

God's Big Story

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Isaiah 40:1-5

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

Never, in my wildest dreams, would I have imagined embarking on a profession involving public speaking.

I enrolled in an introductory speech class in my freshman year of college. We were assigned an extemporaneous, five-minute speech on a topic of our choosing. I submitted beforehand a copy of my written speech to the professor. Since we were proceeding in alphabetical order, I calculated the number of days until it was my turn to speak. I arrived for class one fateful spring afternoon, knowing I still had a cushion of a few days. But when several students were conveniently absent and several more gave short speeches, it suddenly dawned on me. I'm going to have to give my speech today and I'm not ready!

The professor called on me, so I tried my best to fake it. But a minute into the speech, I froze. I couldn't remember my lines. My professor had a printed copy of my speech, so I asked him for a hint, but he was one of those old school professors with exacting standards, so he wouldn't budge. His icy stare shot right through me. Little beads of perspiration formed on my furrowed brow. My throat became parched and my face turned beat red. I stood there in silence, humiliated. I then walked back to my seat, gathered my books and walked out of class, vowing never to return. Eventually, I did return. I flunked the speech but I eked out a C- for the course. Never, in my

wildest dreams, would I have imagined embarking on a profession involving public speaking. God must have a sense of humor!

Speech 101 taught me the value of being prepared. Still, to this day, my most recurring nightmare is coming to worship on a Sunday morning unprepared. Maybe that's why I set multiple alarms!

Preparation is essential, whether it involves hanging wallpaper, studying for SATs or preparing for Christ's coming. Students who don't study for finals pay the price. Athletes who dog it in practice regret it on game day. Musicians who don't practice the music will flame out on performance day. My Boy Scout leaders drilled the scout motto into our heads: Be Prepared!

The great ship Titanic sank on its maiden voyage in 1912, taking 1500 people with it to its watery grave. The greatest tragedy was the inadequate number of lifeboats for passengers on board. The ship was designed to carry 42 lifeboats, but only 16 lifeboats could be found. These 16 lifeboats could accommodate 1178 people but not the 2207 passengers on board. The ship was regarded as unsinkable, the owners said, so lifeboats wouldn't be necessary. It was a waste of space and would make the deck look too cluttered. In simple terms, the Titanic was not prepared.

You better not pout. You better not cry. You better not fret and I'm telling you why. Jesus Christ is coming to town.

We're telling God's Big Story this year, Genesis to Revelation in nine months. We read in Genesis that we were created to live in relationship with God and one another. Sin, however, severs these relationships. In theological terms, we call it "the fall." Adam and Eve fall out of relationship with God. So God seeks to redeem the relationship through something called a covenant. God establishes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah: "I will be your God and you will be my people." The Ten Commandments specify what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. When the people fail to keep the covenant, God raises up prophets to speak His Word. They address both the immediate circumstances of their day as well as point the way toward the Messiah who will bring ultimate redemption to people.

Isaiah the prophet writes, "A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low, the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (40:3-5).

Ancient highways were nothing fancy. They were crude and dangerous. Robbers would prey on unsuspecting travelers on those primitive highways. But, when a conquering monarch traveled those

same highways, rocks were removed and potholes filled. Crooked places were straightened and mountains were cut down to size. Every hindrance was put out of the way.

I was traveling the Dulles Toll Road years ago when several police on motorcycles directed me to pull over. A speed trap, I thought, I'm doomed. But suddenly police were everywhere, closing the highway's exit and entrance ramps. It was an eerie sight to see the Dulles Toll Road shut down during rush hour.

When the highway was clear, the presidential motorcade passed. President Clinton and entourage were granted sole possession of the highway. Normally this highway would be jammed with commuters, but when the Toll Road became a presidential highway, every potential risk was cleared out of the way.

The gospel writers interpret John the Baptist as this voice crying in the wilderness. Matthew writes, "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Matthew 3:3). John announces the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Prepare for his coming. You better not pout. You better not cry. You better not fret and I'm telling you why. Jesus Christ is coming to town.

The early followers of Jesus, according to the book of Acts, were called people of "the Way." Before they were ever called Christians, they were described as "the Way." No doubt it was taken from Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth and

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- Tim Keller

the life” (John 14:6). Jesus shows us the way, the way to God, the way to true life.

John’s message is a simple imperative, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). The Greek word repent, *metanoia*, is a directional term meaning to change, turn around and go another way. It’s where we derive one of our English words for change, metamorphosis. Repentance begins with the realization, “I’m going in the wrong direction.” We’ll never see the kingdom of God if we’re looking for it in the wrong way.

The Pharisees recoil at John’s call to repentance. They expect to be rewarded for their acts of piety, not taken to task. Repentance is for sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, bad people like that.

Many religious people in Jesus’ day refused to face up to the truth about themselves. They ignored the dark side. We call it denial. The central defect of evil is not the sin, but the refusal to acknowledge sin. We deny hateful feelings and vengeful motives. We become consumed with keeping up appearances. We scapegoat other people and become intolerant of criticism. Denial has a huge role to play in addiction. The user refuses to see the truth even though the truth is plain to everyone else.

Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York summarizes the gospel this way, “We are more flawed and sinful than we ever dared believe and, simultaneously, we are more loved

and accepted than we ever dared hope.”

Cornelius Plantinga writes in his book *Beyond Doubt*, “For many contemporary people, life has lost all religious dimension. These people live a flat life, recognizing neither the depths of their sin nor the heights of God’s grace. We can’t live with God, with each other or even with ourselves until we see how great is our sins and how much greater is God’s grace. The Bible shows us a more excellent way, full of heights and depths. Prayers from the depths whisper guilt and yearn for pardon. Prayers from the heights shout praise to God for mighty acts of mercy.”

There are two primary world views of the Christian life that shape our outlook on life. We are either accepted by God on account of God’s grace or our goodness. People living their lives on the basis of these two world views may superficially look alike. They may even sit beside each other in the pew, both praying to God and giving their time and money to the Lord’s work. But they are doing so out of radically different motives.

The world view that we are accepted by our goodness has as its premise, “I obey; therefore I am accepted by God.” But the orientation that we are accepted by God’s grace has an entirely different premise. I am accepted by God through Christ, therefore I obey.

How do we prepare for Christ’s coming this Christmas? We’ve been preparing for Christmas all right, going to the mall, running

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errands everywhere. People are driving a little crazy right about now in their resolve to get ready for Christmas, but are we doing anything to prepare for Christ's coming? Take a mental inventory of your life right now. We need to get rid of anything that blocks God's way into our hearts.

I'm not simply talking about will power and determination. Richard Foster writes in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, "Our ordinary method of dealing with ingrained sin is to launch a frontal attack. We rely on will power and determination. Whatever the issue may be for us—anger, bitterness, pride, lust, fear—we determine never to do it again, we pray against it, fight against it and set our will against it....The moment we feel we can succeed and attain victory over our sin by the strength of our will alone, we are worshipping the will...When we despair of gaining inner transformation through human powers of will and determination, we are open to a wonderful new realization: inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change is God's work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside."

We invite you today to open your life to God's transforming power. Some of you have never opened your lives before to God's transforming power. What better time than Christmas! Some of you are thinking, I've already done that, maybe several times. Yes, but there are areas of your life you're

still holding back for yourself. You can have this part of my life, God, but not that part. That part is mine. The highway we're preparing is a way straight into our hearts. The carol Joy to the World says it best: "Let every heart prepare him room."

