

Is That Story True?
June 16, 2013
Rev. John L. Saxon

Readings

The readings this morning are from Yann Martel's book, *Life of Pi*, published in 2001.

"The world isn't just the way it is. [It is not just "the straight facts."]

"It is how we understand it.... And in understanding something, we bring something to it....

"The telling of something always becomes a story. Telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—is an invention. Just looking upon this world is an invention. Life is a story—an invention. [And so, life is a story—an invention.]

"The question is: which story do you prefer? Which is the better story?

"Do you want a story that won't surprise you? A story that will confirm what you already know? A story that won't make you see higher or further or differently? A flat, immobile story based on dry, yeastless factuality?

"To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.

"If you stumble about believability, what are you living for? Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?

"Stories are about the selective transforming of reality—the twisting of reality to bring out its [true] essence."

Sermon

I

Spoiler alert!!!

This sermon contains details about the plot and ending of *Life of Pi* (which, as they say, is now showing in a theater near you). If you haven't read the book or seen the movie and intend to do so, you may want to take a nap or put your fingers in your ears or leave now so you won't find out what happens to Pi or how the story ends. (Pause.) But it's too late now! So please don't leave or close your ears or take a nap. Just sit back and listen to a story that author Yann Martel says "will make you believe in God." (Pause.) Or maybe not.

II

It was about ten years ago—a time in my life when I was doing a good bit of personal and theological reflection as I thought about applying for seminary and going into ministry—that I read Yann Martel's 2001 novel, *Life of Pi*. I don't remember how I heard about it or what

it was that made me decide to read it. I can't remember if someone gave it to me as a gift or whether I bought it.

What I remember was opening the book and reading on the inside jacket cover that it was a story about a boy, a tiger, and the vast Pacific Ocean—a story that would “make you believe in God.” Who, the publisher asked, “could reasonably ask for anything more?”

A story that would make me—a card-carrying agnostic, humanist Unitarian Universalist—believe in God? Well, I took that as a personal challenge! We'll just see about that!

And so I started reading Martel's story about Pi Patel, a teenaged Indian boy, whose father owned a zoo in Pondicherry, India. Growing up with his zoo-keeper father, mother, and brother, the three subjects that most fascinated Pi and defined his life were swimming, animals, and religion.

Although he was born into Hinduism, Pi's curiosity and yearning led him to explore both Christianity and Islam and, ultimately, to practice all three religions simultaneously—looking for that which was best in each, that which they all held in common, and that which transcended them all. “[Good] Hindus,” he concluded, “in their capacity for love, are indeed [good] Christians, just as [good] Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are [good] Hindus, and [good] Christians, in their devotion to God, are [good] Muslims.”

In 1977, Pi's father decides to move his family and the zoo from Indian to Canada. And so Pi, along with his parents and brother, a tiger named Richard Parker, a zebra, hyena, orangutan, and all the other zoo animals set sail across the Pacific Oceans in an old, rusty Japanese cargo ship.

One night, in the middle of the ocean, there's an explosion and the ship sinks. Pi climbs into one of the lifeboats and, after drifting for 277 days across the ocean, is washed up on the Pacific coast of Mexico—sunburned, starving, dehydrated, and almost blind: the sole survivor from the ship's sinking.

As Pi is recovering in a Mexican hospital from his ordeal, two representatives from the Japanese company that insured the cargo ship come to ask him what he knows about why the ship sank, what happened to the ship's crew, passengers, and cargo, and how he survived. And so, Pi tells them his story—a fantastic and, to them, unbelievable story of how he found himself in a lifeboat with Richard Parker, the tiger from his father's zoo, a zebra with a broken leg, a hungry hyena, and an orangutan who had been floating on a bunch of bananas.

He tells them that, as far as he knows, his mother, father, brother all perished along with the ship's crew (including the ship's French cook) and most of the animals from his father's zoo. He tells them about how the hyena killed and ate the zebra and the orangutan and how the tiger killed and ate the hyena. He tells them about how he trained the tiger so that the two were able to live together in the tiny lifeboat, sharing, at first, the emergency rations and bottled water they had and then eating the turtles and fish he was able to catch and drinking the small amounts of water he was able to collect or filter.

He told them of landing on a mysterious island of floating algae inhabited by meerkats who lived in trees that grew on top of the algae. He told them about encountering a Frenchman

in another lifeboat in the middle of the ocean—a survivor who, like Pi, was temporarily blind from dehydration, hunger, and exposure—and how the tiger killed the Frenchman after the Frenchman attacked Pi, intending to eat him. He told them about how the tiger, Richard Parker, ran into the forest after the lifeboat washed up on the shore, never to be seen again.

The Japanese insurance agents, of course, find all of this quite hard to believe and they tell him so. It was, for them, literally an in-credible story—one that was just too hard to believe. But to Pi, almost nothing is too hard to believe and he challenges their insistence on a story that will confirm what they already know (or think they know): a flat, immobile story based on dry, yeastless factuality?

“If you stumble at mere believability,” Pi says to them, “what are you living for? Love is hard to believe,” he says. “Ask any lover. Life is hard to believe. Ask any scientist. God is hard to believe. Ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?”

“We’re just being reasonable,” Mr. Okamoto replied—to which Pi responded: “So am I! Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing, and shelter. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater.”

“But we need to know what *really* happened,” they insisted. And so, Pi told them another story—a story without tigers or hyenas or zebras or islands of floating algae with meerkats that lived in the trees. He told them that after the ship sank, he found himself in a lifeboat with his mother, the ship’s cook, and a Japanese sailor whose leg was broken. He told them how the cook, in his greed, ate all of the food they had and drank all their water. He told them how the young sailor died after they cut off his infected leg. He told them how the cook ate what was left of the sailor’s body and how the cook killed Pi’s mother after she defended Pi when the cook hit him. He told them how he later killed the cook and how he survived all alone in the lifeboat until being washed up on shore and making his way to a small Mexican village.

