



There are few things as powerful or that capture our imaginations as much as that of a story. We love stories. We read stories to our children and when friends and family members get together they share stories. The Bible shares a great many stories. It shares stories of our forbearers in faith and stories that Jesus told – called parables – that illuminated his teaching. Stories are a way of taking a truth and really embedding it into our hearts and minds, which is why I include stories as often as I can in my messages.

Some stories are so engrained in our consciousness that I can begin the first line and you can finish it. How about if we try that? Here are some first lines of famous stories that I will begin, and see if you can answer.

Call me...Ishmael.

—*Moby Dick* by Herman Melville

It was the best of times...it was the worst of times.

—*A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens

In a hole in the ground there lived...a hobbit.

—*The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

'All children, except one...grow up.'

—*Peter Pan*, or originally, *Peter and Wendy*, by J. M. Barrie

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of...Tom Sawyer...

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain.

The sun did not shine, it was too wet to play, so we sat in the house all that cold, cold wet day. I sat there with Sally. We sat here we two and we said "How we wish we had something...to do."

—*The Cat in the Hat*, by Dr. Seuss.

Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan...Edmond, and Lucy.
—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, b C. S. Lewis.

Once upon a time there were four little Rabbits, and their names were-Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail...and Peter.
—*Peter Rabbit*, by Beatrix Potter.

And this one, surely, everyone will be able to complete.
In the beginning God...created the heavens and the earth.
—Genesis 1:1.

Today we continue the series of messages that will take us through Easter Sunday. The title of the series is *What Faith Can See*. In this series I have been speaking about passages that demonstrate how difficult it was for the disciples and others to understand the words and actions of Jesus, and the work of God. It was not only difficult for the disciples, but is for us as well.

This morning we come to a well-known story from the life of Paul – his conversion on the road to Damascus. This story is so well-known that it has entered into the lexicon of our culture as people often refer to a change in life or the changing of one’s mind as a *road to Damascus* moment. What I want us to look at this morning is the change in Paul’s life story. The title of this message is *A New Story*, and what I want to focus on is the promise that faith can bring to us a new story. If you are unhappy with the direction of your life, if you are in the midst of a difficult season of life, if you are worn down by the struggles of life, God can write you *A New Story*. One of the great promises of faith is that life can change, life can be different, and life can begin anew, wherever we are on the road of life.

Follow along with me as I read our Scripture text for today.

Acts 9:1-6; 26-28

1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest

2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

5 “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.

6 “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

As Luke begins the story, he has a dramatic opening line – *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples*. That’s an opening line that captures your attention, isn’t it?

Paul, at this moment, was still known primarily by the name of Saul, and he is on his way to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus and return *them as prisoners to Jerusalem* (Acts 9:2). At the time,

Saul was the protector of the religious status quo, and in the followers of Jesus he saw a great threat to the establishment, of which he was a part. In his mind, this new movement needed to be stopped, and stopped by any means necessary.

Let's stop there for a moment and consider this point –

Paul learned it is possible, and sometimes necessary, to change your mind.

It's hard to admit when you're wrong. All of us, from time to time, will say *I'm not always right* but here's a little test I want you to take, because it demonstrates just how hard it is to know that we are wrong. In ten seconds, think of three times you were wrong. Go ahead and start thinking.

Could you come up with three times? That's three times when *you* were wrong, not someone else. I actually gave you an extra five seconds, just to make it easier. Here's the point in that experiment – even though we readily admit that we are not always right, and even though we acknowledge that it's hard to admit when we are wrong, we find it very difficult to come up with a few times when we were wrong.

Paul was a great example of the truth that just because you are absolutely convinced about something, it doesn't mean you are correct. Paul was convinced in his mission. Paul was unwavering in his commitment to dragging followers of Jesus back to Jerusalem so they could be imprisoned. Paul had the backing of the religious authorities. Paul could recite all the Scriptures that he believed backed him up. Paul could justify in every way imaginable his mission. But here's what we have to remember – he was wrong! And not only was he wrong, God had to initiate a divine intervention to convince Paul that he was wrong! It's one thing to be wrong; it's wrong on an entirely different level when God has to step into your life to let you know you are wrong. The good news is that Paul had the good sense to listen and to acknowledge his error when God did intervene, but Paul was not the only one who needed a divine intervention. In fact, we recognize that God intervened in a dramatic way for all of humanity, and we call this the Incarnation. God the Creator and Lord of the universe came to earth as a divine intervention, and yet many people still could not acknowledge the error of their ways!

We can look back in history and find way too many examples where people cannot acknowledge the error of their ways, and this, sadly, includes religious people. In the Middle Ages the church persecuted people who would not accept the required orthodoxy. Imagine; the church that had itself been the victim of persecution became the persecutor. For generations, some in the church supported slavery, the subjugation of women, and we could go on, but the point is that God, at times, intervenes because it is necessary for him to offer a corrective to the mistaken ways of humanity.

