Session 5:
The Importance of Story for Forming Lives and Ministry

GUIDING QUESTIONS

How do we tell our individual and collective faith stories in the Northwest and in our church? Why does it matter?

ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND READING

"Living the Story," by Diana Butler Bass *(attached).* Consider making copies of this article for class participants. Permission has been granted through the Alban Institute, provided the credit line is included on all copies.

PREPARATION

- Blank paper, markers and tapes for gathering activity
- Items for altar/worship area
- Copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or other resource for reading Psalm 19
- Newsprint/whiteboard/overhead, etc.
- Handout: "The Importance of Stories" (2 sides)
- Optional handout: "Living the Story" by Diana Butler Bass (2 sides)

GATHERING
10 minutes

As people enter, have them come up with symbols for Salmon Nation/the Pacific Northwest. Hand out blank sheets of paper for them to draw them (and label if necessary) – one symbol per sheet. Post these on the wall. (Other alternatives are lining a wall with newsprint and having people draw symbols on it or given people play-dough for shaping symbols.) Generate as many symbols as possible, including symbols that are natural (Douglas fir, salmon, mountains, ocean, river) as well as cultural (Space Needle, Starbucks coffee cup, Microsoft logo, International Peace Arch).

WELCOMING ACTIVITY
5 minutes

Ask participants to give their name (if necessary) and share one symbol from those on the wall that has meaning for their faith life and why.

OPENING WORSHIP
5 minutes

- Light the candle in your worship area.
- Begin with a short prayer.
- Read Psalm 19:1-7 (*ELW* version preferred)
- Read or sing *ELW* 736, "God the Sculptor of the Mountain"

PARTNER ACTIVITY
10 minutes

- Allow a minute or two of quiet for participants to reflect on their faith lives and come up with one story of a faith-filled experience to share, perhaps something related to the symbol they chose. This could be a moving worship experience, a sacred time of death or birth, a conversation with a faith mentor, etc.
- Have people share their story in pairs. As one partner talks, the other simply focuses on listening respectfully.
- In the large group, briefly discuss the experience of being listened to and of listening.
- Point out that one of the themes of the Salmon Nation project is the importance of stories for the faith and vitality of our congregations: eliciting them, listening to them, and reframing or recasting them where needed.

LARGE GROUP SHARING
29 minutes

Distribute the handout "The Importance of Stories" and allow time to read it.

- Ask for reactions to the handout.
- In the large group, tell some of the stories that define your congregation, and list on newsprint the titles you come up with for these stories. (Examples: "When the church burned down;" "Opening the homeless shelter;" "Becoming a church that cares for creation.")

Reflect on your stories, using the questions below to guide your discussion.*

- What do your stories say about your church? Are you engaged in vital ministry? Welcoming to outsiders? Reflective of the context of the Northwest? How are you responding to the gifts, yearnings and needs of this place (see lists created in previous sessions)? Which biblical stories resonate with your congregation's stories?
- Which stories or scripts does your congregation need to proclaim? To change/reframe?
- Which symbols from this session's gathering activity resonate with your congregation's stories? What would it look like to incorporate these into your congregation's ministry and liturgy?
- How does your congregation continue to elicit and tell your stories? How can your encourage this?
- Because of the weakness of religious institutions in the Northwest, we often view ministry here as a struggle. Can we reframe this narrative? What are the gifts and joys of doing ministry in this place?

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*Another set of questions that are useful for reflecting on a story from a congregation is:

- What is God doing here?
- What are the people doing?
- What can we learn?

CLOSING
1 minute

Close with this blessing from the Iona Community in Glasgow:

Bless to us, O God,
the moon that is above us,
the earth that is beneath us,
the friends who are around us,
your image deep within us. Amen.

"Living the Story"

by Diana Butler Bass

For three years, I researched vital mainline Protestant congregations. Armed with a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., I studied fifty churches to determine if there existed a common pattern of spiritual vibrancy and shared practices that strengthened communal life. Sifting through thousands of pages of data, my team pieced together both an overall pattern and leading practices in the study group, thus developing a picture of religious change, emerging vitality, and potential futures for mainline Protestantism.

As a result of this project, many clergy groups have invited me to share my findings; I estimate that I have now addressed nearly 20,000 clergy and lay leaders across the United States (with a good number of Canadians in the mix). From place to place, people asked a variety of questions, engaging the research in productive ways. At every event, however, someone raised questions of leadership: "What did you observe about leadership? What kind of leadership nurtures the kind of vitality you found? What are the characteristics of the leaders in these congregations?" I quickly realized that in most cases people were asking me how they could lead their congregations into a richer life in God. And, sadly, they felt frustrated in their own attempts to be good leaders. The questions seemed to come from their own spiritual hunger, a nagging sense of failure as congregational leaders, or anxiety about their leadership performance.

