



Telling our stories
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2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14, Luke 9: 51-62
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Some of you will be familiar with the Crowded House song *Four Seasons in One Day*. That song was written in part about the weather in Melbourne, but it could just as easily be about Auckland, certainly at this time of year when we often experience *Four Seasons in One Day*. Has anyone else here recently left home on what you thought was a clear crisp mid-winter day, only to be caught in the rain? Years ago, I remember such a day when on the way to an uncle's home I got soaked to the skin. As I walked in the door looking like a drowned rat my uncle asked "how are you?". Without thinking I said, "what an utterly terrible day." He grinned and simply said, "no it's a good day, just bad weather." It was a simple point, but one I took to heart. The day is what we make it after all.

Narrative therapy is a form of pastoral care where people are encouraged to think about the way they tell their own story. Because the way we tell our stories matters. Our perspective shapes how we experience life and the world around us. Sometimes, we need to find new ways of telling our stories, to help make sense of our experiences in a new way. This concept is helpful because it reminds us of the incredible power we have to reshape ourselves and our understanding of all things. At its best, changing how we tell our personal narrative can be an incredibly liberating experience. Because sometimes, our perspective needs to be interrogated, because as much as we think we know, we all have gaps in our understanding. As human beings we are wired to find meaning in things, and we do this primarily through story telling.

But knowing this, we also need to know that sometimes our stories are not as reliable as we think.

Years ago, when Cate and I were both at theological college, one of our fellow students died very suddenly. In fact, he died during one of our classes. In the days following his death people shared the stories of what had happened and started to weave together the different threads of narrative that were part of that event. In the face of this tragedy, the college community tried to make sense of what had happened. And as part of that, some people began to reflect on just how busy our friend and colleague had been in the days before his death. And the question arose as to whether our friend maybe had a sense that he wouldn't be with us much longer. There is no clear answer to that question.

For those who are familiar with the musical Hamilton, part of that story also centres on the experience of a life cut short. The title character of that musical Alexander Hamilton died at the age of 47 having been shot in a duel. Throughout the musical, as the life story of Hamilton is told, other characters constantly comment on how prolific he was, how incredibly busy and driven he seemed to be. For example, in one song he is asked repeatedly "Why do you write, like you're running out of time?" In this way the musical tries to make sense of what was a senseless death, by suggesting that Hamilton did the best with the time he had.

This same narrative is present throughout the Gospels. While the Gospel's recount the life of Jesus, they are not a biography. The Gospel's are the stories of communities trying to make sense of a life. More than that they are also a theological text, because they are not just dealing with the story of Jesus, they are also engaging with the story of God's relationship to humanity, as well as humanity's response to God. In the midst of all that, there is also the issue of a life cut short.

In today's gospel we can see one way that the early church retold the story of Jesus. Just like the stories told after the death of

that theology student, and the death of Alexander Hamilton, Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as driven to get things done in the limited time he had before him. There is a sense of urgency to the ministry of Jesus, which was written from the perspective of those who believed that the ministry of Jesus happened over a short period of time. And I say they believed that, because this is actually a gap in our knowledge. The gospels do not agree on how old Jesus was, or how many years he ministered for. While I grew up being told that Jesus died at 33, that age is little more than a guess. There is a range of thought on which year Jesus was born in, let alone when he died.

The point here is that life often doesn't fit neatly into the stories we tell. Life is complex, and our stories which try to make sense of this world can tend towards simplicity. The problem here is when we become trapped within our simple stories and forget that our version of the story is not the only story or perspective available, we can become rigid and unable to change.

If we can accept that maybe, just maybe, Jesus wasn't actually running from one spot to the next across the Judean wilderness as if each moment might be his last, we might discover something new in the Gospel story. Maybe we can find deeper appreciation for the Jesus who loved people, not because time was short, but because love can be found in every moment. If we free Jesus from this idea of compulsive overworking, we gain a better perspective on how Jesus lived, as a person who brings peace, love, and reconciliation to all. For me that story becomes more powerful, when freed from the notion that Jesus was somehow compelled to get as much done in the time he had.

Earlier this month I dared to suggest that there is another narrative that needs to be challenged. It's the narrative of hopelessness, the narrative that tells us that things are getting worse, and will only get worse. That is also a very simple story. It's compelling because we live in a time when we have access to so much information that we can be easily overwhelmed. Wars,

genocide, poverty, social inequality, racism, the climate crisis, these are news stories that face us every day. And it is incredibly easy to fall into the simple story that these problems are too big, and we are too small.

We must recognise this simple narrative for what it is, so that we can turn our attention to finding other perspectives. It's not that we ignore the challenges, but we need to temper despair with an acceptance of the complexity of life. That simple shift in our thinking sets us free to look for alternatives, because there are alternatives. Yes our understanding of the world has grown, but we should not be limited to only seeing our problems. We need to expand our perspective to allow for new more complex solutions. We have the power to change the narrative. Hope might not be right word for what we need, after all that is a simplistic approach. Perhaps the first step is simply to recognise narratives of hopeless and despair, and then to ask ourselves if there are other ways of understanding those stories?

Are you able to recognise a simple story you tell yourself? I'd suggest that a global crisis is not the right place to start. Maybe just a story with slightly lower stakes such as, I'm the only person who packs the dishwasher properly. If you are able to identify one, maybe ask yourself if there is another way of telling that story? A way that is more generous to yourself, and maybe more generous to others as well.