



Week 1: The Greatest Story

Scripture Passage

Acts 17:22-34

Focus Statement

From Netflix to social media, stories fill our imagination and time. The problem is we often compare our stories with others and feel unimportant. The good news is you are connected to the greatest story ever told.

ME

Share one of your favorite stories; maybe it's from a book, a movie or from a loved one. How did the story make you feel? How did the story give you a sense of adventure and purpose?

WE

We can all relate to the excitement of a good story. From chatting with our relatives, to watching movies, stories shape our perspectives and give us a sense of importance and belonging. Often, we may not notice the impact of how those stories are shaping our own perspectives as well as others, but they can and often do have a significant impact.

GOD

In the text, we find Paul standing on Mars' hill, speaking in a similar setting to our own society today. People are generally religious or spiritual, but not necessarily in relationship with God. They may acknowledge a higher power but not necessarily God's handiwork and particularly God at work in our everyday lives calling us to be in relationship and communion with God. Paul acknowledges that God sees us as we are, and where we are; but [God] calls us to live upright and holy, all the while reminding us this is a task that we cannot do on our own, for in God we live, move and have our being. Paul, having himself a powerful testimony of conversion and repentance, helps us see the story that invites all of us...the transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the most important and epic story ever told. The story of God and humanity is filled with exciting adventures, life-changing plot twists and hopeful redemption. Most importantly, this story invites us to be part of something larger- God's epic rescue. Our God is vast, faithful and exciting!

YOU

No matter who you are or what your story is, you are invited to participate in the adventure. God is rescuing the world, and you are worthy to be part of the great story. If you have committed to walking with God, then you have been rescued. If you haven't made that commitment yet, then God is ready and waiting to rescue you and let your own story begin today.

WE

Each one of us here has a story. For some of us who are new to faith, or perhaps even renewing our faith, this is an exciting time where those stories are being shaped and need to be told. For the rest of us, there's someone out there, or maybe even in this room, who needs to hear your story. Imagine a church where everyone's story is important, and everyone is participating in sharing this great Gospel story.



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Week 2: The Whole Story

Scripture Passage 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Focus Statement Part of our redemption comes from telling our whole story. By telling the whole story, we are able to see how through God's grace, even the greatest of sinners are redeemed.

ME Share a story where you are able to admit to personal shortcomings, failings or poor choices. We have all failed to live up to our call as disciples of Christ. Our failings, however, are not the end of the story.

WE We can all relate to falling short. Perhaps you were not completely honest on your tax forms, and as a result worry about an audit by the IRS. Or maybe you have hurt someone you love and long for forgiveness and a new start. Whether it be a poor choice or an action that led to great pain, failing is part of everyone's story.

GOD In 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Paul's story of conversion from persecutor of the church to its chief proponent gives an example of conversion and transformation. It shows a life that has been redeemed by the unlimited love and grace of God.

1. Paul writes this letter to his protégé to encourage him in ministry and a life of faith. As a part of his instruction, Paul narrates his calling, including his shaky and contentious beginning as a persecutor and chief adversary of the church. He shares his testimony that though he spoke against Christ, attacked his people, and was proud of his behavior, Christ's love and faithfulness poured out over him.

2. Paul does not gloss over or diminish the depths of his depravity and insists that it is for sinners like him that Christ came into the world to save. He and we are examples for all those who are going to believe in Christ for eternal life, that no one is beyond redemption.

YOU God's plan for redemption includes you! There is nothing too shameful or painful in your past or your present that God's love and grace can't reach. Sharing your whole story is a vital practice of your faith. It may be used by God to inspire and encourage all those who hear and assure them of the inexhaustible grace that resides in our God.

WE We are called to tell the painful, as well as triumphant, stories that are interspersed in our faith. Christ calls to tell this story not that it may be used as a place of shame of self-deprecation, but that it may draw another imperfect soul into communion with a perfect God.



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Week 3: God, Where Were You?

Scripture Passage

Genesis 28:10-19a

Focus Statement

God still speaks. God is not silent. God has not forgotten the story God started with you. For those of us who are feeling a little alone, if we'll just practice looking up, we might notice that God was already here.

ME Tell a story of a time when you felt forgotten or alone. Describe a time you thought: "where the heck is God right now?"

