

Almost Persuaded

The Rev. Dr. Peter G.
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Acts 26:24-32

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*How can your
story become
part of God's
Big Story?*

Steve Hartman made it big a few years back with an award-winning feature series, "Everybody has a Story." It used to be a popular segment on the CBS edition of The Early Show. Hartman would toss a dart over his shoulder at a map of the United States. Wherever the dart would land, Hartman and his cameraman would travel there. Upon arrival, he would call people at random from the phonebook, asking if he could help them tell their story.

Imagine your reaction to a phone call out of the blue, from a CBS reporter, who wants to put your story on national network television. Your first reaction would be, "Is this some kind of joke? I don't have a story to tell."

Some people didn't believe him. In one town, it took Hartman 44 phone calls before someone took him up on his offer to tell her story.

The largest city he visited was Miami, Florida; the smallest was McMullen County, Texas with a population of 851 residents and a single-page phone directory. His dart once landed on Fairfax, VA. The youngest person interviewed was four, the oldest was 87. Some interviews were rather bizarre, such as the funeral undertaker who had stored a mummy in his garage for 60 years. Steve Hartman

proved that everyone does, indeed, have a story to tell.

Our sermons have been directed toward a single question this year. How can your story become part of God's Big Story?

We tend to regard the Bible as a collection of stories, each designed to impart a moral lesson. Actually, the Bible tells a single story. We call it God's Big Story. To help us remember God's Big Story, we have reduced it to three words: creation, fall and redemption. Creation—we have been created to live in relationship with God. Fall—we have fallen out of relationship with God, through something called sin. Redemption—God will stop at nothing, not even the death of his Son, to redeem people back into relationship with God.

Acts 26 tells us how Paul's story becomes part of God's Big Story. Last Sunday, I told you the sorry details of a dysfunctional family named the Herodians. Agrippa, last in a long line of Herods, has an incestuous relationship with his sister Bernice. I can't think of two people less qualified to rule on the merits of Paul's case.

Festus, the newly appointed governor, consults with Agrippa about an unusual prisoner left over from the days of his predecessor, Felix. Agrippa has heard about this controversial Christ follower, so he requests an audience with Paul. The

Paul is converted... from a Jesus hater to a Jesus follower.

next day, amid great pomp and circumstance, Agrippa and Bernice parade into the Hall of Audience to listen to Paul speak.

Paul does not attempt to exonerate himself. He regards each trial as an opportunity to preach the gospel. His speech before King Agrippa is masterfully delivered, serving as a climax to the book of Acts. That's why I urged you last Sunday to come back for the rest of the story.

Acts 26 recounts Paul's story—his Minute for Witness, if you will. Paul begins by taking us back to his religious upbringing. He is born a Jew (26:4). At his bar mitzvah, he becomes an avid student of the Law and Prophets. He joins the prestigious order of the Pharisees—men committed to following all 613 laws of the Old Testament and the oral tradition called the Talmud (26:5). Therefore, Paul regards it as his sacred duty to oppose people who claim allegiance to an imposter Messiah (26:9-11).

Everything is turned upside down when Paul encounters the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (26:12-18). The voice of Jesus knocks Paul off his feet and renders him sightless. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads" (26:14). Goads are sharply-pointed cattle prods. Domestic animals don't like being jabbed with a stick, so they would instinctively kick against the goads. But their kicking is useless. They would be better served to submit to the prod than kick against it. Paul,

like a stubborn ox, has been kicking against the will of God.

Paul is converted on the Damascus road from a Jesus hater to a Jesus follower. His defense to Agrippa ends with the words, "That's why I stand here today, bearing witness to what Moses and the prophets said would happen—that the Messiah must suffer and be the first to rise from the dead" (26:23).

In all five trials, Paul circles back each time to the resurrection. Paul proclaimed to the Jewish leaders, "I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (23:6). He declares to the Roman officials, "It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today" (24:21). He poses to Agrippa and his court the rhetorical question, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" (26:8).

At this point, Festus blows a gasket, "Paul, you're crazy! You've read too many books, spent too much time staring into space! Get a grip on yourself. Get back in the real world!" (26:24-*The Message*). Festus regards it as sheer nonsense for a king to ascend to the throne through suffering and death.

