

Have I Got a Story for You

Acts 21:37-22:29

Have you ever had that sinking feeling deep in the pit of your stomach? You may have heard the story this past week about the woman in Guatemala City who heard what she thought was an explosion outside her home. She ran out the door expecting to see smoke rising in the direction of where she heard the blast occur only to find nothing.

When she returned inside to check on her grandchildren she found that the explosion had occurred inside her home. It wasn't an errant rocket from a military training exercise. Neither was it a gas line that had ruptured. The explosion actually came from her bedroom from underneath the bed near where her grandchildren had been playing. The cause of the explosion was a 40 foot sink hole. How would you like to tell that story to your neighbors or your sewing circle?

What makes a good story? How do you convey events of an experience in such a way that is credible, compelling, and creating a curiosity for your hearers or readers to stay connected to the end whether it is a true or fictitious story?

A story is defined as the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings. Stories can be true. Stories can be fiction. Stories can be a blend of what is both true and fiction.

A number of years ago while visiting a book store a local writer was signing autographs for his first book "Deadly Sweet in Ann Arbor." It was a fictional murder mystery with made up plot and characters. However, all the locations in and around Ann Arbor cited in the book were real. He then wrote a sequel to the book with places up north that included Mackinaw Island, Mackinaw City, Cheboyagan and other smaller towns in the area.

Some of you will remember the old "Dragnet" series on television. The disclaimer by the announcer at the beginning indicated that the events you were about to see were true, but the names had been changed to protect the innocent.

Other stories are purely fictitious. Nothing about them resembles anything in real life. While studying American Literature our assignment was to read James Thurber's short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. The story is about a mild-mannered man with a rather routine and uneventful life. The only exception to his otherwise humdrum life is the daydreaming episodes of excitement where he pictured himself in some adrenalin pumping role and near death experiences. After reading the story our task as students was to create our own Walter Mitty style short story. Though never published I was asked to read my story to the class.

Then there are true stories or documentaries. It may be told by the person who experienced the event or facts are gathered or shared about experiences or events that are then told from the perspective of the person who either experienced the event firsthand or saw the events take place. For example, take the 1999 Detroit Marathon. That's my first and only. The Detroit News reported on the exciting finish of the men's and women's race. They interviewed the winners and talked about past achievements. The interview walked the readers through the race, what they were thinking, when they knew they had the race won and so on. Then they reported all the times, ages and places of the rest of the finishers. No interviews from among that group were given. No quotes in the newspapers or on television. I would be among that group. I can tell you that I finished 154 out of 432 in my age group and that I finished 921 out of 3,327 runners. To all but me my story isn't interesting and won't be shared with the world, just among family and friends. Only they will know from me about the exhilaration of crossing the finish line and being draped with a finisher's medal.

Though we were both present at David's birth Robyn's perspective is entirely different and unique compared to my own recollections. But that's the nature of true stories. We are a witness of the events from our own viewpoint as we give testimony to some event or experience for which we have firsthand knowledge.

True stories reveal facts about events or experiences

By its definition, the Bible then is a series of connected stories or happenings all with the central focus of Jesus. Within that central focus are a series of stories that relate personal or national events all pointing directly to the central theme. From a distance they can appear to be a series or disjointed events. What does the story of some strong guy who gives in to temptation have to do with a letter that was written to some church in Europe? What does the genealogy of Luke have to do with the 10 commandments found in Exodus?

Yet through closer examination we see how incredibly interconnected all these stories in the Bible are to each other.

Stories whether true or false have the capacity in some way to change us. That change can either be good or bad. As my college literature professor would say "Literature is a repetitively selective series of concretions revealing a value scale." I think he meant that whatever we write reveals what we believe and value with the hope of changing the beliefs or values of someone else. It can change us in some way. We see that evidenced in our passage today. It's a personal story of events that occurred to an individual both revealing the impact that took place through a personal encounter resulting in a dramatic life and career change as well as an attempt in sharing his story to in some way challenge the beliefs of his audience so that those beliefs would be changed.

In effect, the sermon is just like that. We present a story to challenge you to change as a result of what

you hear. We want the story to be credible, relevant and compelling.