WE One way or the other, most of us have been in this situation. We might not be running for our lives from family members like Jacob was from Esau, but many of us have felt a little forgotten by God: As if God had many plans for us and our futures and then forgot about us. For example: Some of us felt like God was in the building on our wedding day, but MIA once our marriage got in trouble. Some of us felt like God was in our corner when we were young and healthy but has forgotten about us as we have aged. Some of us just need help making important decisions in our lives, and we used to hear God's voice so clearly, and now all we seem hear is silence.

GOD This is a lonely moment in Jacob's story. He was running away to Paddan-Aram. This is a sad journey when remembering how hard Abraham worked to ensure Isaac's family stayed in the Promised Land. Jacob has acted with deceit, tricked his brother and is on the run. He has propped his head on a rock in the middle of nowhere thinking "What have I done?" But something happens. He falls asleep and through his dream he realizes that God was already there! In fact, angels were busily moving about from heaven to earth. In this moment, Jacob realizes something that we would all like to know: we have not run beyond God's reach. It turns out God was already there, and God is still busy shaping our story. Jacob received a promise. It's the same promise his grandfather received, because God has not forgotten about us. Jacob wakes up and proclaims this famous line: "God was here, and I didn't know it!" God IS here. God is not silent. God is still shaping our story.

YOU In light of his realization that God was already in this place, Jacob creates a reminder - setting up his stone as a pillar. In this way he and others can be reminded that God is already here, helping us tell our story. Our challenge this week is to set up a reminder so that we will periodically stop, look up and notice God here and at work. This week, every time you notice that you've had your head down staring at your phone, STOP, and look up. Look around for just a moment and see if you notice God at work in the life of someone around you. When you do, say "surely, God was in this place, and I didn't know it."

WE Can you imagine how it would affect us if we practiced this? If we were skilled at noticing that God is busy shaping our story and the story of those around us? We would be a little more graceful to our children, a little more supportive to our partners or a little more encouraging to our neighbors. Recognizing that God is present and actively shaping our stories is the first step in living the kingdom of God.





Week 4: News Worth Sharing: A Life Worth Living

Scripture John 9:1-12
Passage

Focus Statement Each of us is significant, and our stories matter. There is someone who needs to hear your story and feel welcome into the story of God.

ME Share a story of your calling into ministry and a fear of your inadequacy and how you overcame it by the grace of God.

WE As United Methodists, we have said that our main objective is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. How do we tell the story of Jesus in the way that we live our lives? How are we new creatures because of our faith and how can we express that with words and actions?

GOD This story is one of many instances where we find Jesus calmly handling seemingly impossible situations. Many situations we find the disciples almost missing the miracle because they, like we so often find ourselves, were stuck on the cause of the problem. They wanted to know what made this man blind? What sins were committed by him or his parents? What is this a consequence of? Jesus tells them, this happened so that God's glory could be seen through him. Jesus, as a matter of fact, breaks laws of the Sabbath in making the mud and healing the man, and the Pharisees, almost miss the miracle because they are so focused on rules, regulations and traditions that they can't celebrate the miraculous change in this man's life who was begging on the side of the road for so long. This is good news that people need to hear. Not only can Jesus forgive our sins and turn our lives around; but that sometimes in life we just find ourselves in tough places...not because of anything we've done, but because that's just life. Regardless of which one of those cases it is, Jesus shows himself strong and mighty, and able to heal any and all those situations and turn our stories around. In the story from the Gospel of John the blind man was not theologically trained, nor did he have any special skill set. What he had was a story of how Jesus changed him. He acknowledged that he didn't fully understand how it happened but that he was blind and now he had sight.

YOU Each of us has a faith/transformation story to share. Have you ever considered that sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the way others can come to know God and live a transformed life here and now? Too often people have been told they can't be part of God's story. You have the privilege of telling them the Big Story, the whole story and your story.

WE Imagine if we as a community began taking our own stories seriously. What if this is the first step in sharing our story with God? What if we got just a little better at noticing God's handiwork in the mundane moments of our week: our interactions in the checkout line, little financial decisions or our conversations with our kids in the car? What if we made a commitment to listening to each other's stories and sharing our own, and celebrating those transformational stories in people's lives? Our church, our community and the world around us would begin to change from this story of God's love.



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