

The Big Story Gen. 1:31; John 3:16,17; Rom. 3:23, 5:8 8/8/21

Earlier this week I looked on-line for a list of people's top fears. I found the usual suspects: fear of flying, germs, small spaces, the dark, spiders, snakes, heights, public-speaking, commitment, etc. You can probably relate to some of these fears, can't you? But I wonder if we added another category just for Presbyterians, whether it might be near the top of the list: Evangelphobia- fear of sharing your faith! There was a time when Presbyterians, like almost all Christians, saw sharing their faith as a natural part of being a Christian. But over the last 40-50 years, we've gotten out of practice, and now many of us are lost when it comes to talking about our faith.

Last spring I taught a Zoom course called "Engage," which was about how to share your faith in a low-threat, non-terrifying kind of way. So, I thought I'd share some of what we learned with you this Sunday and next. Now you should know that some of my early faith-sharing experiences were not positive. After high school I enrolled at a fundamentalist Bible college in Philadelphia. Let's just say it wasn't a good fit for me. In fact, I got kicked out- but that's a story for another day! Anyway, they took evangelism very seriously there. We were required to share our faith a certain number of times each week and report on what we'd done! And

they were very specific about what that meant. You couldn't just yell "Jesus saves!" into a crowded subway car and count that as 25 witnesses!

Oh, no! They had a "canned" approach developed by Campus Crusade for Christ called "The Four Spiritual Laws." You had to go through that booklet with someone in order for your "witness" to count! I rebelled against this requirement, as well as most of their other requirements! If I was going to share my faith, I wanted it to be more conversational, and I wanted it to arise more naturally. I think that's true for most Presbyterians, too. However, some of us get overwhelmed when we think about sharing our faith, because we're not sure what to focus on. After all, the Bible has 66 books, covering thousands of years. Where do we even start?

That's where we're headed this morning. I'm going to attempt to give a brief overview of the main story of the whole Bible in the next few minutes. The Big Story. It's based on a presentation developed by James Choung that was featured in the "Engage" course. You can find it on Youtube if you want to. I hope it will be helpful to you!

We begin at the beginning! The very beginning! Gen. 1:1 "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" (EASEL* - "Designed For Good") As you read through the creation stories in Genesis, you'll note that after each act of creation, the author reflects and says, "*And it was good.*" And after the creation is complete, we read, "*God saw everything*

that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31) “Designed for Good!” And as we read the story, we find that humans were in a good relationship with the creation, tending and enjoying it. They were in a good relationship with each another. And they were in a good relationship with their Creator. That’s how things started, but it didn’t last long.

By Genesis chapter 3, the first humans chose to disobey God, leading to a cascade of broken relationships with the creation, one another, and with God. In chapter four jealousy between brothers leads to the first murder, and we’re off to the races. (EASEL* - “Damaged By Evil”) The world today seems out-of-joint. The creation itself is in serious danger due to pollution, destruction of natural habitats, and global warming. We seem to be odds with the very planet on which we depend for life itself! Broken relationships characterize much human interaction, from broken marriages and strained relationships between children and parents, to misunderstandings between races, to antagonism between people of differing political views, to international conflicts which lead to outright war and violence in many parts of the world. Brokenness is everywhere. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “...*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” (Rom. 3:23) Or, as Christian rocker, Randy Stonehill put it, “We are all like foolish puppets, who desiring to be kings, now lie pitifully crippled after cutting our own strings.”

Interestingly, something within us cries out that this is not the way things are supposed to be. At some level, we know deep inside that we were made for something different, something better than this world. It's a call back to Eden, a reminder that we have been damaged by evil, and that something needs to change. But nothing- not our technology, medicine, education, therapy, religions, or wealth- nothing seems able to really change things. And in some cases, they make things worse! That's the bad news of our predicament.

The good news is that God intervened, doing for us what we could not do ourselves. (EASEL*- "Restored for Better") God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world to remind us of what a world under God's rule looks like, to call us to join that kind of world. And, then through sacrificing his own life on the cross, he bridged the gap between God and humanity, restoring our relationship with God, securing our forgiveness, and making the restoration of our relationships with one another and the creation possible. It was God's divine rescue plan! In the famous words of John 3:16, *"¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* (John 3:16,17)

And, because we are confident of God's love for us and for those around us, we can begin a new way of living. And we can work together to continue God's grand restoration plan. (EASEL*- "Sent Together to Heal") Being part of that healing mission of God can take many forms. One way is to share this good news of God's love for us with others.

Many years ago, I was on a mission trip in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. We traveled to the most remote village I have ever visited there, a five-hour drive from the capital city of Merida, the last hour on a deeply rutted dirt road. Xmaben was a lush green village surrounded by high jungle. It was also very isolated, and there was no phone in the whole place. But there was a small Presbyterian congregation there, and they needed help putting a concrete roof on their very first church building. So we went.

The construction work took 6-10 hours each day in the sweltering heat, and we were exhausted by evening. But after the third day of work, the villagers excitedly told us about a special event that was taking place that evening that they wanted us to be a part of. It turned out that they had established a mission church in the nearby village of Ucum, and they were holding a service there that evening. So we loaded ourselves into a chicken truck, and off to Ucum we went! We sang a little in the service and I said a few words, but what most impressed me was the passion these

Mayan Christians had to share the good news with others. They had been busy establishing a mission church, when they didn't even have a finished building of their own! Sharing our faith with others is an important part of God's work of healing in the world. The people of Xmaben understood that!

But it's not all. God's work in the world also involves the very difficult task of building unity and peace between divided people. Between people of different races, for example, who have had very different experiences throughout the history of our country. Between new immigrants and long-time Americans. Between Americans and Iraqis and Iranians and Russians and Chinese. Between people in our community who have different visions for what a good life should look like in Adams County. Between husbands and wives who have forgotten the reason they got together in the first place. That's all part of God's work of healing in the world; We are all called to be peace-makers.

So, that's the Big Story! Where are you?

- Do you think you're still living in Eden where everything is peachy?
- Or, are you keenly aware of the ways in which this world is broken?

Maybe you've been badly broken by it yourself. Are you longing for things to be the way they're supposed to be, but not sure what to do about it?

- Or, are you aware of the good news of God's intervention into our world in the person of Jesus Christ? Have you trusted in what God has done on your behalf to make you right with God, other people, and the creation?
- And, are you joining in the work God is doing to heal our world, to restore it to the way it was created to be? Where are you? Where do you want to be?

Next week, we'll go to the second part of this series, looking at how our own story connects with "The Big Story," as a way to share that story with others.

*At this point, I drew a simple image on an easel from James Choung's "The Big Story" presentation, which can be viewed on Youtube.