My research team did not directly study leadership in vital congregations — we hoped to make that the topic of a later grant. Early on, I actually tried to avoid questions of leadership, feeling vaguely inadequate to address the topic and having no specific data to share. I worry that leadership is difficult to discuss and prone to "magic bullet" solutions of quick-fix gurus. The questions kept coming, however, and although I had no hard data, I realized that I had observed good leadership in the participating congregations. In *The Practicing Congregation*, the first book published about the project, I identified an emerging style of "narrative leadership" for congregational renewal.

Narrative leadership is a deceptively simple principle: *know your story and live it.* Some people know stories and tell them well but live without intentional connection to those stories; others simply experience quotidian life with no reflection on larger stories of meaning. In vital mainline churches, leaders knew their stories and lived them — thus turning the power of narrative into a source of and resource for change.

Story Shapes Leadership

The stories about American religion shape our expectations of leadership. For example, "the Titanic" storyline dominates how we talk about mainline Protestantism. We think of mainline Protestant denominations as a doomed ocean liner; the ship has hit an iceberg (political conflict, numerical decline, or some other crisis) and is sinking. Denominational officials are accused of "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic." People regularly remark, "We're going down," or "We can't turn this ship around." Once, I heard an Episcopalian refer to her priest as "the chaplain on the Titanic."

If we think of churches as the Titanic, that has serious implications for leadership—our bishops, conference ministers, pastors, and priests are required to rescue us. Throw people in lifeboats. Fix the big hole in the ship. Save whoever—and whatever—can be saved. From this perspective, leadership is an emergency rescue operation, heroic but hopeless. We all know the end of the story. The ship will sink. The best our leaders can

do is to save a few—and maybe themselves. No wonder so many pastors are anxious and depressed. Who wants to lead in this scenario?

But what if the Titanic is not the story? A better story—and perhaps more accurate in current circumstances—may be that of the Mayflower. In this story, a boat of pilgrims finds itself in uncharted seas, blown off course by a storm and heading to an unnamed country. Like the Titanic story, there is a sense of urgency, confusion, and fear. But the ship is intact as it sails off course from the intended colony of Virginia. Here, leaders are not trying to patch the hull or load lifeboats. They are not praying for a miracle. Instead, they look for land. They keep calm, providing focus, vision, and direction while they navigate the choppy and unfamiliar seas of the north Atlantic. Once they do reach land, leaders envision a way to structure the new community and take part in building a new life.

In the Titanic story, leaders lead while the ship is sinking. In the Mayflower story, leadership stabilizes a pilgrim community in choppy seas as they head for an unknown world. Leadership in a crisis? Or leadership as an adventure? How a leader leads and the expectations a community has about leadership depend on the stories we tell ourselves.

Leaders Shape Stories

Closely related to this is the capacity of leaders to shape stories. These days, one of the primary capacities of good leadership is to enable people to understand change, interpret chaos, and make sense of a seemingly meaningless world. There are a variety of ways for leaders to make meaning—some religions practice this sort of leadership through creedal conformity, dictates, demands, or intellectual certainty. But another route to meaning-making is through storytelling.

Throughout my research on vital mainline churches, both clergy and congregational leaders were storytellers. They knew their own faith stories, they knew the stories of their congregations, they knew their tradition's stories, and they knew the larger Christian and biblical stories. They exhibited ease and comfort in sharing these stories and invited others into a variety of stories in natural and authentic ways. In the process, they opened paths for other people to learn and tell stories of faith. And they ably moved between personal, congregational, and biblical stories to create worlds of spiritual and theological meaning. They intuited the power of story to rearrange people's lives—using story in much the same way Jesus did—and to open windows to spiritual realities and alternative paths that sometimes escape life's more mundane interpretations.
And, of course, storytelling leaders have the ability to change the story in which they exercise leadership! Scripts can be rewritten. A good leader will be able to move a congregation away from deadening and fear-filled stories, like that of the Titanic, toward life-giving possibilities of faithful adventure.

Diana Butler Bass's research on vital mainline Protestant congregations is featured in her books *The Practicing Congregation* and *Christianity for the Rest of Us* and in recent articles in *Newsweek* and *USA Today*. For more information, visit www.dianabutlerbass.com.

