

My Faith Story

by Jeremy Berg

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Introduction

As I was preparing to preach this first sermon in my hometown, I couldn't help but think of Jesus' preaching debut in his hometown of Nazareth. Remember the story? Jesus stood up in the pulpit, read a passage of Scripture, and after a short, poorly received sermon was driven to the edge of town by the angry congregation who then attempted to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:16-30)! Then Jesus said, "a prophet is never welcomed in his hometown."

Trusting that he knew what he was talking about, let me make it clear right now that I am no prophet. And if I say anything this morning that offends anyone, I pray you will be more merciful than those Nazarenes.

The Million-Dollar Question

Perhaps the first thing the senior high youth discovered about me when I arrived at this church some months ago is that I LOVE STORIES. I love books. In fact, all winter they have been forced to gather every Sunday night in my basement filled with books, which I have called "The Professor's Study." My love for books, however, goes deeper than an appreciation of good literature. My love for stories finds its root at a much deeper level of my being, at the core of my identity, my understanding of who I am and why I am alive. This morning I want to share my story of how God flipped my life upside down—or more accurately, right-side up—simply by reading a book. I want to share with you how God gave me a new purpose, and a new identity, through the power of a His Story.

Sam and Frodo, the two hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, have been struggling along for quite a while on their journey. They are exhausted, confused and desperately searching for direction and hope when Sam asks the million-dollar question: “Frodo, I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?” As John Eldredge notes in his small book *Epic*,

“Life doesn’t come to us like a math problem. It comes to us the way a story does, scene by scene... Each day has a beginning and an end. There are all sorts of characters, all sorts of settings. A year goes by like a chapter from a novel. Sometimes it feels like a tragedy. Sometimes like a comedy. Most of it feels like a soap opera. Whatever happens, it’s a story through and through.”

But this hobbit proves to be wiser than many of us. Do you ever stop amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday life and reflect upon the larger meaning of it all? I think John Eldredge is right again when he says that, “For most of us, life feels like a movie we’ve arrived at 45 minutes late. Something important seems to be going on” but we can’t always figure out how everything fits together. As kids we would never stop in the middle of our silly game of hide-and-go-seek and ponder the meaning of life. In high school I spent most of my spare time at open gym, perfecting my 3-point shot. Rarely, if ever, did I stop and ask myself the million-dollar question: What story am I living in? What is my purpose in life? This kind of self-examination and reflection is rare among adults, let alone carefree high school kids. I was just living life, one moment at a time, never thinking past the next basketball game or Friday night at the movies.

Whispers Within

This minute-by-minute perspective, this sort of ‘roll-with-the-punches’ attitude toward life would carry me through high school and into my second year of college before an alarm finally sounded. In the Fall of 1999, the bells of my inner soul began to ring. I began to hear that quiet whisper deep within. It would ask uncomfortable questions like, “Why are you here? What are you going to do with

your life? What is your calling? What is your purpose?" These quiet, somewhat harmless whispers quickly crescendoed to a frightening blend of anxious thoughts about the future and personal doubts about who I was: "What am I going to do when I grow up? Oh my goodness, I am grown up!! What major am I going to choose? How am I going to pay for college? I don't know what I want to be! I don't know exactly who I am anymore."

You see, in high school I my future was as predictable as any other teenager. I would go to school, hang out with friends, play some sports, go to some dances, maybe have a girlfriend or two, pull some harmless pranks and in the end receive that diploma. My identity was secured as I was surrounded by a good group of friends. My self-confidence was boosted by success in the classroom and achievements in athletics. Most importantly, I was raised in a supportive, loving, and stable family. I knew who I was and what I was supposed to do.

In college, however, my future was no longer as predictable as a high school student. I was beginning to chart my own path and forge my own identity. The future was wide open. All the things that had previously defined who I was and where I was headed were gone. And I still remember how unstable I felt. The foundation was missing. My walls of security had crumbled. Security, however, was not the only thing I lacked. Even worse, the things in life that used to give me most joy and excitement were no longer fulfilling. Basketball had lost its appeal. Friends were great, but just watching a movie with them on a Friday night didn't quite satisfy that deep yearning in my heart. I was searching for a greater purpose and a new passion in life. I was finally asking the million-dollar question: What story am I living in? What is my role? Where is this story going?

