

THE MESSAGE

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Acts 22:1-16

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Testimony!

Story time! Story time at our house can happen at anytime. “Mommy or daddy, would you read this book to me?” One of children would ask as they come running with book in hand. Who doesn’t love a good story?

A good story has a powerful opening line, a hook, something to capture our attention. For example: Charles Dickens story *A Tale of Two Cities* begins with the words, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...”

Some opening lines are so good that people remember the opening line but forget the title or the author. Consider the work of Edward Bulwer-Lytton. A few people can tell you who he was, and even less people can tell you anything about his 1830 work entitled *Paul Clifford*. And yet, I’m sure you’ve heard the opening line of that masterpiece, “It was a dark and stormy night...”

When I read stuff like that, I want to know more. Don’t you? It draws us in. We want to keep reading to see how the story unfolds.

Dan Brown knows how to tell a good story with paper and pen (or in his case computer). His two books *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons* mesmerized millions of people around the world -- creating a spiritual buzz. Like any good story Dan grabs the reader’s attention on the very first page and continues to draw you in until the very last page.

A great story has many pieces that come together. There is a theme that we can relate to, a fascinating plot that thickens, a problem, an issue, a conflict that has to be resolved. There is a main character in trouble, with doubts or weaknesses. There’s action that brings a certain amount of fear and a threat of danger, and it’s usually placed in a setting that’s easy to recall and hard to forget.

The Bible is filled with such great stories like that. Luke is a great story teller as our reading today from Acts 22 reveals. Luke tells us about Paul’s faith journey -- in Paul’s own words. It’s as if Paul is telling the story himself. The story has everything to hold the reader’s attention, with lot’s of action and a little blood and guts thrown in for good measure.

Paul has come to Jerusalem to tell the story of God’s work in his life – a story of how God transformed him – how God used him, a formerly murderous Christ-hater who now shares a message of transformation and new life in Jesus Christ for both insiders and outsiders.

The religious crowd at that time felt they needed to protect their God, protect their religion, protect their faith, and protect their traditions. The idea that God's favor could be extended to anyone outside their group is so offensive that they will do anything -- including violence -- to protect God's love for them and their religious way of life. I guess they forgot about the seventh commandment which says something about not killing.

Anytime Paul entered a city, he would go to the temple (or synagogue) to worship God. Paul's new life in Christ meant that God always comes first.

One particular day, Paul's enemies are waiting for him. When he walks into the temple, a group of thugs grabbed him. They took him outside and began to "beat-the-you-know-what-out-of-him" with the intent of killing him. There is such a commotion that the Roman soldiers stepped in and put a stop to the beating. Then, adding insult to injury, they arrest Paul, bound him with chains, and then asked him who he was and what had he done to deserve such brutality.

The crowd, by this time, is in such a frenzy of hatred that the soldiers literally picked up Paul and carry him away to the military barracks, with the crowd following close behind, screaming and shouting, "Away with him" – literally meaning, "Kill him!" Did I mention, the mob was a group of religious church-going people?

Then, the story takes a little twist. Paul somehow has the chutzpa to ask, ever so politely, "May I say something?"

It's story time! Paul tells about God's work in his life. That's where our reading picks-up this morning. (Check out Acts 21 to hear how Paul got to this place.) The way Paul tells his story becomes a model for us to tell our story about God's work in our lives.

We all have a faith story to tell. And Paul gives us a model for telling it. For some reason we don't always tell our faith story to others: lack of courage and confidence, lack of understanding, not sure how to say it.

So I want to point out how Paul told his story. I invite you to see it as a model for telling your story. I know that every one of us has a faith story to tell, and I believe God wants us to tell our story to touch and transform the lives around us. There are five movements in Paul's faith story, so let's take a look at them.

First: Paul begins at the beginning.

Ask yourself the question, where did it start? Where did God begin to stir in your life? You may not have understood at the time, but God has been investing in you through the Holy Spirit from the very beginning, even before you were born.

Paul tells his hearers that he, like them, is a child of God and many people shaped his faith development especially Gamaliel – a well known Pharisee in town. Paul was

deeply influenced by people of faith in his life, and realized how God had placed them in his life shaping him into the person of faith he had become.

God has been investing in us long before we are aware of it. And God does that through the people of faith in our lives. That brings us to the second movement.

Second: Paul considered the people who helped shape his faith.

Question, who inspires your faith? Who do you look up to when it comes to faith matters -- grandma or grandpa? A parent or a friend? A coworker? Who planted the seeds of faith in you? Someone did!

Third: Paul faced his reality.

Paul is honest about his doubts and struggles, and he had a lot of them. Every one of us has a closet full of mistakes, consequences of our actions and inactions, choices that have hurt ourselves and others. Our closets are full.

So it's a good thing that God is in the redemption business, the spring cleaning business. God cleans out our closets of mistakes through the forgiveness of sins. God makes something good come out of something bad. The cross is a great example.

So the question we ask next is this: what kind of struggles and doubts do you wrestle with in your life? They may be there for a reason.

In every faith story, there is a moment when the light goes on and we realize that God's presence is calling us – to take a leap of faith. One of the first things Paul asked when God showed up in his life was this: “Who are you, Lord?” That's a good question to ask. And it's one I find myself asking often. “Who are you, Lord?”

Fourth: Paul has a relationship with Jesus.

Who is Jesus to you? For me he is Lord and Savior. That means he's the boss of my life and he's the one who saves me from sin. He makes all the difference in my life. Without Jesus in my life, I am nothing. So I made a commitment many years ago that I would allow God to use me however God sees fit. So here I am. And as they say, the rest is history.

How did God first come to you? When did you begin to sense God in your life? For some it's been a long slow process, for others it may be a date on a calendar, but either way, recall that time when you first sensed Jesus active in your life.

Fifth: Paul takes the next step.

Consider how God has shaped your life – how your life has played out so far? Consider where you are today on the road of life and where God is calling you next. There aren't any wrong answers here. It's your story, unique to you.

Paul asked two questions. First he asked, **“Who are you, Lord?”** Then he asked, **“What do you want me to do, Lord?”**

These questions take us from where we are to where God wants us to be. It involves asking and listening for the answer, and then taking a step in faith accordingly.

I often ask: what’s next, Lord? And then I wait – and wait – and wait – and wait – and wait some more. And the answer comes. The answer always comes.

Each one of us has a faith story to tell. For some of us, it’s been a quiet, long-running, slowly-unfolding, “best of times/worst of times” kind of story, where God is molding and shaping you for the next step. For others, it’s been a “dark and stormy night,” kind of narrative -- more in line with the spectacular, back-from-the-jaws-of-death kind of story that keeps God busy in your life.

The circumstances really don’t matter. What matters is that your story is one of a kind. It’s your story. It’s the story of God at work in your life. And I’m convinced that God wants you to tell your story by living it. That’s what Paul did!

The exciting thing is God isn’t finished with your story yet. There is soooooo much more to come! You are a great story in the making. So go write it by living it! Amen.