

God's Big Story

The Rev. Dr.
E. Stanley Ott

Acts 2:29-36

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

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The Bible is the greatest story book in the world. It tells stories of people doing wonderful things, gutsy courageous things, deceitful awful things. Its stories tell us about God's Big Story of creation and of the goodness and also the failure, the fall of the human race, and of the life of Jesus and the renewal, redemption and covenant Jesus gives us. The Apostle Peter spoke on the day known as Pentecost and said, ²² *"You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—²³ this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴ But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ²⁵ For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; ²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope. ²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. ²⁸ You have made known to me the ways of*

life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'"

Oh, that is such a great story, because the story of Jesus links directly to our own life stories and gives us hope, no matter what is going on.

Over the next nine months, we are going to be thinking a lot about stories—God's Big Story of His work among us and of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the stories of our personal lives and how God's story and our stories intertwine into one marvelous story of our loving God's grace, love and power. As we look at many of the stories from the Old Testament and from the New Testament, you will discover them to have the power to change your lives. We will begin, over the next four weeks, with the wonderful first book of the Bible. The Book of Genesis as it tells us God's Big Story of creation, the story of the fall, the sin of Adam and Eve and all humanity, and the story of the covenant, the sacred agreement that our redeeming God makes with us.

October is going to be a very special month. We will kick off October with the much anticipated visit of Dan Allendar, who will lead us in a special event in which he will help us learn to love the stories of our own lives and how God has been working in the stories of our lives. In October, we begin a six-week series based on the Book of

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Exodus, the story of how the nation of Israel moved from slavery in Egypt to becoming God's people in the Promised Land. During October, you will have the opportunity to join a Journey Group, which will meet for six weeks, perhaps longer. The Journey Groups will use a study guide that Glenda Hoffman is preparing to help us reflect on God's story and on our own life stories, and how God journeys with us. I urge you to attend the Dan Allendar event. You can sign up this morning, join a Journey Group, and allow our loving God to meet you in some new and wonderful ways in the ongoing journeys of your own lives.

So we are going to spend the next several months thinking about stories—the stories in the Bible and the stories of our own lives.

A little girl asked her mother, "How did the human race appear?" The mother answered, "God made Adam and Eve and they had children and so was all mankind made." Two days later, the girl asked her father the same question. The father answered, "Many years ago, there were monkeys from which the human race evolved." The confused girl returned to her mother and said, "Mom, how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God, and Dad said they developed from monkeys?" The mother answered, "Well, dear, it is very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your father told you about his." Well, I don't think that is quite the way we will link the

stories of the Bible and the stories of our own lives, but it's fun!

When you think about it, our lives are wonderfully complex stories with all sorts of plots, sub-plots, twists and turns with heroes, villains, friends and foes, ordinary moments and memorable moments.

Last week, a friend of mine who lives in Fayetteville, North Carolina sent me an email, and I noticed his Fayetteville address under his name. Instantly and unbidden, I remembered the fall of my ninth grade year. Dad was stationed at Ft. Bragg, and I was a freshman at the Fayetteville High School sitting in Miss Jones's English class on November 22, 1963. Suddenly, the classroom door flew open and a runner breathlessly popped in to tell us that John F. Kennedy, the president of the United States, had been shot. On the day of Kennedy's funeral, school was in session and again I was in English class, where we all watched the funeral on a black and white television. I remember Miss Jones suddenly coming apart and running from the room in tears. In my young life it was my first experience of grief. I haven't thought about that moment in a long time.

In a similar way, there were many memories stirred last Thursday during the dedication of the 9/11 Memorial at the Pentagon. Those very unusual moments and an infinite number of ordinary moments form an indelible part of the stories of our lives. The images we carry are images of great joy, great wrongdoing, great tragedy, immense love and God's presence in countless, overwhelming ways in every

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moment, in every story of our lives.

So this fall, we will study the interplay of two great story lines—God's Big Story among us, first through the history of God's people and the life of Jesus and second through our personal life stories. Of course, God's Big story, like our personal stories, is a complex jigsaw puzzle of many interlocking stories. I once watched a movie in which several of the moments of the life of Jesus were portrayed. I will never forget how the movie rendered the events of Matthew, chapter 14. The twelve disciple-apostles were rowing across the Sea of Galilee in a shallow boat. Jesus was not in the boat with them. Suddenly, through the wind and waves, the disciples see someone walking toward them—actually walking on the water!

It's a scary moment. It is getting dark out on that lake, they can't see clearly, the wind is strong and the waves are showering them with water. Peter wants proof. Is this a ghost or is it really Jesus Christ? So Peter gives this person standing out there in the middle of a rough sea a simple test: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Instantly, Peter hears the single word, "Come." Peter gets out of the boat. He walks on the water and approaches Jesus. Wow! But the wind whips up; Peter loses his focus on Jesus and starts to sink. In the movie I am watching of this scene, Peter is right in front of Jesus when he starts to sink and he sinks fast, like

you'd sink if you jumped in a swimming pool, and as he falls he cries, "Save me, Lord," throwing his arms up as he plummets down. What happens happens so fast you have to see it in slow motion to get it. The hand of Jesus reaching out, clasping the hand of Peter, Jesus' fingers seizing Peter and lifting him up and out of harm's way, water flying every-where. And Jesus says, "O you of little faith, why do you doubt?" The major themes of God's Big Story are visible in that story. Creation as Peter experiences the wonder of God's power walking on water, the fall as Peter's eyes leave Jesus, and redemption as Jesus lifts Peter to life.