My Greatest Folly

It was at this point that I committed my greatest folly. Having come to the realization that my future was now wide open, or as we fittingly say, "An Open Book," I decided that it was time to take up the quill and ink myself, and begin

writing my own story. I was to be the author of my life, “The captain of my own soul.”

I took full responsibility for my entire future and was determined to make my life story a bestseller. All I had to do was develop an exciting plot, surround myself with fun characters, throw in some daring adventures, some steamy romance and most of all make sure it was heading toward a happy ending. It doesn't take too much imagination to foresee the disaster that awaited me.



Trying to control one's own destiny is an overwhelmingly daunting task. In fact, it is a hopeless task. The plot of my story had a mind of its own. I had no control over the characters. Every attempt at an exciting adventure turned into a cheap thrill that lasted but a moment and then the thrill was gone. Romance was fleeting and far from steamy. I was tired, frustrated, scared and confused. Most of all I was thirsty for a taste of the abundant LIFE people speak of. But, I had committed the double folly of which the prophet Jeremiah spoke so long ago. God said through Jeremiah,

“My people have committed two sins: (1) they have turned away from me, the spring of fresh water, and (2) they have dug for themselves cisterns, cracked cisterns that can't even hold water” (Jer 2:13).

In attempting to be the author of my own life, I had (1) left God out of the picture, cutting myself off from the only source of true life, and (2) I had attempted to find lasting fulfillment in things that are unable to satisfy. As Saint Augustine said, “You God have made us for thyself, and our souls are restless until they find rest in thee.” My soul was restless.

So, during the winter of 2000, I threw up my hands in desperation and finally asked for God's help. I admitted that I was far too weak to be author of my own life. I asked him to guide my future and reveal a calling. I began journaling at this time and have saved them to this day. They are an eyewitness account of the beginnings of a supernatural, spiritual awakening. They provide a glimpse into the early promptings of the Holy Spirit breaking into the scared and confused heart of a young college kid. Around this time I wrote the following entry:

March 9, 2000

I am so confused with school right now. I have no direction or goals at all. I am trying to see your ways Lord. It could be that you are waiting to reveal to me my calling in life until I have established and grown stronger in my faith. Maybe you have removed the distraction of a calling from my life for the time being just so I can focus entirely on You. Perhaps you are asking me to find my calling by looking to you.

I asked him for a calling, a new purpose, a new story. I was beginning to learn the lesson of Proverbs 3, that urges us to, "Trust in the Lord, with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. Acknowledge him in all that you do and he will show you the way" (Prov 3:5-7)! In another journal entry around this time, it is apparent that God was beginning to answer my prayer for a new passion in life. He was becoming my heart's main desire:

March 15, 2000

God is working in me in big ways. I feel like I have lost desire for everything but God! I find less joy in school, classes, exercise, work, and sports... It seems like God has cleared away all of my former passions so that they won't distract me from Him. My will is to find a major I like and graduate in

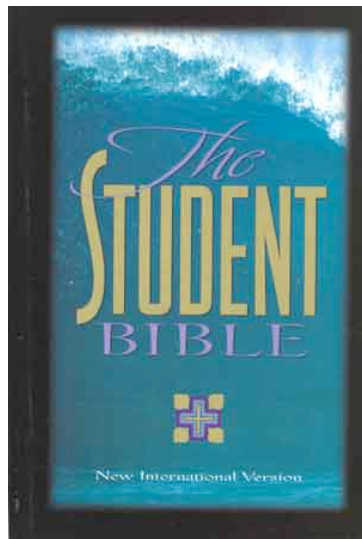
four years. God's plan is for me to grow in Him now before he reveals his awesome plan for my future.