And at the end of this story, Pi asks Mr. Okamoto: “Is that better? Are there any parts you find hard to believe? Anything you’d like me to change?”

“Oh, no,” Mr. Okamoto replies. “I think we have all we need. Thank you for your cooperation. You’ve been very helpful.”

“You’re welcome,” said Pi. “But before you go, I’d like to ask you something. Which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?”

Mr. Okamoto immediately replied: “The story with animals. The story with the animals is the better story.”

“Thank you,” said Pi. “And so it goes with God.”

III

Well, I have to tell you that when I finished reading *Life of Pi*, I wasn’t at all sure that it was a story that made me believe in God. In fact, I wasn’t really sure what to make of Pi’s story or stories.

Which story was true? The story with the animals or the story without the animals. What really happened?

Did Pi just “make up” the story about sharing a lifeboat with a man-eating tiger? Was the story of Richard Parker and Pi simply an invention? Was it a metaphor for what “really” happened? A story in which the zebra was the Japanese sailor, the orangutan was Pi’s mother, the hyena was the ship’s French cook, and the tiger was Pi’s alter ego? A story that Pi invented to protect himself from the ugly reality of what actually happened to the sailor, the cook, his mother, and him?

Was the author claiming that truth is simply a matter of what we choose to believe—what we would like to believe is true or real? Was Martel saying that truth is simply a matter of what story we prefer to believe—which story we think is “better” or more comforting?

And what did Pi’s story have to do with God? Was the author saying that people believe in God because they prefer the story of God or find the idea of God comforting? Was the tiger, Richard Parker, Martel’s image God—a real, powerful and dangerous presence that we can’t ever fully know or understand: a companion, perhaps, that we call out to in our struggles but one that doesn’t really care about us and will sooner or later jump out of the boat and run off into the forest?

When I finished the book, I had lots of questions and no answers. And, like almost everyone else who has read the book or seen the movie, the ending still leaves me scratching my head and wondering—which, I think, is what a good story should do and everything that a reader could reasonably ask for in a story.

Life of Pi wasn’t a story that made me believe in God. But it was a story that made me think about God and belief and stories and truth. And when I finished reading Martel’s book, I said to myself: “Some day, I’m going to try to preach a sermon about this!”

Well, it’s taken ten years, but I finally got around to it, spurred on by the recent release of the movie (which I haven’t seen), directed by Ang Lee and starring a computer animated tiger that I hope will be nominated for an Oscar as best supporting actor.

And here, just briefly, is why I wanted to talk with you today about the Life of Pi.

IV

I believe, in the words of Pi Patel and Yann Martel, that, in some very deep and true sense, “the world isn’t just the way it is.” It isn’t just “the straight facts.” Life isn’t merely a dry, yeastless factuality that can be proved or disproved, explained by reason or dissected by science. It isn’t something that is either true or false—something to be believed or disbelieved.

Now, as President Obama would say: “Let me be clear.” I’m not saying that I believe in the supernatural or in islands of floating algae with meerkats that live in trees. The natural world is super enough for me—filled with beauty and wonder, horror and terror, kindness and love, mystery and miracles that I will never fully understand or be able to explain.

I remain, in many ways, an agnostic. I don’t know whether Pi and Richard Parker shared a lifeboat for 277 days or whether Pi made up the story of Richard Parker and the lifeboat in

order to psychologically cope with the horror he endured. There's a lot about the world and myself and God that I don't know and will never be able to know for sure.

I don't believe in a supernatural God who created the universe, but I can't prove that God doesn't exist. I believe in a different God—a God that is not an "it" at all, but rather the larger Life that connects all life and being—but I can't prove that God exists.

I believe in love, but I can't explain it. I believe in life but know that it can't be dissected. I believe in truth even if there is no one, single, objective truth with a capital "T" but instead many, different truths, each of which can be true and none of which can be proved to be true. And, like Pi and Martel, I believe that, in some very real sense, life is a story, that each of us chooses the story we prefer, and that, for me, a story with God, tigers in lifeboats, meerkats on islands of floating algae, intuition, imagination, mystery, awe, and love is a better story than one that is based only on "dry, yeastless factuality," reason, logic, materialism, and scientific reductionism.

V

"The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it.... And in understanding something, we bring something to it.... The telling of something always becomes a story." And stories—all stories—are always "about the selective transforming of reality: the twisting of reality to bring out its [true] essence."

A story can be true even if what the story tells never really happened. And a story about something that actually happened is not necessarily true. A story is true only and whenever it reveals the true essence of Life as we know and understand it. A story is true, not simply because we wish it to be true or find it inspiring or comforting, but rather when it gives meaning to Life and our lives.

And so for Pi, Mr. Okamoto, me, and you, the question is which story do we prefer—which story is better: which story is more true because, regardless of whether it really happened, it reveals something of the true essence of Life as we know and understand it.

The question is whether the stories we tell have the power to surprise us or, instead, simply confirm what we already know or think we know. The question is whether the stories we tell help us see the world more deeply through the eyes of imagination and wonder and not only with the dry, yeastless factuality of reason. The question is the degree to which we allow believability, doubt, and uncertainty to be a stumbling block that prevents us from living life deeply and fully with joy and imagination, with meaning, purpose, and faith, with wonder, awe, and reverence, with hope and love.

May the stories we tell all be both true and incredible.

May it be so.