God is writing a new story, and that story is often a corrective to the story written by humanity. While mankind attempts to write the story to suit humanity's purposes, God writes the story to suit his purposes. While humanity writes the story of power and domination, God writes the story of peace. While humanity writes the story of hatred and strife, God writes the story of love. While humanity writes the story of riches and wealth and gain, God writes the story of giving and sacrifice. Tracing the Biblical story we find time and again that God was writing a new story. When Egypt enslaved the Hebrew people to build their buildings and become their servants, God writes them a new story. God writes the story to say that people were never created to be enslaved by others and he frees the Hebrew people and fashions them into a people and into a people who would demonstrate to all of history what it meant to be people who would follow God.

Many of the Biblical characters are examples of God writing a new story. Moses, rescued from the waters by Pharaoh's daughter, was raised in privilege. Discovering that he was one of the Hebrew people, enslaved by the Egyptians, he took the life of an Egyptian overlord who was beating one of the Hebrew slaves. Fleeing Egypt, Moses believed his story was over, but he was the one chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people out of captivity in Egypt. Moses could not imagine such an ending for his story, but God wrote him a new story.

David, the great king of Israel, enjoyed a lot of high points in his life, but he also endured some terrible lows. His power and political achievements fostered in him a level of arrogance so terrible that when he wanted the wife of another man he took her and then ensured her husband would be killed to cover what he had done. His family, because of his tragic example, became the textbook example of dysfunction that led to the tragic death of his beloved son Absalom. And yet God wrote a new story in David's life to the point that Scripture would say of David that he was *a man after my (God's) own heart* (Acts 13:22).

Peter was a fisherman, living his life, scratching out a living, when Jesus approached him on the shores of Galilee. He was a willing, though flawed, follower. He denied Jesus, was restored, but still struggled. Paul had to confront Peter about Peter's hesitancy to welcome Gentiles into the church. But Peter was faithful, and gave his life for his faith. God wrote a new story in his life.

And Saul, as we read today, while he was still breathing threats and murder against the members of the early church, found God on the road to Damascus and God wrote a new story in his life.

Others will seek to write your story.

Listen again to verses 26 – 28 –

26 *When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.*

27 *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.*

28 *So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.*

I guess it's only natural that some people would be not only skeptical about any change in Paul; they would fear him as well. They were aware that he was present when Stephen was stoned to death and that he was in agreement with that action. Paul had his share of skeptics. Paul had people who wanted to write his story for him. Paul had people who would say to him and about him – *you can't trust that guy. He hasn't really changed. Don't put him in charge of anything. How could God use someone who has done what Saul has done?*

But, thankfully, Paul had some help in Barnabas. Verse 27 says *Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.* I love Barnabas. I love that Barnabas was not afraid to stand up for Paul. Well, maybe he was a little afraid, but his commitment to the truth that God was writing a new story in Paul's life allowed him to overcome that fear and stand up for Paul. Remember, Barnabas is not a major character in the Bible. Barnabas had to stand up for Paul to some heavyweights of the early church – the apostles. That's Peter, James, John, and the other nine. Barnabas took hold of Paul and said, *come on. I'm taking you to the top and I'm going to vouch for you.* Barnabas was not, it's important to note, his given name. According to Acts 4:36 his given name was Joseph. Barnabas was a name given by the apostles, and the name means *Son of Encouragement*. Barnabas certainly lives up to that name in this passage, as his encouragement and his willing to vouch for Saul made a great deal of difference in the life and ministry of Saul.

I am grateful for those who fill the role of Barnabas in my life. I am very blessed to have a number of people who are a Barnabas to me. Maybe there is someone who needs you or I to be their Barnabas. Maybe there is someone who needs you or I to vouch for them, to remind others that it is God who is writing the story of their life and not the skeptics, the doubters, and the critics that they face. There are many people who need a Barnabas to step into their life. There are many people who need someone to help them understand that God can, and will, write a new story for their life.

Let God's story make you bold.

Verses 27 and 28 use two great action words – *fearlessly* and *boldly*. *27*In Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

There is something very freeing and invigorating when we are free from worry over what others think about us. When we are free from worry over those who want to box us in and define our lives for us. When we are free from worry over those who want to write our story for us or tell us that we are bound by the story they want for our lives.

Someone is always seeking to write your story for you. Someone is always seeking to define you. Others will seek to write your story for you. Paul did not allow the skepticism of others to write his story. Who is going to complete your story? Who has defined your story? Never forget that it is God who is writing your story. When fears and worries, challenges and failures, appear to be writing the story of your life, remember that God is the author and the finisher of your faith and your life.

I have a friend who is a writer, and I am often fascinated to observe his writing process. Over time, he writes and rewrites. Sometimes he will change a large section of a story and sometimes he will change only a word or two. The smaller changes are what fascinate me, but they are done with the same careful thought and determination as the large changes. Sometimes, even after a story is published, he will make changes that will be applied to later revisions. His work reminds me that the writing of a story is never truly complete, as the story is always being written.

God is writing a new story. Always. There is much handwringing about the state of the world today, and there are many reasons to bring us concern, but God is writing not only our stories, but also is writing the story for all of humanity, and that story will not be decided by the principalities and powers of this world, but by God.

God is writing a new story for you, and for me. Allow that new story to make you fearless and bold!