With that as the background for the message, turn with me to Acts 21 where we will review this story together. Acts is the story of God's moving through the Holy Spirit to establish His church. This story reveals the growth of the church and the change that was taking place because of the Holy Spirit's work in leading and empowering people to do incredible things that otherwise in their own wisdom and logic and by their own power they would never have done. Acts isn't so much about the history of the early church although it provides those facts for us. It is a story or record of what the Holy Spirit was doing to bring dramatic change in the world.

Acts 1:8

To this point in the story we have been following the adventures of Paul who has been led by the Holy Spirit. He has entered the city of Jerusalem where, after visiting the Temple to fulfill a vow was brutally attacked by Jews who hurled false accusations about him inciting the crowd to riot to the point of wanting him dead. Roman soldiers promptly arrived on the scene to take control. Because they thought Paul was the instigator of this riot they arrested him. To spare his life from further injury the soldiers hoisted him up on their shoulders in order to carry him up to their barracks. On their way up the stairs Paul addressed the commander requesting that he be allowed to speak one more time to the mob that was still burning with anger.

Here is where we pick up Paul's story as Paul shares his testimony, the story, the record of his life. We could also say it's his witness. A witness is someone who attests to facts by giving a statement or providing evidence. A witness is a person who saw or experienced something firsthand. Paul is a witness giving a testimony as proof of what happened to him. Pay careful attention to how he crafts the story as he shares it with this audience. Here is Paul's story as he shares it in chapter 22.

Paul shares his early convictions in verses 1-5

Paul shares his exciting conversion in verses 6-16

Paul shares his eminent calling in verses 17-21

I. PAUL SHARES HIS EARLY CONVICTIONS

– v. 1-5

Paul does something that is essential and critical in getting the attention of the crowd. In both verse 1 and verse 2 Paul spoke in Aramaic. That may be insignificant to you, but not to his audience. It was a way to get their attention. Replacing Hebrew it was the language spoken by Jews in that era. That he spoke in Aramaic and not Greek is significant because it helped to defuse the tension. This helped bridge the gap so his audience would stay with him and keep them interested. It showed them he was of kindred spirit. Paul did whatever he could to share the gospel in a way that was not offensive, while never backing away from telling the truth.

Besides his initial conversion experience Paul shares his story four other times in different ways to different audiences and for different reasons.

Here in chapter 22 Paul shares his testimony with a Jewish audience.

In chapter 26 Paul shares his testimony before King Agrippa in what would be a Gentile audience.

In Philippians 3 his testimony has a theological bent.

In I Timothy 1 it is a personal testimony to Timothy.

It's important in sharing your testimony to have a pretty good understanding of your audience so it can be tailored to suit them.

In talking with a Jewish friend I tried to avoid references to the New Testament and stay with the Old Testament.

Sharing my faith with someone who was Catholic I would use all of Scripture and some terms they may have been familiar with.

The point is that like Paul, we need to adapt the story of our salvation experience to our audience while not leaving out the essentials.

Notice also in verse 1 that he referred to them as family calling them his brothers and fathers. This showed them respect for having the same cultural heritage. It spoke of their common Jewish lineage.

After this very brief introduction Paul began his story. His devotion to his heritage had been brought into question. The accusers were claiming that he no longer was committed to keeping the traditions of their ancestors, that he gave no consideration for what he once believed. Paul put these assertions to rest by advocating that he was a Jew and proceeded to explain who he was by starting with where he was born. He didn't mention that he was a Roman citizen. He didn't say he was a Cilician. He said he was a Jew. He used his birth place so they would identify with him and that he identified himself with them and would continue to listen. Then he noted that he had been raised in Jerusalem.

He was a Jew to the core and never ashamed of that heritage. There is a story about the great English politician and Prime Minister Disraeli. Disraeli was a Jew, and in Parliament he was once chided by an opposition leader for his Jewish background. His opponent said disparagingly, "You, sir, are a Jew." Disraeli drew himself to his full height, which was not very great, and replied: "Yes, sir, that is true. I am a Jew. But I remind you, sir, that half of Christendom worships a Jew, and the other half a Jewess. And, sir, when your ancestors were gathering acorns in a German forest, my ancestors were giving law and religion to the world." Disraeli was proud of his heritage.