Paul now appeals directly to Agrippa. "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe" (26:27).

Agrippa finds himself in something of a bind. If he answers affirmatively, Paul will press him to believe in Jesus. If he answers in the negative, he will incur the wrath of Jews who regard the writings of the prophets as the very words of God. So, Agrippa dodges the question.

“Everybody knows that almost doesn’t count.”

- Brandy

“Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” (26:28). Does Agrippa speak sincerely or sarcastically here? If sarcasm is intended, Paul ignores it with his response: “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains” (26:29).

I’m intrigued with Agrippa’s comment, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” The New King James Version translates this verse, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.” Agrippa concedes that Paul has delivered a good speech. You make a good argument, Paul, almost good enough to persuade me to become a Christian. Good, but not quite good enough.

“You almost persuade me to become a Christian” is one of the saddest verses in the Bible. Agrippa was almost persuaded. This is the last we hear of Agrippa, the one who goes down in the annals of Scripture as someone who almost became a Christian.

Almost is an adverb meaning not quite or nearly. I almost went to another college. I almost went into another profession. I almost drove into the path of an oncoming car. I almost took a job at another church before I interviewed here. I almost did these things, but I didn’t do them.

R&B recording artist Brandy sings, in her *Never Say Never* album, that “Almost doesn’t count.” When it comes to failed relationships, her refrain says it best:

“Everybody knows that almost doesn’t count.” Almost doesn’t count, except in the game of horse-shoes. Almost doesn’t count in following Christ.

Let me take you back to last summer’s Olympic Games in Beijing. Michael Phelps was competing for a record seventh gold medal in the finals of the 100-meter butterfly. Milo Cavic, a Serbian, was comfortably in the lead after 50 meters. In the final 25 meters, Phelps made a furious kick and closed the gap. Cavic made the fatal mistake of gliding toward the finish, while Phelps snuck in an extra half stroke and lunged at the wall. The race was too close to call. The crowd waited for Omega, the official timekeeper, to flash the results on the overhead screen. Phelps won the 100-meter fly by one-hundredth of a second, the smallest margin of victory allowed in competitive swimming. Cavic almost won, but you know something. He lost.

I almost went to Wittenberg University, but I decided on Ohio Wesleyan instead. I almost went into coaching football, but I chose the pastorate instead. I almost accepted a call to a church in Cleveland, but I decided God wanted me here in Vienna, VA. I almost did these things, but almost doesn’t count.

Agrippa was almost persuaded to become a Christian. Almost is not an adverb which can be used with integrity to modify the noun “Christian.” You can’t be an almost-Christian. Either you are a Christian or you aren’t. Some people are almost Christians. They are almost persuaded, but almost doesn’t count.

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Philip Bliss was a music director for a church in Chicago and the author of many popular hymns. One Sunday, Rev. Brundage was preaching about Agrippa, who was almost persuaded to become a Christian. Rev. Brundage concluded his sermon with the words, "He who is almost persuaded is almost saved, and to be almost saved is to be eternally lost."

Philip Bliss reflected on these words and returned home to write a hymn with the words of the sermon fresh on his mind. He entitled the hymn *Almost Persuaded* and stored it in a trunk. After visiting family, Philip Bliss and his wife returned home by train. A bridge suddenly gave way and the train plunged into a ravine below and caught fire. Bliss escaped the wreckage, but could not locate his wife among the survivors. He went back into the burning passenger coach in a vain attempt to find his wife and died by her side.

Among his personal effects inside an old trunk were several unpublished hymns. Among them was the hymn *Almost Persuaded*:

Almost persuaded now to
believe;

Almost persuaded Christ to
receive:

Seems now some soul will say,
Go, Spirit, go Thy way;
Some more convenient day
On Thee I'll call.

The hymn hits home. It does no good to become an almost-Christian. Either you are a Christian or

you aren't. Stop straddling the fence and playing both sides of the street; become a Christ follower. Don't put it off, as the hymn suggests, to a "more convenient day." That day may never come.

***Don't put it off...to a "more
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