Last Sunday morning, I attended the wonderfully upbeat worship service of a new church in our Presbytery, the Prince George's Community Presbyterian Church. As of last spring, its pastor, Ed Harding, and I were acquaintances who had met each other briefly a few times at presbytery meetings. When I was attending the General Assembly of our denomination out in San Jose, California, last June, I went to a reception for our presbytery being held in a building a few blocks from the Convention Center; and who should I bump into at the reception but Ed Harding. Ed and I hit it off, and we decided to walk back to the Convention Center so we could talk. We were talking, and I was not paying any attention to where I was walking. At one point we were crossing a street. I was just a little in front of Ed, and I, engrossed in conversation, was completely unaware that I had stepped

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directly into the path of an oncoming electric trolley train only ten or fifteen yards away and silently barreling down on me. In the blink of an eye, in something that happened so fast that I can only see it my mind by seeing it in slow motion, Ed's hand shooting out from behind me, seizing my shoulder and hauling me back the very instant the train zoomed by. I literally had less than a second to live when he pulled me from death to life. God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption was pictured in my own life as I was enjoying the creation of a new friendship, failed to pay attention and thus fell into harm's way, and was rescued by Ed's hand as I was saved.

For the rest of my life, when I think of Jesus seizing the hand of Peter as he sank into the sea, what incident in my life do you think will come to mind? God's Big story and my life story will always intertwine, just as God's Big Story and your personal life story will always intertwine. I know that one day my own physical death will approach me as death will approach you. And I know that in the second of my death, the way Ed Harding pulled me to safety, the way Jesus pulled Peter out of the water, is like the way the great and marvelous hand of Jesus will grasp me and pull me to him, "*For where I am,*" said Jesus, "*there you will be also.*" No matter what is going on in your life, you can know that the powerful loving hand of our Lord has you in his grasp. God's Big Story is the

ultimate story of my life and of your life.

In fact, when the Apostle Peter spoke on the day of Pentecost the words I read earlier from the Book of Acts, he said, ²³"*This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.* ²⁴*But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.* ²⁵*For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; ²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope.'*" You can see immediately the link between God's story and David's story. "The Lord is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken!" It gives David hope as he said: "*For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption.* ²⁸*You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.*" (Acts 2:26b-28.) God has had His eye on your story since before you were born and weaves His story into your story! In your trusting of God's Son, Jesus, you will discover that your life story and his great story blend together and are intertwined in the most wonderful and powerful way. Forever!

I've heard my friend Glenn McDonald tell the story many times of going on a cruise in the Caribbean with his wife and his two brothers and their wives to celebrate their parents' fiftieth anniversary.

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- Glenn McDonald

His parents said, “We will do all sorts of things together. On the second day we will even get to stand in line and meet the captain.” Glenn rolled his eyes and said to Mary Sue, “I’ll get us out of that.” They had a wonderful first day on their cruise and, as the ship was sailing beyond Puerto Rico at 4:48 am when everyone was sleeping, a disembodied voice over the cabin intercom said, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain. I am very sorry to disturb you so early in the morning, but we have an urgent concern. We have an unconfirmed report that a passenger has fallen overboard. We have already turned the ship around and initiated a search.” “At that moment, [Glenn said] I realized for the first time that the boat was no longer moving.” The captain continued, “Please go to your room if you are not there at this time, and account for everyone in your party. If anyone is missing, please report their name to the purser’s desk immediately.”

“Thirty minutes passed.

Through our window we could see that the U.S. and Dutch Coast Guards had arrived on the scene. We found ourselves praying, ‘God, if anyone is out there alone in that ocean, may your mercy be upon him.’ There were 1,700 guests on the cruise boat and more than 700 crew members. Fifteen minutes later the captain addressed us again: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we are looking for Eric Armstrong.’ Two hours later the sun rose above the Caribbean. Once again we heard the captain’s voice. ‘Ladies

and gentlemen, I am very pleased to tell you we have just found Eric Armstrong. A U.S. Coast Guard Helicopter is at this moment airlifting him to safety. He appears to be in good condition. Thank you for your cooperation.’”

Glenn goes on to say, “The successful search-and-rescue had a dramatic effect on the rest of the cruise. Every passenger now knew: *I’m sailing with someone who would turn this ship around in the middle of the night and come looking for me.*”

Who was Eric Armstrong? Was he a VIP, U.S. Senator or Congressman, the first mate, someone intimately related to the captain? No, he was a 20-year-old man who at 4:30 a.m had apparently fallen off the bow while doing ‘the Titanic thing’—*I’m king of the world!*

Before dinner on that second day there was no question what I wanted to do [said Glenn]. I stood in line to meet the captain. I wanted to shake the hand of the one who I knew would pull out all the stops to find one lost person, even someone who was doing the wrong thing at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?” (Luke 15:4)

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace

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will lead me home.”²⁷ *“My sheep hear my voice,”* said Jesus. *“I know them, and they follow me.”*²⁸ *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”*²⁹ *What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.”* (John 10:27-29) You can know this. No matter what is happening in your life and no matter what is to come, our God's Big story is playing out in your life. He has you in His grasp. He will never let you go. In the coming weeks, we invite you to join us in learning the wonder of God's Big Story. We also invite you to join us in learning to love your own story and to discover how God's Big Story and your own story are all a reflection of the work of our very loving, very powerful and very forgiving God.