The Importance of Stories

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms. – Muriel Rekeyser

Conversation partner and religious sociologist **Diane Butler Bass** discussed the importance of narrative leadership:

> *Throughout my research on vital mainline churches, both clergy and congregational leaders were storytellers. They knew their own faith stories, they knew the stories of their congregations, they knew their tradition's stories, and they knew the larger Christian and biblical stories. They exhibited ease and comfort in sharing these stories and invited others into a variety of stories in natural and authentic ways. In the process, they opened paths for other people to learn and tell stories of faith. And they ably moved between personal, congregational, and biblical stories to create worlds of spiritual and theological meaning. They intuited the power of story to rearrange people's lives—using story in much the same way Jesus did—and to open windows to spiritual realities and alternative paths that sometimes escape life's more mundane interpretations.*
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>
> — from "Living the Story," *Alban Weekly,* 1/22/2007

Conversation partner and author **Tim Egan** commented on the importance of "story" in our region:

> *I think we are better readers and storytellers because of our climate. I'll tell you a little anecdote about that. I once asked a theater director why there was so much theater in the Northwest — and there really is, per person, more in these cities than anywhere — and he said, "Well, that's very simple. In a dark climate people like to go into a cave and tell stories."*

Tim Egan also pointed out that the Northwest is lacking an overarching narrative:

> *This is the problem the Northwest has. Every family, every country, every region needs [some] sort of a defining animating narrative. You pass it onto your children and you can live your life within the arch of your narrative. The Northwest doesn't have a regional narrative. The South has it. New England has it. The Plains have it … We don't have [a regional narrative.]. We really don't… So, the struggle of people in [this region] is finding a narrative you can inhabit. If you find something you can inhabit you can live your life comfortably. That's where religion really makes a big difference because it helps to give people something they can inhabit — a story they can inhabit. Most people in the Northwest don't have one. They've shed one.*
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> — from Salmon Nation Project discussion with Timothy Egan, June 5, 2006

Conversation partner **Martha Gies** wrote the book *Up All Night*, which tells the stories of over 20 people who work the graveyard shift in Portland, Oregon. She found simply listening to people share their stories changed them:

> *For me the overtly religious experience of [writing* Up All Night*] was … living out my belief of the human worth and human dignity of everybody. It was life-changing for some [of the people I interviewed]. For [me]*

to come in and ask about the story of their life and their dreams and how their work relates to that and to record it and to write it in a book and invite them and their family to come to the book readings—there were 25 book readings—was very important to them. Some of them changed jobs, interestingly enough. Some of them had been doing [the same work] for years and changed jobs….

Question: As a result of your interview you think they changed jobs?

I think so because they heard themselves say things like, "Martha, what I really want to do is ... but so far I'm doing…" And when I called them up a couple of years later and said the book is being published they were doing that thing [they wanted to do].

Martha also commented on how good liturgy relates to story-telling:

Question: If our liturgy is storytelling how do we do that the best here [in the Northwest]? How do we do storytelling and story listening as a religious practice in a fairly formal setting to help connect the yearnings we are talking about and the meanings that we want to make in this region?

… the very best liturgy I've ever got to be a part of … was done in St. Joseph's [Catholic Church] and it was where we ... were acting out story as a group. For instance, we did Easter vigil starting with a bonfire in front of the church … in one of those big barrels, after which we lit candles and we took them into a dark church. And the baptisms were timed so that the first sunlight came in through the rose window and struck where the [baptism font] was placed. You know, if everybody is doing that together you don't have to say a word. Another thing that they did [on Christ the King Sunday was that] they came into a dark church with banners flying in a long procession as somebody backstage rolled the lights on. It is a big church. But as those banners came in the lights rolled on, and I get goose bumps thinking about it. Or, on Good Friday we had a cross that was as long as an entire pew, and we'd pass it hand-over-hand … I would take all kinds of people there to touch that cross and to realize that if all of you don't hold that cross it is going to drop on your head. You don't have to say a word. So, there is a lot of participatory story.

—from Salmon Nation Project discussion with Martha Gies, Oct. 23, 2006

Commenting on a statement by Timothy Egan that *"water is the master architect of the Pacific Northwest,"* project participant **Laurie Larson Caesar** reflects about water as symbol and its role in our Northwest and Lutheran story:

Water as a possible symbol for our region intrigues me. Water drizzles on us for at least six months a year, flows abundantly in the Western half of our states, has fed us for dozens of generations, drove the Corps of Discovery to despair in the winter of 1805, has become the central motif of stickers in public school bathrooms ("Save Water for the Salmon!"), and sits at the heart of the political issue of the area – fishing rights, irrigation rights, salmon and dams. Water also flows through the heart our Christian tradition. Immersion into water is one of our primary sacraments; it is spiritual renewal, God's action, entrance into Christ's death and new life, and deeper connection with a new community with a new way of being. What would it look like if we took our connection to all water more seriously as Lutheran Christians? New rituals, new prayers, new garments … In Beaverton, for example, in the Fanno Creek watershed, what would happen if we baptized new Christians in that stream? Or at least water taken from that stream? Would we be more directly connected to the annual SOLV clean-up of that body of water? How might our faith and life be transformed? And might it speak to our many neighbors if we were articulate about that connection, explicit about our own history of "wild holiness."