

2021 03 14 – News of the World

John 3:14-21 (The Inclusive Bible)

My Grandpa Montgomery, my mother's father, was a storyteller. You always knew when Grandpa was about to tell a story because he began by saying, "I mind the time." Then he would share some escapade from his youth, like the Hallowe'en night that local boys took apart a vehicle and then re-assembled it on the roof of Bradley's school. As children, we would listen in awe to tales of mischief and glory and we would imagine the courage, the strength, the daring and foolishness it would take to commit such deeds.

This week's Lenten movie, *News of the World*, is also a tale of courage and strength, of daring and foolishness. It is a story about a storyteller. His name is Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd. The year is 1870 and Captain Kidd, a former officer in the Confederate Army, now makes a living travelling from town to town in northern Texas reading the newspapers to local audiences.

Following one such evening of news reading, Kidd sets out for his next location when he encounters an overturned wagon on the road. Dismounting to investigate further, Kidd finds the body of a Black soldier and then, a very much alive, young White girl. He sees her papers lying on the road and discovers that she is an orphan who was taken by a tribe of the Kiowa nation after they killed her parents. Her Kiowa family has now also been murdered and the soldier had been taking this young girl home, to live with her relatives. The girl's name is

Johanna, but Kidd soon realizes that she has lived with the Kiowa so long that Johanna speaks only their language and doesn't even recognize her name.

The Captain takes Johanna along with him to the next town and tries to convince those in authority to take her home. Soon, it becomes obvious that no one else is willing to take responsibility for this young girl. So our hero decides that he will change his normal route and begins a journey across dangerous territory to return Johanna to her aunt and uncle.

News of the World is a very entertaining film and one, I'm sure, that many of you would enjoy. It is the story of a relationship that begins to blossom between these two travelers as each attempts to understand the other's language. It is the story of their adventures as they travel through this untamed territory. It is the story of a tumultuous time in the history of the United States as the results of the Civil War are beginning to be felt in the far reaches of the country. It is a story of personal suffering caused by violence and war. It is a story of the power of the written and spoken word, the power of story itself.

As we all know, stories can have both positive and negative effects on our lives. In the movie, Kidd and Johanna come across a township where a man named Merritt Farley has created his own little fiefdom. He has managed to kill or drive away the Indigenous people and any others he deems "undesirable." All that are left work for him. Farley even controls the news by writing his own self-serving tabloid and restricting access to outside sources. It's obvious that "alternative truth" and "fake news" were not invented in the 21st century.

Captain Kidd is a reader of the news, a master storyteller, but at the same time, he is haunted by his own personal demons, the stories that he tells himself. He is tortured with memories of his role in the death and destruction of the Civil War. He carries a picture of his beloved wife, and yet he hasn't been back to San Antonio to visit her. It's obvious that Kidd is running from his own self, his own story. At one point he says to Johanna, in English, "We're all journeying across the prairie in a straight line and looking for that place to be. And when we find it, we go straight out, and we plow it, and we plant it, all in a straight line." She looks troubled and in Kiowa responds with the wisdom of the ages, "To move forward you must remember." It is obvious that her Kiowa family have taught Johanna the importance of story, of remembering, as a part of healing.

Like Captain Kidd, Jesus was a storyteller. We know that he often used stories or parables in his teaching. And, in today's passage, Jesus reminds his listeners of an ancient story from their own Hebrew scriptures, the story of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. In this particular story, Moses uses a snake on a stick as a symbol of God's healing power. When the Israelites gaze at the snake they are saved from the serpent's deadly venom. Jesus is using this story to explain that God's healing power is available to everyone. And that all we have to do is believe in, or turn ourselves towards, the power of God's love.

In this particular translation, Jesus refers to himself as the "Only Begotten One" and he says, "Yes, God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die but have eternal life." Jesus was a storyteller, his ministry had one purpose: to share the good news of God's love. Jesus told a

story of unconditional and everlasting love, a story of amazing grace. And he told that story not only with his words, but also in his actions. Throughout his ministry Jesus demonstrated the power of God's love through his healing miracles and also in the way that he welcomed everyone, even those on the margins.

Jesus' story was also about God's reign of peace and justice. Jesus taught that God wants us all to have eternal life, and not just in heaven, but on earth too. I love the way the Celtic theologian, John O'Donohue, describes it, he says, "I believe that this is what eternal life means: it is a life where all that we seek—goodness, unity, beauty, truth, and love—are no longer distant from us but are now completely present with us" (*Anam Cara*, page 229) That is the good news; that is Jesus' story.

In *News of the World* we see the power of love as it works its way through the lives of Johanna and Captain Kidd. We watch as they both experience its ability to heal. We watch as they remember and then recreate their own stories. We watch as they use the news of the world to entertain, to empower and to heal those around them.

Like Jesus, Captain Kidd and my Grandpa Montgomery, we are all storytellers. We all have stories that we have experienced, that we have been told, that we tell ourselves and that we share with others. Let them be stories of love, stories of grace, stories of healing, empowering stories of peace and justice for ourselves and for our world.

Amen.