All other joys of life were beginning to pale in comparison to knowing Christ. As the Apostle Paul once wrote, “I have come to regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8).

An Unexpected Gift

Not too long after I began looking to God, He began to move in some amazing ways in my life. Two of my roommates were out for coffee one day when, in their words, they “both felt moved by the Spirit” to buy me a new Study Bible.

They were both raised in Bible reading families, where everyone carried nice, leather-bound Study Bibles with fancy cheater notes in the margins, old sermon notes filling the pages, and even one of those geeky water-proof canvass cases to carry it in.



I, on the other hand, still had my gold-colored Good News Bible I received at my first communion collecting dust on my bottom shelf—you know, the one with the little stick drawings in it. No bookmarks, no sermon notes, no dog-eared pages, no margin notes. Just an old, rarely cracked Bible I had occasionally tried reading, but usually ended up snoring on, always marking my page with a small pool of drool. Peter and Joe brought me home a new Bible that day and set it in on my desk. I received it like you might receive a new pair of socks on Christmas morning. “Yippee! A new Bible! Just what I needed.” Oh, and it's hard not to take this gesture as some sort of backhanded spiritual slap in the face. It's about as flattering as receiving a breath mint from a friend. “Oh, I can take a hint!”

After letting it sit for a while on my desk, I finally decided the only proper thing to do when you receive a gift is to at least use it once. Then you can move on with a clear conscience. So I took my shiny new Student Bible to the Dining Center that night to eat. Finishing my meal I took it out and opened it up to John. See, I never really ever got past the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Why would I need to? It's the four Gospels that tell us about Jesus. Right? What more did I need?

I was raised a good Lutheran. I knew the basic story of the Gospel, of how Jesus came into the world to show us God's love, how he died upon the cross for my sins so that I could have eternal life. And I believed it with all my heart. Yet, even though my faith was firmly planted in the soil of all of these fundamental beliefs, I still sensed I missing an important piece to the faith puzzle. Should I read on past John? Could the answer possibly be found beyond the four Gospels?

A Two-Legged Faith

You might think of my faith at this time as a two-legged stepping stool. Have you ever tried standing on a stool with only two legs? YOU CAN'T DO IT. Trust me! You need the third leg to make a sturdy tripod. The first leg I had in place was extremely important. It was the leg of ***Assurance of Salvation and Eternal Life***. I had placed my trust in Jesus, had asked him for forgiveness and made him my Lord and Savior. I knew where I was going when I died. But this had little impact on this life. What about life now?

The second leg, the leg of ***Personal Transformation***, was also slowly falling into place. I was beginning the lifelong process of dying to my old self, clothing myself with Christ, growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, letting my life be transformed by the renewing of my mind, loving my neighbor and all the rest. These two legs are essential to the Christian life, but these two alone hardly provide a sturdy stepping stool. In fact, these two alone are not enough to

stand on at all. My two-legged faith was aimed at merely turning me into a nice guy with a rosy afterlife to look forward to.

But is this what the Christian life is all about? Cleaning up our act and waiting to die so we can get on with heaven? I had bought into this and was finally realizing that there was still something missing. I was missing that third leg, and I now had an idea of what this third leg was. I needed a purpose. I needed a mission. I needed a calling. ***I needed to find myself wrapped up in an exciting, purpose-filled adventure story, where I had an important role to play.*** I needed to discover GOD’S BIG STORY and MY PLACE IN IT! I didn’t want to just wait around, staring into the sky, and being a good boy in the process. What was I to do?

Hearts Burning & Wheels Turning

Back at the Dining Center, with my new Bible anxiously waiting to have its binding broken for the first time, I decided to read on past John into uncharted waters. The very next book in the New Testament is one I had never really heard of. It was called Acts in my Bible—short for The Acts of the Apostles. I had no idea what it was about. I presumed it might even be a collection of one-act plays; perhaps, some Shakespearean-like sonnets written in a hard to understand poetic verse. Boy was I in for a big surprise!

