopher Robin in an odd voice, hardly daring to believe it. "That was you." Christopher Robin said nothing but his eyes got larger and larger and his face got pinker and pinker.

Milne wrote these wonderful stories for his young son, Christopher Robin Milne, and he populated the stories with all the stuffed animals that were part of Christopher Robin's world. And then he does something that's very interesting and was quite brilliant, which is he puts Christopher Robin as a character in the story that he's reading to Christopher Robin. It's a very interesting and wonderful twist and would've been amazing to watch happen if you happen to be sitting with Christopher Robin in your lap, hearing those stories for the first time.

That's an interesting and I think helpful place to start reflecting on the stories of Pooh because what Milne has done for Christopher Robin is in many ways what the writers of scripture do for us, which is to provide an opportunity for us to engage in and be participants in God's story.

We spent a lot of time last fall reflecting on the power of story, the power stories have to shape us and teach us and the power our stories have to shape and teach the people around us and we explored that as a new model for what evangelism might look like. Milne goes, of course, a step further by placing the primary hearer of the story in the story itself. And while stories of scripture are often framed in a way to teach and inspire us, they are often also written in a way that is intended intentionally to involve us, and the story that we have in our Gospel lesson today is one of those. This is important because it is very easy for us in particularly a well-educated, affluent congregation like Metropolitan to keep the stories of scripture at an arm's length. They're frankly more comfortable to hear that way.

We love in our sermons, in our Bible studies, in our Sunday school classes to unpack all of the historical critical material around a story; we love to delve into the socioeconomic background of a story; we love to hear the history and hear more about the people that are part of the story. And that's all good and important stuff but it sometimes feels to me as though we use that as an opportunity to keep the story at an arm's length so that it doesn't necessarily involve us.

III. Moral Imagination

Jesus, in today's Gospel lesson, tells us a very powerful and very uncomfortable story about religious hypocrisy and he tells it to the people at the same time that the religious leaders are also standing in the crowd listening, and the scribes and the chief priests who hear the story recognize immediately that Jesus is talking about them, that Jesus has placed them as characters in the story. And they're not happy about it. They're not good characters. And they, of course, use that immediately to start plotting Jesus' downfall.

But I will share with you that as easy as it is to condemn the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus spends so much time condemning, I will at least give them this: They had the emotional honesty and the integrity to recognize themselves in the story and that's something that we're not always good at doing.

In general, however, this is exactly what the texts are inviting us to do. Whenever we encounter a biblical text, and I see this over and over again in the life of our church, the first question that most of us ask is, "What does that text mean? Explain it to me, Pastor, what does that text mean? What is that text about?" And I wonder what it would look like if instead our first question was not, "Explain the text to me." What if our first question was, "Where am I in that story? Who am I in that story? What character am I in the story that I just heard?" Set aside all of the history and all of the Biblical critical work that has been done by scholars, "Who am I in the story? What character do I resonate with? What character repels me and why?"

See, the writers of the Bible understood that one of the most powerful ways that God has of speaking to us is when we can move below the level of our intellectual curiosity and start to engage our emotional reality. And stories have a very powerful way of doing that if we let them in or rather if we let ourselves into the story and chances are that when we start asking those kinds of questions, we open up our ears to hear God in a different sort of way.

IV. Spiritual Imagination

The idea that God is speaking to us directly in the readings of these scriptures is also part of a spiritual discipline that we call *lectio divina*, and you all have heard me talk about *lectio* before as one of the great tools in our chest of tools around prayer. And we have a men's *lectio divina* group that meets here on Thursday mornings which any of you men would be welcome to join us at. And part of the process of *lectio* is reading through a passage several times, the same passage, just a handful of verses, in a very slow, reflective way, and listening for what word or phrase raises itself up. It's a very common way of doing *lectio*. There is a way that many of the great spiritual leaders of our church have also used that is a form of *lectio* that's focused just on narrative passages.

And again, it's a process of reading the story through a couple of times to get very familiar with it and then setting the text aside and trying to imagine what it would be like to be in that story. So, it's getting familiar enough with the arc of the story to set the actual text down and close your eyes and start thinking about what did that day feel like. Was it hot? Was it windy? What were the sounds like? If it's a rural setting, maybe we hear sheep off in the distance or birds. If it's in the middle of Jerusalem, maybe we hear the hubbub of urban life. What are the smells as that little boy passes around the broken fish and the broken bread? What do we taste as the bread and the cup are passed?