Paul was never ashamed to speak about his heritage and wanted to make sure his audience understood that he in no way was anti-Semitic, and that his beliefs drove his actions and attitudes.

To further impress on them his heritage he spoke about the training he received in Jerusalem. He was a student of Gamaliel. This Rabbi was the most revered teacher of the day and some advocate that he was the greatest Jewish teacher of all time. That he mentions his formal education would have gone a long way with the crowd because they also knew and respected this great teacher. He spoke about being thoroughly trained in the law. Under Gamaliel, his education was complete, exact, and left nothing out.

In writing to the Philippians Paul asserted about his education and background in this way: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.” (Philippians 3:5-6)

Paul also wanted them to understand that his zeal surpassed theirs. They had a strong conviction for adherence to the Law, but Paul’s was even greater. His zeal was so intense he exclaimed to them that it drove him to persecute the church, to imprison and even put to death those who followed the Way. You think you have zeal, I had more, Paul said.

About his zeal, listen to what he relates to the Galatians (1:13-14). “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

Paul’s convictions about his heritage drove him to pursue Christians with near reckless abandon.

He was a Jew’s Jew. Regarding his zeal few had greater passion and conviction or devotion than he did. To cap it off, if they didn’t believe his testimony they could go and ask the high priest. He could attest to the drive Paul had. The Council

could confirm the letters that were written by them to seek out believers as far away as Damascus so they could be brought back to Jerusalem and punished.

Paul had a story to tell and he wanted his audience to understand his past, the kind of person he was.

We each have a story, a past that is worth noting to show who we were so that as we share what has happened to us, our audience can see the difference it has made. We all have a story of events that occurred before Christ, whether we were 6 or 66.

Paul shared his early convictions.

Then we see in verses 6-16 Paul shares his exciting conversion.

II. PAUL SHARES HIS EXCITING CONVERSION – v. 6-16

Paul then related how God intervened in his life. As he told the story he indicated that it was about noon. He mentioned this not just so they have a reference of time but as a lead in to what he would share next. We all know about how bright the sun can be at noon. It’s blinding. Paul stated that they were on their way to Damascus and it was about noon. Suddenly, unexpectedly, without notice or warning there was on the road a light more dazzling than the noon day sun. Paul wanted to emphasize that this encounter was both beyond description and definition and that it was supernatural.

On that roadside a miracle transformation took place in what Augustine once referred to as the “violent capture of a rebel will.”

Alan Redpath, one time pastor of the historic Moody Church in Chicago remarked that “the conversion of a soul is the miracle of the moment, the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime.” That is in a nutshell the essence of Paul’s conversion. Not only was he miraculously saved there was also a dramatic and lifelong change. That

he was religious no one could question. That he had zeal no one could dispute. Some may debate whether Paul's actions could be construed as murder if done for the sake of his religion. But nonetheless, cut through all the motives for his actions and they were done in zealous anger. He had a notorious reputation and past, but experienced a tremendous internal transformation that resulted in an external transformation of behavior.

C.S. Lewis has written that "a proud man is always looking down on things and people: and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." And so it was in that moment of suddenness on the Damascus road Paul told how he was cast down prostrate on the ground with a light that was so bright and a voice that was so compelling that he could only look up. There was no announcement, no band to signal what was about to take place, just suddenly and with emphasis a light shown. The very person of Jesus stood before him in all His glory – His radiance outshining the noon day sun. It was a way for God to get Paul's attention.

Our experience of meeting Jesus probably has not been as dramatic or perhaps even as sudden but we have none the less had an encounter with the living and risen Christ. He has in some way revealed Himself to you, compelling you to repent of sin and believe in Him for salvation. But maybe you are here today and have experienced such an encounter yet have never taken that step of faith, to believe first of all that you even need a Savior and then to believe that Jesus is the Savior. Paul had to come to a place first of recognizing that his own pride had kept him from seeing the true Messiah. His pride fostered by his religious zeal had to be stripped away and when He met Jesus on that road, he saw for the first time who he was and that he needed this Savior. Before him stood the very One he had considered to be the prophet of a false teaching, not dead, not cursed as they believed anyone to be who hung on a cross. Here He was alive and glorified.