Acts turns out to be perhaps the most exciting and action-packed book of the entire Bible. It begins with the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples. He spends some last moments with his friends over a 40-day period, giving some last instructions before he would ascend to the Father, leaving the disciples scared and confused, scratching their heads, going “Now what?” I immediately found myself wrapped up in the action.

See, I was asking the same question. Like the disciples who spent four or so years following Jesus around, getting to know and love him, I felt well acquainted with Jesus through reading the Gospels. I couldn’t imagine the confusion that must

have settled in among those 12 guys who had invested everything to follow Jesus. They had left their jobs and even family to become his disciples. Now, in the course of only a few days, their beloved friend and teacher had been arrested, executed as a common criminal, resurrected from the dead, appearing to them again, even sharing breakfast with them on the seashore. Back with them, perhaps now things would be all right. In fact, they even asked him in Acts 1:6, “Now are you finally going to finish what you came to do?”

But Jesus has a different plan. In the New Testament passage for this Sunday, we find the following scene. Jesus is about to leave his disciples again to return to the Father, but before he does Luke tells us “he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to WAIT there for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). Wait?! NO! This is not what I wanted to read. I was tired of waiting. I want a mission. I was hoping he was going to give them some lasting quest, some meaningful task to complete. But he tells them to wait in Jerusalem. I almost shut the book right there. Thankfully I kept reading on.

Turns out that the waiting Jesus spoke of would only take a few days. And the promise of the Father is not some Eternal Pie in the Sky When We Die, but instead, as Jesus says, “You will receive POWER when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8a). Now I was getting excited. Jesus was talking about receiving power for accomplishing some new, important task. He spoke of the Holy Spirit that all Christians receive when they become disciples. He seemed to be speaking of the necessary arsenal and weaponry for some great battle, or the proper luggage for a grand adventure, an exciting mission. I was all ears now.

Next he reveals his mission to the disciples, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ENDS OF THE EARTH” (1:8b)! This was nothing short of a journey to the ends of the earth. Talk about a mission! This was an invitation to play a meaningful role in God’s grand story of redemption and cosmic renewal!

Something deep inside of me ignited that evening as I proceeded to read the next 20 some chapters. Like John Wesley, I felt “my heart strangely warmed” as I read for nearly 3 more hours. My heart was on fire. I felt like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who, after hearing Jesus unpack the Scriptures, said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us” (Luke 24:32)? That night I discovered that the Christian life was far more exciting than just “being a good person” or merely “going to heaven when I die.” It was an invitation into God’s great Story where I had a special role to play.

The Rest Is His-Story

On the evening of March 14, 2000, in the Dining Center of Bethel University my perspective on life was forever changed. I knew the answer to the hobbit’s question. I knew what sort of tale I had fallen into. It is an exciting tale of God’s boundless love for a world filled with people who all too often insist on doing it their way, who want to control their own fate, and write their own story. It is the story Eden’s demise, where the first humans were not willing to just play their part, but instead desired to be like the Author. It is the story of Babel, where a human race bent on taking the place of God, tried building a tower to the heavens.

And just when God’s rebellious creatures reached the point of their grossest defiance, and deserved God’s utter most wrath, the High God of Heaven relinquished His crown of glory, and received instead a crown of thorns. Just when God should have reached down and put us in our place, He instead sent His only son to take it. This is the story in which we find ourselves. This is the story we are called to go out and share with others.

Go, therefore, into all the world, inviting all who may still be trying to write their own story, stumbling under the weight of a burden too heavy for any mortal to bear. Share with them the comforting words of the prophet Jeremiah, who

declares, “Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jer 29:11).

Go also to all who may be bored with life, to those tired of the monotony of the daily grind, and to any two-legged believers who are still seeking that missing piece and invite them all into the purpose-filled story of God where they can discover their own meaningful role to play.

Finally, go out to all Christians who, like the disciples after Jesus’ ascension, find themselves just standing around, gazing up into the sky. “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). But in the meantime, there’s work to be done.

Go tell the story, and invite others to find their unique role in it!

Amen.