

Living God's Big Story

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Colossians 1:9-14

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transfor-
mation

***My secret is
that I need
God....***

- Doug Coupland

Novelist Doug Coupland writes about being raised in a totally secular environment in Vancouver. Like all of his 30-something friends, he never went to church. His generation was the first one to grow up without God. That's why his book is appropriately titled, *Life without God*.

He asks in his book the really big questions everybody asks. You know, why am I here? And what is the purpose of my life? He struggles to make sense of life when God does not factor into the equation.

He writes a telling comment in the next-to-last-page of his book: "Now—here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again. So I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God...I need God to help me give, because I no longer am capable of giving; to help me to be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."

His book expresses what I referenced on Christmas Eve. Namely, that people are longing for God. We try to fill this spiritual void with all sorts of things. If you were here on Christmas Eve, you might recall the eye-opening quote attributed to G.K.

Chesterton, which I talked about in relationship to the Tiger Woods debacle: "Everyone knocking at the door of a brothel is looking for God."

In 2008, we preached a series of sermons called God's Big Story. To help us remember God's Big Story, we centered on three words—creation, fall and redemption. We have been created to live in relationship with God. We are made to want God and need God. That's how we are made. No wonder Coupland's secret is that he needs God.

God's Big Story doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the life of the early church. So, we devoted 2009 to learning how God's Big Story plays itself out in the life of the early church. Last year, we traipsed through all 28 chapters of the book of Acts. In 2010, we are narrowing our focus further to one church in a single city. How can God's Big Story transform a church?

These last three years have been narrowing like a funnel. The broad opening of the funnel represents God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption. Just as a funnel reduces in diameter in the middle, so we narrowed our field of vision to the early church in Acts. This year, we are moving further down the funnel to its narrow stem and reducing our scope to a single church.

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So what? You ask. What difference does God's big story make in my life? The goal of every sermon is helping us discern how our story can become part of God's Big Story. Your life represents the narrow opening at the bottom of the funnel. How can God's Big Story become part of our story this year?

Paul writes the letter of Colossians to several house churches in the ancient city of Colossae, in what is now part of modern Turkey. The city was destroyed by an earthquake in 60-64AD and has never been excavated.

The letter begins, as Stan introduced last Sunday, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...to the faithful saints in Christ at Colossae." Identifying the sender at the letter's outset makes perfect sense to me. What's the first thing you do when you receive a letter or email? You look to the end to identify the sender. But here, the sender is identified right from the outset. Brilliant!

Before Paul launches into his reasons for writing, verses 3-8 express thanks for these Colossian believers. You'll notice before Paul delves into the issues that give rise to his letter, he praises his readers and affirms them. Note the order. Before we confront, we affirm!

Verses 9-14 constitute Paul's prayer for the Colossians. These five verses constitute a single sentence in the Greek. My English teachers used to get on me about my run-on sentences. Paul has the

same deficit. He piles up genitive clauses and prepositional phrases in prayer for these Colossians.

We have entitled this Colossians sermon series that extends until Easter, "Journey of Transformation." We tend to regard the Christian life as something static and stationary, as mental assent to the set of beliefs (the Apostle's Creed) or as an ultimate destination (heaven). But the Bible portrays the Christian life more as a journey than a place to stand or a destination. Paul prays, in verse 10, that these Christians would "...lead lives worthy of the Lord." The Greek word translated as lives, *peripatein*, is a favorite term of Paul's. It appears 30 times in his letters and is literally translated "walk." Walking refers to a person's total conduct in life.

Walking is an appropriate metaphor for the Christian life. Walking implies direction and progress toward something. A disciple is someone who walks after Jesus. Disciples are, precisely, people who follow Jesus. We talk repeatedly about being a disciple-making church. We are learning, all our lives, what it means to follow Jesus Christ, to walk in the way of the Lord.

God wants to take us on a journey of transformation. You'll notice in verse 6 that this gospel is "bearing fruit and growing in the whole world." Paul prays, in verse 10, that his readers would "bear fruit in every good work." If we are growing, the proof will be fruitfulness for God. Paul identifies, in his Galatians letter, the fruits the Spirit

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of God produces: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (5:22-23).

Paul associates bearing fruit in verse 10, with “growing in the knowledge of God.” Paul doesn’t merely have in mind intellectual knowing. No one likes a know-it-all. Paul speaks of an experiential knowing—a knowing that comes from living in close proximity to Jesus Christ. It is the kind of knowing that results in loving and serving Christ, not in self-promotion.

Okay, the Christian life is a journey of walking and growing in the Lord. The goal of this walking and growing is transformation. We’re on a journey of transformation this year. Transformation is a virtual synonym of redemption. Remember God’s Big Story of creation, fall and redemption? Although God creates and sin destroys, God can redeem everything.

When our son, Andrew, was young, he played with transformers. These were toys that would transform from, say, a car into a robotic action figure. I’ll bring one in—we might still have some of them stored in our basement. God wants to transform our lives into the image of Christ.

Paul writes in verses 13-14: “God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Redemption is placed in parallel

position to forgiveness. To be redeemed is precisely to be forgiven.

Redemption means to release by means of a payment. We use the word redemption in the world of finance. The return on the money invested into stocks, bonds or mutual funds is called redemption.

Redemption, in the first century, was often used to describe the purchase of slaves. In the Old Testament, God redeemed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. That’s why the prophet Isaiah exalts God as Israel’s redeemer (63:16).

In God’s Big Story, we are created to live in relationship with God. But we fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. Unfortunately, the word “sin” these days has become synonymous with hot vacation spots like Las Vegas, the “Sin City.” Or sin is likened to a decadent dessert. A chocolate sundae is considered sinful—wickedly delicious.

Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us from God. Jesus Christ becomes God’s means of repairing the breach. Jesus Christ redeems people back into relationship with God. Although sin enslaves people, Christ liberates. He emancipates people from sin. How ironic that Paul writes about redemption from his jail cell. Jail is not the only thing that imprisons people.

The earthquake in Haiti has weighed heavy on our minds this week. It resurfaces the why question in me. Why did a benevolent and powerful God permit this earthquake to happen?

“In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?”

- John Stott

I feel inadequate to know what to say. I become annoyed with Christians who say too much, like Pat Robertson, who suggested the disaster was payback for a pact with the devil that Haitian slaves made to gain their independence from France more than 200 years ago.

I am helped by something Tim Keller said in his sermon in the service of remembrance following the 9-11 disaster. One of the great themes of Scripture is that God identifies with suffering. You'll find this theme throughout the Bible—God sides with those who suffer.

God becomes personally involved in our suffering and death in the person of Jesus Christ. You might say God knows what it is like to lose a loved one in a horrible tragedy. As John Stott said, “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?”

I don't pretend to know the reason why God allows suffering and pain, but I know one reason it can't be. It can't be because God doesn't love people or doesn't care. God loved people so much that he was willing to come down and enter our world of suffering and pain. This is not the whole answer to the question why, but it is the hint of an answer. If you grasp the meaning of the cross, it has the power to transform our lives and redeem our suffering.

Let me speak to those among us who haven't yet begun this journey

of transformation. I invite you, today, to begin this journey by opening your life to Jesus Christ and allowing God's Big Story to become part of your story.

Maybe you began this journey some time ago, but you're in something of a rut. You feel stuck. Your spiritual life has become stagnant. If you fall down, you pick yourself back up. You can always restart this journey of transformation.

Start or restart the journey of transformation with us this year.