Paul was now confronted with the reality of his own depravity. He was confronted with making a decision about following his own blind faith or following the real Messiah who now stood before him. To Paul the truth had been revealed about his vain attempt to attain righteousness in his own effort by zealously keeping the law. The truth had also been revealed to him that this Jesus was the Messiah. He did an about face with his faith. Everything he had once believed was now drastically and dramatically changed. He changed his mind about God, about the Messiah, about the resurrection, about where his zeal would take him.

Paul spoke of those who were with him that day as eye witnesses even though they only saw the light but did not see Jesus, even though they heard the voice, but did not understand it. That encounter was for Paul alone. But they knew something unique had happened to Paul.

To further substantiate his testimony, Paul made reference to Ananias who three days later came and met with him. Notice again how delicately he refers to Ananias not as another believer but as a devout follower of the law. He was just like them and in deference to his audience he to the Messiah as the Righteous One. They would understand him to refer to the Messiah.

This one time rebel with a reputation entered the city of Damascus a different man with a different message and different mission. Paul had a past. It was living a religious life, but a life still separated from God. He shared his early convictions. Then he shared his exciting conversion. Finally, let's note how Paul shares his eminent calling.

III. PAUL SHARES HIS EMINENT CALLING – v. 17-21

Between verses 16 and 17 three years would transpire before Paul returned to Jerusalem. It is at this time that Paul began to relate the change that

took place since his conversion. It is at this time that God revealed His plans for Paul. He was to go to the Gentiles and begin the task Ananias spoke about at his conversion. Paul would witness to all men of what he had seen and heard. Paul would tell others about the greatest story – about the risen Savior.

Paul was to be a witness. The Greek word used in verse 15 is “martus” and has to do with someone’s personal experience. It came to mean one who bore witness by his death. It’s the word we get for martyr. A witness is one who declares something to be true by what he or she has seen or heard. It is a personal experience. Paul was a witness.

There are three words in the Greek with the same root which emphasizes different aspects of the witness. One refers to the person who testifies. One speaks of the testimony itself or the facts that confirm the events.

The third emphasizes the correctness or validity of the message or testimony.

Paul was to be a witness of the message about Christ of what he both saw and heard. He was the testifier sharing the facts about his personal experience. His life corroborated the validity of the message, because no one could have had such a drastic change as Paul.

That Paul was a Holy Spirit empowered witness is evident through Luke’s account of Paul’s journeys to share the gospel. To endure hardship and prison for the sake of Christ is testimony itself of the life changing impact on the person who will yield to that divine encounter with the living Savior. Have you had such an encounter today? Have you met Jesus on your Damascus road? Have you let Him so guide your life to be His witness?

Paul would state “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation, to all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16)

His admonition to Timothy is for us as well. “So do not be ashamed to testify (witness) about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner.” (II Timothy 1:8)

Peter encourages to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do so with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (I Peter 3:15b-17)

Though Paul gave an accurate rendering of his conversion and shared his commission about going to the Gentiles that news did not sit well with his audience who had more disdain for them than they did for Paul at that moment. They were ready to put him to death. Their hardened hearts would not be compelled by the grace of God to see what happens to someone who surrenders to the Savior. They objected that Gentiles could be saved without obeying the law, without being a Jew. Paul attests that a person is not saved by the law but by faith alone. There’s his story. What will you believe?

Paul shared his early convictions.

Paul shared his exciting conversion.

Paul shared his eminent calling.

So what’s your story? If you’re saved you have one. Are you willing today to submit to and commit to the Lord by sharing it with others? Are you here today having never experienced an encounter with the living Christ before until today and now know you need to submit to Him for salvation?

Acknowledge that you have done wrong, the Bible calls it sin and that sin has separated you from God. Believe that Jesus died in your place for your sins and that only through Him, not your own efforts, can you be saved.

Confess to Him that you need a Savior.