

Scripture: Acts 26:1-32

Text: Acts 26:29

Message: Telling your Story

June 17, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Pastor Jack Van de Hoef

This past year we have been looking at God's Grand Story. It's his Story that reveals how God has been in relationship with people since the beginning of time. Even though that relationship was broken and people were disobedient, God continued to reach out to them in grace, love, kindness and forgiveness. God's Grand Story finds fulfillment in Jesus, and continues to be told with that understanding of how Jesus reveals God's love and grace in a perfect way.

Each one of us fits into that story. Every one of us has a story to tell. It's a story of life experiences and of God's work in our lives.

This morning we listen to the story of the apostle Paul. He was an important leader in the early church. He was also an ordinary person, a child of God, like you and I. He clearly saw his story as part of God's Grand Story. We will look at part of his story as he tells it in Acts 26.

We find Paul speaking to a challenging audience. (see context in chapter 25, where Paul has been in prison for 2 years already.) There was Governor Festus, who knew very little of the Jewish faith and its practice. He also seems to have cared very little about it. He had little or no interest in spiritual arguments. Paul's examples and his words about Jesus fulfilling the words of the prophets did not mean much to him. That is probably why he accused Paul of being crazy. It made no sense.

There was also King Agrippa (present on a visit to Festus). Agrippa was trained in the ways of the Jews. This had been done to make it easier for Agrippa to rule over the Jews. But Agrippa himself was not a believer.

Along with these two government leaders, there were many other attendants and observers in the room, including high ranking officers and leading men of the city (see Acts 25:23). Some were required to be there as part of their duty. Others may have been present out of curiosity. What message does Paul give in this context? When given the opportunity to defend himself, he tells his story.

Paul had been a legalistic Jew who had confidence that his obedience and good works

would get him a good place in heaven. Paul does not hesitate to say that he was a Pharisee (v.5). He was so sure that he was right that he did whatever he could to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth (v.9). Paul was a Jesus-hater. He hated the followers of Jesus. He arranged for them to be put into prison. When they were being put to death, he cast his vote against them. (v. 10).

At that time in his life, Paul would have strongly disagreed with anyone who said he was an unbeliever. He would have protested against anyone who said he was not doing God's will. Paul was convinced that The Way of Jesus was false and blasphemous. He did whatever he could to stop it.

Until God stopped him. On the road to Damascus Paul was confronted by the Lord. That became a moment of change in Paul's life. Instead of opposing the Lord, he was appointed "a servant and a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you." (v.16) Paul was sent to change lives in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom he had been persecuting.

Paul was a changed person by God's power and grace. From trying to eliminate the followers of Jesus, he himself became one of Jesus' followers. From trying to gain acceptance from the Lord by his near perfect obedience, he came to acknowledge that he was a sinner who could only be saved by the grace of God and not by his own good works. From opposing the name of Jesus he was changed to become one who preached that name. He called others to "repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds." (v. 20)

This is what Paul had become—someone who had surrendered to the power of God in his life, someone who admitted that what he had done in the past was wrong. He became a person who came to see Jesus, the Son of God, as his Saviour. He became a person who came to see that God loves us and forgives our sins for the sake of Jesus, his Son. He became a person who began to tell others of this great God and to call them to believe in him and "receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus." (v. 18)

Paul presents the grace of God to them in the example of how God had worked in his own life. He did not tell his life story to toot his own horn or to show how wonderful he was. He spoke of what the Lord had done for him. He gave witness to the work of Jesus Christ in his own life. It was not a heavy theological lecture. It was a personal story.

Festus and Agrippa were not easily convinced. Festus called Paul crazy. Agrippa resisted Paul with the sneering remark, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" He would not be won over that easily.

But neither Festus nor Agrippa could deny the most convincing evidence in front of them. Paul stood there as a changed man. The proof of the divine power of God is his power to change lives. People might come up with some sort of answer to theological arguments; they cannot answer a transformed life.

In verse 29, we hear Paul saying, "I pray God that you... may become what I am, except for these chains." To tell God's Grand Story includes asking ourselves a question, "Would I be ready to say to someone that I would like them to become what I am? What example am I giving? What do they see in me when they look at my life? Do they see a changed life? I'll admit that I am not perfect. Can they see that I am loved by God and devoted to serve and praise my Lord and Saviour?"

To share the good news of Jesus does not require that we must have a well-thought out theological presentation. Start by asking what were you like before you met Christ? Not all of us can profess such a radical change as the apostle Paul. And yet each one of us who believes in Jesus Christ must confess a conversion. There has been a change in our lives. It may have been gradual. It may be more definite. It is a change which involves a definite decision and commitment to trust Jesus Christ as Saviour and to follow him as Lord. It is a commitment to turn from a life that would involve disobedience to a life of obeying Christ. As Jesus said to Paul, it is to turn "from the power of Satan to God".

What changed you? What do you believe? *Why* do you believe? *Why* do you *continue* to believe? How has God been working his grace in your life? Will you share that story with a neighbour or co-worker or friend who asks you to explain the hope that you have?

There is another striking phrase in verse 29. Paul says, "I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." I pray God that others may also come to believe. I pray God that lives may also be changed by him.

What do we do as those who have experienced this life-changing grace of God? We too must pray for people to come to Christ. We must pray for people to become alive in their faith. We must pray for people to be more dedicated to the Lord as expressed in their dedication to serving him in their lives and in the church. We must pray for people to become

bold in faith.

We know of people in our church community, and in our family or friendship circles who never come to church any more. Instead of talking *about* them, let us pray for these people that their lives may be changed. Yes, we might visit them and invite them, and befriend them wherever possible. But we must certainly pray for them.

We have neighbours who live very near the church, very near our homes, neighbours with whom we have regular contact, yet who do not know the Lord. We have people we come into contact with who do not know the life-changing grace of God. Pray for them, that they may become what you are. Pray that our own hearts will be open to hear their questions, their searching, their wondering. Pray that we may have the words to speak to share our story with them.

In our prayers, let us not just pray for people in general. Let us pray for specific names. Mention people by name. Pray for them specifically and regularly.

And always remember that we will not change hearts. Nor are we required to change lives. It is God who will change hearts. Our story and our witness may be part of the work that God does. Other people's story and witness will be used by God. Some will plant, others water the seed, others harvest. We might not see the fruit of our sharing the good news. We might not realize what part we are playing. That isn't the point. The point is, that we tell our story as an expression of God's work in our lives and pray God to use that in the hearts of those who hear.

Paul had anything but a receptive audience listening to him. They either thought he was crazy or they resisted his invitation. Yet Paul did not back down. God had made himself known to Paul. There was no question in Paul's mind, but Jesus was his Saviour. Paul had the evidence in his own changed life. He told his story of his walk with God. He longed for many more lives to be changed by the powerful grace of God.

May your changed life be a witness to others of the power and grace of God. Tell your story. May your words lead others to surrender to the life-changing work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Amen.