



The Whole Story 1 Timothy 1:12-17

On my staycation last week, my friend Cammie came for a couple of nights. Her daughter just started at Concordia. We went to their soccer game, first time I ever attended a soccer game. Concordia's women's soccer team was playing against my alma mater - Bemidji State.

I obnoxiously cheered for Bemidji while sitting amongst Concordia parents...yep, I found out that I am that kind of soccer fan. Good times.

One evening, we were flipping through Netflix, and I asked if she had seen Hacksaw Ridge?

No.

No? Really!?

I had to double check. Cuz I get so geeky and excited to share good stories with people.

Let's watch it, I said enthusiastically! Assuring her, that if after a few minutes it just wasn't her thing we could try something else.

She LOVED it! So much so, she wanted to watch it again the next morning. But it's not really a morning kind of movie.

It is a story about World War II, about faith and sacrifice and grit. It's not easy to watch, maybe not for everyone. But so inspiring, so moving. It is based on a true story of a man named Desmond Dobbbs.

He enlisted in the army but according to what he knew about God, he would not kill. He served as a medic.

That's all I'll say, but I recommend, good story it! And then tell me if you liked it.

You probably know this by now, I love good stories! Stories fueled my passion to be an English teacher. The joy of sharing good stories...like Pride and Prejudice.

I didn't want to let go of teaching to become a pastor.

But God helped me see that I wasn't losing out. Instead, I was exchanging "telling good stories" with sharing about "the GREATEST story ever told"!

We all like hearing good stories. We can all relate to the excitement and lift they bring. Right?

From being read to as a child, to chatting with our friends, watching movies; ...stories shape our perspectives. Pointing to what is important in life, filling our lives with meaning and belonging.

We may not notice the impression of these stories, how they are shaping us in the moment. But they can and often do have a significant impact on us.

Can't help but think of our kids...those getting their Adventure Bibles next week and the kids in Confirmation and their Teen Life Application Bibles.

This is their time to hear these amazing stories in the Bible for the first time, scaled to their learning level.

For Confirmation, it is wonderful to team with Lydea and be a part of this process. Of watching these stories go a bit deeper in the kids' lives, building on the faith they've been working on for years.

Helping them have an awareness that God is with them, a close and active part of their lives. Just like God was in the lives of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

These heroes of the faith and these great stories are being planted in their hearts and minds, strengthening Bill, Brooks, Brynn, and Mason for a lifetime of following God.

I wonder...can you remember, those moments when you first read a certain book. That is now one of your favorites?

Or the first time you watched, what is now one of your favorite movies?

Or your favorite story in the Bible?

Powerful encounters with stories!

In our text for today, we have the privilege to listen to a powerful, world class storyteller, the Apostle Paul.

Paul is in the wealthy city of Athens, Greece. He walked around and carefully looked at their objects of worship. He saw idols and alters to false gods

everywhere. At almost every turn...another temple, shrine, or idol. Athens was religiously religious.

Paul saw their “general spirituality” and raised them; “a personal relationship with the living God”. He was bold.

Can you envision him on this big chunk of rock? This is the place.

Can't you just hear him address the crowds, immediately capturing the attention of his audience, he stands up and projects...**“People of Athens!”** With maybe this kind of move...

His audience? Very similar to our own society today. Paul praises his audience for being very conscientious and polite, very religious and spiritual in a general sort of way.

Like today we also have people who are religious or spiritual, but not necessarily in relationship with God or following Jesus.

Like then, today many may acknowledge a vague sense of a higher power but not necessarily credit it or name it as God's personal handiwork. I remember a time like that in my life.

And like then, they are not particularly open to seeing God at work in our everyday lives. Nor hearing God as one who is calling out to us in love, calling out for relationship, calling out to share life together.

Being careful not to offend a God they possibly didn't know, the Athens added an altar inscribed to this unknown God. Covering all their bases.

But then Paul comes to them, **“People of Athens!”**
I am going to remove your ignorance. I am going to proclaim and reveal to you THIS Unknown God.

