

Lent 1, 14 February 2016, Knox Church, Dunedin, John Franklin

I am grateful to Kerry for the privilege of being with you today.

I was last in Knox a month ago to joyfully conduct my son's wedding.

Kerry and I have known each other since 1973.

I was Assistant Minister at St David's Auckland, and Kerry was a young lawyer.

These days i am an Anglitarian with my Presbyterian and Anglican identities, a Presbyterian minister and an Anglican priest.

My last position, was chaplain to the Bishop of Dunedin, Kelvin Wright.

Now I am doing mainly spiritual direction and ministry supervision, and I hear lots of stories, stories about how people are in their work, relationships, and how they are in God.

We tell stories about our lives, first of all to ourselves.

And in this last week I have heard myself talking to myself.

I am running a 6 day silent retreat in the Maniototo at the end of the month.

And I have been wondering, have I got the costs right?

Numbers are not my thing.

Will the cook manage people's food requirements because one retreatant can't cope with even the merest speck of gluten?

Will I have time to get all the preparations done because I am away the week before?

People are from various denominations so which eucharistic liturgies should I use?

And what shall I say when it's my turn to preach or speak?

And all the questions can generate anxiety.

But am I an anxious person?

Not really.

So I can choose to listen to another story.

I actually have a lot of experience in running retreats.

It is about making space for the Holy Presence.

God runs these events, not me.

I see people becoming still, and letting go.

See them opening like flowers.

I see transformation, and renewal happen as people respond to the love that gave them birth. I can't make anything happen.

My role is to make space for God.

And that's a different story, generating a different sense of identity.

Which story is true?

Well, the thing is, both those stories are true.

But what matters is the story I choose to tell, which one I listen to.

Because that story will affect my behaviour and attitude, the way I interact with my fellow retreat leaders and the retreatants.

Stories are very powerful things.

They are statements of identity, how we see ourselves and our world.

What are the stories you tell about your life?

What are the stories you tell – to yourself or other people - about your childhood, your work, your marriage, your most significant relationships, your faith?

And how do those stories influence your behaviour, attitudes relationships and sense of identity?

And how do we tell our stories?

Do we tell stories of tragedy, disaster stories of *Burning Inferno* proportions?

Or do we tell stories grounded in grace, stories of growth and reliance on God; stories of God's goodness, grace and provision?

What matters is the story you choose to tell because stories create identity.

We live in a world of competing stories.

In such a world, we must know the Christian story in order to resist the false stories that seek to take us captive and subvert us.

And we look today at Jesus in the wilderness.

As we read Luke's version of the temptations of Jesus carefully, we can see two competing stories: the story that Jesus taps into in order to resist the devil and successfully navigate the temptations laid before him, and the narrative the devil presents.

Jesus is in the wilderness.

Wilderness... A key part of Israel's story.

We heard Deuteronomy 26.

"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.

He went to Egypt.

There we were persecuted.

We cried to the Lord.

He saw our oppression and he delivered us, and testing us in the wilderness, brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey".

This story has sustained Jewish people persecuted for untold generations in Europe and traumatised by the 20th century holocaust.

Jesus is in the wilderness - the 'wilder-ness'.

And wildly assaulted for 40 days.

"Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil."

He lived it out; prayed it out before he taught it to us.

"Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil."

And the last three assaults of the devil are aimed at the heart of Jesus' identity.

Twice the devil begins his temptation by calling into question Jesus' identity as the Son of God with the words "if you are the Son of God" followed by a challenge to prove this identity with some miraculous display.

"Come on, you've done your time. You need to eat. A little bread is perfectly legitimate. You can do it."

And...

"You can win the people over no problem. Do something dramatic. Jump off the temple. You know the angels will catch you. It would be stunning."

But Jesus has another story.

His identity was confirmed by Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, and John the Baptist. And he knows his genealogy as reported in Luke 3.

Jesus did not have to do anything to prove his identity or to earn recognition as the Son of God. He knew the real story, a story that saved him in the time of trial and delivered him from evil. His identity, honour, and status was rooted in God.

He did not need to gain these things by taking the devil's story seriously.

"Make bread, worship me, jump off the temple."

No need.

Jesus' sense of self, his identity, needed no self promotion.

His responses are rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than self for life, glory, and identity.

And us?

What are the roots of our identity?

Are we what we have the power to do?

Or do we know ourselves as God-creations, living in Christ?

I overheard at my sons' wedding a dear friend being asked, "What are you doing these days?" She is in her 70s, and the questioner in her 20s. "I'm diminishing," she replied. "Less of me, and more of Jesus." The 20 something was quite startled, but our friend knows her primal identity is in God; she doesn't have to accomplish or achieve anything to prove who she is. She is a very active woman, but she doesn't need to do anything to establish an identity.

She knows her story is rooted in God.

And it's not just individuals that tell stories.

Families tell stories, nations, organisations, and churches tell stories about who they are. And these stories affect everything they do.

Pope Francis was calling for a change of story when he recently said, "Shall we continue our medieval religious practices in a medieval paradigm and mechanistic culture and undergo extinction? Or shall we wake up to this dynamic, evolutionary universe and the rise of consciousness toward an integral wholeness?"

And I wonder what stories the Knox community tells about itself?

Is Knox just a noble history?

Or part of this dynamic, evolutionary universe and its rise of consciousness toward an integral wholeness?"

Is Knox a prayer centre for the city, holding us all before God in prayer?

Perhaps this is a mother church of the area, a place of significant celebrations, a place of joyful new beginnings in baptism and marriage, or where we farewell loved members of our community?

Perhaps Knox is a God-space, the peaceful spirit-filled centre of the city where people can come for peaceful reflection, for beautiful music and liturgy, for a rest from their busy lives?

Perhaps you are the place where significant civic events, are infused with God's love and grace?

All good.

Stories of identity.

God stories.

Lent.

It is a time for Christians to ground identity in God.

Jesus knew who he was.

Who are we?

If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

What will you be remembered for?

Your love? Your being a Christ-bearer?

If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear ourselves try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who we are but of what our heart's desire is, and where our ultimate sense of meaning lies.

And the story of Jesus in the wilderness is a pointer for us.

We say in the Apostle's Creed, I believe in God the Father Almighty...

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord...

I believe in the Holy Spirit...

Etymologically, 'I believe' means I draw love from, I draw life from, I find identity in...'

In other words, my life is not about me.

It is more than me.

It is part of the bigness of God.

My ultimate identity is an expression of the creativity of God; a sacred story.

So as Lent begins, we may be wearing sackcloth and ashes, or the white robes of delight, or a bit of both, but we may we say with 2nd Timothy "I know in whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard all that I have entrusted to him."

And the Lord is his name.

~~~~~

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

***growing in courage to live the Jesus way***



**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)