

17 January 2016

John's Story

Jeremiah 1:4-8; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Jeremiah 1:4-8

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Last week we heard conversion stories. We started with Paul's dramatic story, as he retold it to the king and the Roman governor, a prototype evangelistic testimony. Paul saw a bright light, heard a voice from heaven, and in response he completely turned his life around. The persecutor of the church became its greatest witness. Then we looked at some parallel stories: St. Augustine was changed from a womanizing critic of Christianity to a great theologian and devotional writer, St. Francis from an idle rich playboy to a barefoot friar preaching God's love to the lowest levels of society, John Newton from the captain of a slave ship to an abolitionist priest. Along the way we saw other remarkable evidences of God's work. Francis, like Paul, heard a voice from heaven; Augustine, obeying an child's voice that may or may not have been from heaven, opened the Bible at random and found exactly the words he needed to read. We may never be able to prove scientifically the existence and working of a loving God, but the best evidence I know of God's reality is the transformation of God's people. As Paul said in our passage from 2 Corinthians: *everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.*

One problem, though. Actually, very few of us have that kind of experience. We don't see lights or hear heavenly voices and, frankly, few if any of us experience that sort of dramatic and sudden transformation. That was tremendously frustrating to me as a teen, when I heard salvation testimonies like these. I remember one youth rally in Singapore where the speaker had been the leader of a criminal gang, but in prison he picked up a Gideon Bible, opened it at random, and now was a preacher of the gospel. (It was a gripping 45-minute testimony, maybe because 38 or so of those minutes described his preconversion wickedness. I was so jealous. I

hadn't been saved from anything even remotely that interesting.) And he wasn't even the most dramatic example. Anyone remember Mike Warnke from the 70s? He was a humorist and evangelistic speaker who sold millions of albums and spoke to youth rallies all over the world about how Christ had saved him from his old life as the High Priest of the Church of Satan. It came out a few years later that he had actually made all that up, but that's not my point. My point is that most of us don't have that kind of dramatic conversion story.

I didn't. What a boring salvation I had. My parents were missionaries, so I grew up in church, surrounded by people for whom faith was real and important. I don't remember a time when I didn't believe in God and in his Son's resurrection. I was baptized at age seven in the calmest and most undramatic fashion, and at sixteen dedicated my life to ministry. I never did drugs, never got in trouble, got good grades, and always went to the Friday night Bible Study. Snore. I can tell you, it made me terribly insecure about my own faith. I knew that salvation was *supposed* to be dramatic, and mine wasn't.

Here's today's good news: we don't all have to have the same story. Look again at the reading from Jeremiah. God says, *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.* There are no angelic being, no rumblings, no bright lights. Sometimes, it seems, God doesn't appear in a whirlwind. Sometimes, it turns out, God has always been there.

That, at least, was John Wesley's story. Like me, John too had an unremarkable and devout childhood, surrounded by people of faith. His father was a scholarly clergyman, which is a little sad, but fortunately his mother was actually useful. Susanna Wesley taught John and his brother *and sisters* scripture and theology and prayer and love and ministry to others, and John took to his mother's teaching readily. He was a very good boy. When he went up to Oxford, he immediately became known as the most religious boy on campus. He and his brother Charles led a group of like-minded young dedicated to religious discipline. They called themselves the "Holy Club," but other students, sneering at their checklists of daily religious practices, called them "Methodists." (An aside here: I can only thank God that we ended up with the name intended as an insult rather than the name that our founders picked. It just wouldn't be the same belonging to the First United Holy Club of Wausau.) But that was John: a good boy. After university, he was ordained a priest and went off to the American colonies, to Georgia, to preach salvation to the Indians, who were polite but uninterested. Worse, even the English colonists there fell short of John's ideals of holiness. They didn't seem more interested in John's message of holiness than the Indians were.

John returned to England, encouraged to do so by the governor of Georgia, and along the way he encountered a group of Moravian Christians who didn't try to be holy *nearly* as hard as John did, but who, somehow, managed it better. And without irritating people. John began to spend time with these Moravians, back in England, and through their influence he changed. Not all at once, and not dramatically, but step by step. John Wesley was transformed by his faith every bit as much as Paul or Augustine, but in Wesley's case, the transformation was not from sinner to saint but from saint to human being. His conversion was not one moment when he believed – he had *always* believed – but was the process of his realizing that following Christ

was not about being holier than others but rather about loving them. He began preaching a gospel of grace.

Here's the grace that John Wesley described. It starts from the moment of birth – as God had told Jeremiah. Long before we are aware of God, God is with us, loving us toward faith. As we grow older God is still there, protecting us from our own bad decisions, and gently pointing us in better directions until we can decide for ourselves to follow Christ. For some, this decision will be dramatic; for others it will not – just as some will fall in love with a stranger at first sight, and others will marry a childhood playmate. But, Wesley adds, that's not the end of the story. God remains with us through the rest of our journey, still guiding us, still working on us, still loving us toward faith. In the New Testament reading from 2 Corinthians, we read these words: *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.* Paul reminds the Corinthians that having been saved is great, but their story goes on. They have been reconciled, and now, by grace, they get to live a life of reconciliation.

Our salvation story is the story of God's grace in our lives, which may (or may not) have dramatic moments. Either way, no one moment is the point; the point is transformation. In terms of my own faith, I've probably changed more in the past twelve years than I did in my first forty. At any rate, my kids talk about Old Dad and New Dad. (It's okay; they prefer New Dad.) And who knows what turns my story will take next. Or yours. They're still being written; we're still being transformed by God. That's our good news to the world.