And Paul begins. He begins describing this unknown God.

THIS God is one who created all things, heaven and earth. He was not made by human hands like their idols.

Nor does he live in temples created by humans. Instead, this God has created us, gives us life and breathe and everything else we might need.

Then Paul talks about THIS God who has lovingly stacked the deck against us. Yes, he did. It's right here in scripture.

We heard how God marked out our appointed times, when in history we will live, where, and for how long. Setting boundaries around our lives for a specific purpose.

This God set up our lives, where and when...SO THAT we might perhaps seek God. That we might reach out to God in a desire to know God and be known. THIS God is a relational God.

So, relational. He has called us his children, proving his love and care for us. He cares how we live!

And as we seek THIS God who seeks relationship with us, we are assured we will find THIS God. Because Paul goes on to explain, THIS God is not far from any of us.

No, our God is near, as near as our own elbows. In truth, even nearer...

Picture a goldfish in a bowl of water.

Like that.

Okay...how close is that fish to the water in its bowl?

He is swimming and breathing that water! It's its HOME.

Paul says that with THIS God, God is like that water. Because Paul says we live and move and have our being...IN God. Can't be any closer than that.

But Paul is even more bold. He continues to describe THIS God as one who is calling people to change their minds, to believe they will be held accountable for how they live their lives.

Paul explains in verse 31, **“For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof to this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”**

THIS God will judge the world.

And then notice God's proof he will judge. He has given the whole world a sign. He raised someone from the dead.

And then notice...

Notice this absolute artful move on Paul's part. This brilliant choice, to NOT name the person. He purposely left that name out...leaving him unknown, turning the tables, maybe humor?

Paul knew their curiosity would be stirred up. Who is this sign? Who was raised from the dead? They hungrily ask each other.

But they did know WHO Paul was referring to.

They had heard those silly rumors. They knew this unnamed man. A simple Jewish carpenter, turned radical Rabbi, claiming to be the Messiah, crucified by Rome, and some say risen from the dead? Far-fetched.

And if Paul were with us today, and I believe he is. Because he is part of the "great cloud of witnesses" that have gone on before us. Paul is certainly one of the saints in our All Saints Sunday. He's one of the first.

But if Paul could speak to us, knowing God as he does. He certainly would tell us, certainly share this about THIS God on All Saints.

Paul would tell us THIS God is not immune to grief and suffering. He knows and understands loss and heartbreak. For THIS GOD gave his one and only Son so all could be saved.

And THIS God also came in the flesh, and knows our weaknesses, our fears and failures firsthand. Died on the cross for us, making relationship and communion available to us.

THIS God, also wept in the passing of his friend Lazarus. THIS God knows and understands our longing to be reunited with our loved ones. He is acquainted with grief, no stranger to grief.

This God walks with us as we remember and grieve. He sustains and carries

us through.

THIS too is the God Paul proclaimed.

THIS God.

Paul invites the people of Athens to know and receive this God. Because Paul knows this God, the greatest of ALL gods. And Paul has experienced a transformed and changed life. Having himself, a powerful testimony of conversion and repentance.

Our good news, THIS God wants us...you and me. Scandalous, greatest story EVER!

Paul's invitation is still open and calling out to us today. Paul is still inviting us to see the story, to see that the invitation is into something larger, outside ourselves, to know and receive this God.

We are still daily called into a transformative and dynamic, life-changing, hope and purpose-filled life because it is a relationship with THIS God.

We can begin a relationship with God. Maybe that's you today.

Or we can go deeper, to press in and lean into THIS God. To become an even more vital and vibrant part of this epic holy plot, this great story.

May God grant us grace to become caught up ANEW into the GREATEST STORY ever told!

Time of Reflection:

As we sit and reflect, consider the next step you feel called to take with God.

Start a relationship with God.

Go deeper in your relationship with God.

Be grateful for being part of the GREATEST story every told.