

*The Rest of the Story – January 17, 2010 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After the Epiphany*  
*Acts 26: 1, 9-20; Mark 1” 14-20; John 1: 43-51*

The passages of Scripture that we heard this morning - one from the book of Acts and two from the Gospels - are two distinctively different kinds of stories.

One, the one from Acts, is a testimony; and the two from the Gospels are what are often described as “call stories.”

We in the modern Christian world - and we especially in the Protestant tradition - are in love with testimonies. And at first blush, the story that Paul tells in the 26<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts fits the bill for what a testimony often wants to tell us - which is this:

“I was bad... I was very bad... I was especially bad; and then I met Jesus - or, rather, Jesus met me and I stopped being bad. And now I feel good... In fact, I feel very good; and I feel especially good about knowing Jesus.”

In this passage from Acts, we hear Paul vividly and painstakingly describe the details of his once sinful ways. Paul used to lock up Christians. Paul would often cast the deciding vote that resulted in Christians being condemned to death and subsequently executed. Paul used to harass and badger Christians, using his verbal and intellectual skills to get Christians to openly confess their faith in places where it was dangerous for them to do so.

Paul pretty much tells us in this passage that he once was obsessed with Christians - and with their beliefs and their ways and their behavior – and that he once was so consumed with anger and bitterness at the very existence of Christians that he could neither think about anything else nor do anything else but chase them, pursue them, prosecute and persecute any and all Christians even if meant traveling to another city.

Paul’s testimony rings true. And the facts prove the testimony true. For even as we are hearing Paul’s testimony in the 26<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, we cannot help but remember that back in Chapters 6 and 7 of the same book there is an account of a certain sect in Jerusalem that had a young Christian man named Stephen arrested. Then they harassed and interrogated him. Then they dragged him out of the city and then they brutally stoned him to death, while Paul, then known as Saul, held the coats of the killers and fully approved of their actions.

Paul wants us to know in his testimony: “I was very, very bad... I was twisted and disordered in my sinfulness - and then I met Jesus, or rather, Jesus met me.”

In Paul’s case, Jesus met him... Or rather, Jesus confronted Paul, still known as Saul at that time... Or rather, Jesus stopped Paul cold: blinding him; bringing him to his knees; disabling him, as the account in the ninth chapter of Acts tells us... Preventing him, again from the ninth chapter, from continuing his “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” and forever discontinuing his errands to haul Christians back to Jerusalem, arrested and ready for trial. Paul, in his testimony about these events, describes a “light from heaven,

brighter than the sun,” and a voice, the voice of Jesus, stopping Paul from completing his murderous errand. Paul wants us to know, “I once was lost, but now I’m found”

In fact, that is the sum and substance of most if not all personal testimonies... And that is why we love them so. “We once were lost. Now we have been found... We once were blind, but now we can see.”

Often, when singing the hymn *Amazing Grace*, we include an additional verse that simply repeats this refrain over and over again, “Praise God, Praise God, Praise God, Praise God.” And that refrain makes perfect emotional sense, for we are appropriately glad that God has intervened in our lives, however wretched or wayward or despondent or empty, or in Paul’s case, evil and malicious our lives may have become.

And we are overwhelmed with an understandable joy at the gift that God has so freely given us, God’s gift of grace and love, which has transformed our lives by reminding us who we are and whose we are - that we are God’s children, created in God’s image and called to grow in God’s likeness.

And that’s where many if not most testimonies end: praising God for rescuing a lost and wayward life... sharing the joy of finally and fully knowing Jesus; bearing testimony, if you will, of a new peace and rest that has been found in a life with Jesus.

But that is not the rest of the story. And it certainly is not the rest of Paul’s testimony.

Jesus, we hear in verse 16 of the 26<sup>th</sup> chapter, tells Paul to “get up and stand on your feet.” And then we hear Jesus outlining in great detail the purpose for his encounter with Paul, saying, “I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and may turn from the power of Satan to God so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and so have a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

“Get up and stand on your feet.” Jesus tells Paul and Jesus tells us. “I have a purpose in my encounter with you. There is a reason that I have stopped you cold and brought you to your knees. It is so that you will stand up, stand up, and hear, heed, and respond to my call upon your lives.”

Jesus isn’t looking for admirers. **Jesus is looking for disciples.** Jesus isn’t interested in our simply being intrigued by him or interested in him. **Jesus wants us to follow him**, beginning with our baptism, or at least from the time of our conversion, and then to follow him all the way, wherever we are called to go, whatever we are called to do.

Jesus didn’t stop us on our way to nowhere in a hurry simply because He wants us to feel good. Jesus wants us to do some good. Jesus has a call on each of our lives. And Paul at the close of his testimony faithfully reports that he did exactly what Jesus asked him to do. “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,” Paul tells King Agrippa, who has been called in to determine Paul’s future and fate. And that is why, Paul then tells the king, why he has been in prison and why there have been repeated attempts on his life.

Paul's testimony provides the necessary "rest of the story" - that Jesus enters into our lives and confronts the emptiness or incompleteness of our lives not merely so that we can feel better about our lives but also so that we may do something with our lives, so that we can somehow and some way make this world better.

It's simply not enough that we talk or discuss or share our personal stories or testimonies about Jesus. Rather, we are to do as Francis of Assisi once called his followers to do... to preach the Gospel at all times. And if necessary, use words."

\* \* \* \*

Which brings us to the call stories that we heard this morning... In Mark's Gospel, we hear Jesus call Simon, later known as Peter and his brother Andrew to leave their work as fishermen in order to follow Him. In the same short passage, we hear that two other brothers, James and John, "left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired hands" and also followed Jesus.

Let us be clear about this... This was not an easy or a painless choice for any of these four men to make. They were not merely fishing. They were in the fishing business. This was their livelihood. Boats cost money. There were hired hands to pay. There was a solid future in the fishing business; and there was a terrible risk in leaving it all behind.

And yet, that's exactly what Simon and Andrew and James and John did. They took that risk. They made that leap of faith. They made some sacrifices, some enormous sacrifices actually, in their willingness to accept the call that Jesus made upon their lives.

\* \* \* \*

A few days ago, I received an envelope in the mail. Inside that envelope was a simple single page brochure from Dogwood Village in Orange. It wasn't asking for money and it wasn't soliciting business for itself. Rather, it was calling on us - each of us, some of us - to help in some way. The top of the brochure said this: "What you give of yourself is priceless" and then it listed eighteen ways where we can volunteer, from helping out at movie night to pushing around the refreshment cart. The needs were clearly identified and the community was called to meet those needs.

A week or so ago, someone at one of the churches expressed the hope that the women of that church would expand their mission focus by helping at the senior center, especially by volunteering their time when the meals are served. A week or so later, someone at one of the churches expressed the wish that the men of that church would expand their outreach focus by visiting those men who are recovering in the nearby hospitals. Both of these concerns were named independently of the other. Both of these hopes and wishes are sound and sincere and both name a need - and both make a call on people's lives.

\* \* \* \*

And frankly, I cannot think of a single thing to say that would even begin to adequately name the horror that we are witnessing in Haiti and the sadness and despair and frustration that all of us must be feeling. There are needs there. There is a call upon our lives there. Let us listen to God's call and let us do what we can.

Let us do what Jesus called Paul to do when Jesus encountered Paul and changed his life entirely: to get up; to stand on our own two feet; and to be about the work that Jesus would have us to do.

For being found and rescued and saved by Jesus is only the first part of our testimony... Serving Jesus, following Jesus, by doing what we are called to do in this broken and yet beautiful world... That's the rest of the story. And that is the part that is the cause of our Savior's joy. **Amen.**