And the *lectio* process is a process of deeply living into that story, making ourselves part of the story, and then listening to the words that get spoken. And then often, at the end of that meditation, letting all of the picture dissipate and taking a moment to be in dialogue with Christ and to hear what words Christ seeks to speak to

us. It's a technique that many of the great saints of our church have found a very powerful way of hearing God's voice anew.

V. Ritual Imagination

In our Hebrew scripture lesson from Joshua this morning, the story takes place just as the children of Israel are passing into the Promise Land, and just as had happened at the Red Sea, as Joshua strikes the water, the Jordan parts and the children of Israel walk through the Jordan on dry land to get into the Promise Land. And as the waters parted, Joshua tells the people to have each tribe take up a huge stone from the bed of the river and bring the stone out of the bed of the river and set them in a large pile on the side of the river, and that pile of stones is to remind them about their travel across the river in safety and it's to inspire a question on the part of the children in the upcoming generations who may pass by that pile of river washed stones. The goal is to get them to ask, how did those stones get there, and then allow the parents to re-tell the story of God's saving work as God brought the children into the Promise Land.

And if that process sounds familiar, it should because this is, of course, exactly what our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community do at Passover every single year. They gather around the table and they reenact that last supper before they left Egypt, and the youngest child at the table says to the oldest person, "Why is tonight different than every other night?" And then, the story gets retold, but not retold as a far off story that happened thousands of years ago, but a story that happened then and is happening now to us as God continues the process of bringing us to freedom. It's a way of making that historic event part of our current experience, part of our current reality so that we become participants in that event.

In Hebrew, the word "to remember" is not to think back on something that happened. It's an active word that involves a word or an action that sparks engagement in that event. Larry Stookey in his wonderful book on the Eucharist says that for Jews and early Christians, "remembrance was a corporate act," -- it means we all do it together -- "in which the event remembered was experienced anew through ritual repetition." That is what happens every time we celebrate the Eucharist. We go through a ritual repetition of Jesus' last moments and in that process, we become participants, we gather around the table with Jesus and hear those words and hear that promise of eternal life and salvation and forgiveness. Every time we gather, we experience that night anew and make ourselves participants at it.

There's a wonderful passage in one of the Winnie the Pooh stories when Eeyore has a birthday. I don't know if you remember this, but Eeyore has a birthday and everybody forgets it, of course. When Pooh realizes it, he runs home and he gets the only thing of value that he has to give to Eeyore which is a big pot of honey. Well, he eats the honey as he's going to Eeyore but at least he's got a great pot. And Piglet runs home to get a balloon and he runs with the balloon back over to Eeyore and he falls and pops the balloon, but he gives Eeyore what he has. And Eeyore is just

delighted to have this popped balloon and this jar, and he takes the balloon in and out of the jar, that's his new toy.

At the end of the story, A.A. Milne says Christopher Robin asks, "And didn't I give Eeyore anything?" asked Christopher Robin sadly. "Of course, you did," I said. "You gave him don't you remember a little --" "I gave him a box of paints to paint things with." "That was it." "Why didn't I give it to him in the morning when Pooh did?" "You were so busy getting his party ready for him. He had a cake with icing on top and three candles and his name written in pink sugar." "Ah, yes. Now I remember," said Christopher Robin. See, what A.A. Milne does is he places Christopher Robin in the story in a way that Christopher Robin now starts to become part of the narrative. Every time we walk to this table, what we're invited to do is to say, "Ah, yes. Now I remember."

VI. Conclusion

In the stories of Winnie the Pooh, A.A. Milne will offer us a great deal of wonderful wisdom from a bear with very little brain. And next week we're going to start digging into some of the specifics of some of those stories a little bit more, but I thought it would be helpful this morning to hear A.A. Milne's first invitation which is to not sit safely on the sidelines and listen to the stories out there, analyzing and evaluating, as is our wont, but to take the opportunity to jump into the stories with both feet so that they become our stories, so that we become part of God's story. We become part of the story every time we walk forward to take communion; we become part of the story every time we gather with the Washington Interfaith Network to advocate on behalf of justice, we become part of the story every time we look into the eyes of a stranger and see the Risen Christ.

Amen.