

What Story Are You Telling?

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

One of the stories that my father told us growing up was about his beagle, Tawny. Now Tawny was an excellent hunting dog. She was so good at finding rabbits, that some of my dad's friends would ask to borrow her sometimes when they went hunting. Now my dad wasn't particularly good at hunting, mostly because he wasn't a great shot. One day he and Tawny went rabbit hunting in the woods behind our house. It wasn't long before Tawny was in hot pursuit of a rabbit and she chased him toward dad who aimed, fired, and missed. Tawny stopped, looked at him for a second, and went running off to find another rabbit. It wasn't long before she was chasing another one (or perhaps the same one), and she chased him toward my dad, who aimed, fired, and missed again. Tawny stopped again, looked at him, and after a moment, went running off to find another rabbit. Pretty soon she had found a third one (or perhaps the same very lucky one) and she chased him toward my dad, who aimed, fired, and missed a third time. At this Tawny stopped, looked at my dad, and walked back to the house. After that experience, the dog (who followed my dad everywhere) was never willing to leave the porch if my father was carrying a gun.

We all love a good story. We read them in books, we watch them in movies, and we share them with friends. Stories make us laugh, they make us cry, they inspire us, they teach us lessons and make us think about what matters. We all have favorite stories.

There are certain elements that every story has. Every story has characters, in particular a protagonist(s), a main character whose story is being told. Many stories also have antagonists, the characters and forces that oppose the protagonist(s) and stand in their way.

Stories also have a structure or plot, the sequence of events by which the story advances. Stories begin with an introduction, where we meet the characters and the scene and background for the story is established. Stories then have some sort of conflict, some sort of challenge to the protagonist(s) that is the central focus of the story. Some stories have a series of growing conflicts.

Then the story advances through a series of events, that builds the action of the story advancing onward to the climax of the story, where the main conflict comes to a head, and the winners and losers are sorted out.

Stories then move on to resolution, where we get a picture of the result of the climax of the story. Some stories end with the classic, "and they lived happily ever after," while other stories don't resolve quite so cleanly, and other stories don't resolve at all, and instead are left wide open in case the movie makes enough money that the studio thinks that a sequel would be profitable.

When we look at the scriptures, we often look at the Bible as a collection of stories: Noah's Ark, David and Goliath, or stories about different miracles of Jesus. We tend to think of the Bible this way, because this tends to be the way that we learn it in pieces and chunks from a children's book or song, or from a flannelgraph, or by reading the bible one section at a time. But a different and maybe better way of looking at and understanding the Bible is as one whole story, rather than as a collection of stories. When we really think about it the scriptures are one story, with God as the protagonist, working to redeem and restore his creation from decay and destruction.

In the first few chapters of Genesis, the Bible introduces the story of a God who creates out of nothing and everything that is made is declared to be good. It isn't too long before conflict arrives on the scene as the people that God has made disobey him, and things like sin and death, hatred, murder, immorality, greed, dishonesty, selfishness, sickness, and suffering begin to damage and destroy what God has created.

The story the scriptures tell is the story of a God who works to bring these evils to an end through various people, nations, and situations, as we read through the stories of Abraham and the patriarchs, the Israelites, their kings, and prophets.

The story reaches a decisive turning point when God sends his own son into his creation to show them how to live, to suffer and die, and to rise from the dead conquering sin, and death, and evil. And the climax of the story occurs at the end of the book of Revelation when Jesus triumphantly brings heaven to earth and eradicates sin and death forever. In Revelation 21-22, we read the resolution of the story – the “happily ever after” – where we read of God dwelling in the midst of his new creation forever in a world without sin and death and suffering, where the broken have been made whole and the wounded have been healed.

Now one of the most interesting things about this story is how God goes about his confrontation with the evils we find in the world. The God that is depicted in the scriptures is limitless in power, and creates everything out of nothing, simply by speaking things into existence. By the same token, we might expect God to do the same thing when confronted with the evils in the world, and simply to speak them out of existence, or maybe we would at least think that God might take the approach that he has to take care of it because either no one else can or that he can do it faster and more efficiently than anyone else.

If you've been around children, you know that there are some things that it is simply easier and faster for a parent, older sibling, or other adult to do than asking a young child to do it. Things like wrapping Christmas presents, loading the dishwasher, or cleaning a room. If you want it done correctly and in some sort of reasonable time, it is much easier to do it yourself. It can be difficult to stand by and allow a youngster to do it themselves, when we know we can do it better and faster.

But when we look at the scriptures, that isn't what God does, is it? Over and over again, God invites people to play a part in the story, to partner with him, to work along with him, in restoring and recreating the world. Throughout the scriptures, we find God approaching people in various ways and saying, "hey, I've got something for you to do . . ."

We see this in Genesis 12, where God invites Abraham into the story when he calls him to leave his home behind and go to a new land, promising to bless him and to bless the world through him.

In Exodus 3, God invites Moses into the story when he appears in a burning bush and commissions Moses to go lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to a new life and freedom in the land God had promised to their ancestors.

In their journey through the desert, God invites the Israelites into the story when he gives them detailed instructions on how they are to live and be different than all the nations around, making them a light an example to the world.

We see it in the Old Testament stories of the prophets and heroes of Israel, all sorts of people who God invites to partner with him in leading his people, defeating his enemies, and carrying messages.

We see again in the gospels when Jesus meets his first disciples, some fishermen, on the seashore and greets them with the invitation to "come follow me" (Matthew 4:18-22), spends three years training them, and then commissions them to carry on his work, to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations – to carry on God's work of redeeming and renewing the world –before he ascends to heaven.

We then come to this story on the Day of Pentecost. We read that the followers of Jesus were all gathered together when the Holy Spirit comes upon them like tongues of fire and they all begin to speak in different languages telling all those around from all sorts of different nations the story of God's miraculous power. The story then continues as Peter, the former fisherman, tells the crowd what God has done and three thousand people are added to the church that day.

As the New Testament goes on, we learn more about the significance of this event on the day of Pentecost. We learn that the Holy Spirit dwells within the believers and enables them to share the good news of what God has done in Christ, sometimes in miraculous ways (as on the Day of Pentecost). The Spirit encourages them and leads and guides them through their lives. The Spirit sanctifies and transforms them, helping them to become like Jesus and growing fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Spirit enables believers to do what Jesus did, even performing miraculous signs and wonders. The Spirit unites believers into one body and helps them to pray. And the Spirit gives believers gifts for ministry, like prophecy, evangelism, teaching, administration, helping, mercy, wisdom, faith, hospitality, to name a few.

This is what is happening in our scripture from Acts on the Day of Pentecost, God is not only inviting his followers into his story, He is more than fully equipping them for ministry by giving them the Holy Spirit. And as we read through the book of Acts we read of these followers doing amazing things as the church grows and grows and begins to transform the world around it.

Now the invitation into God's story is not just for people we read about in the Bible. Throughout history, God has been inviting people to join his story. The invitation to join God in transforming the world is extended to everyone. Jesus calls to each of us and invites us to follow him. He invites us into his story, and to play a part in the redemption and restoration of all creation. Instead of choosing to do it all himself, God invites us, each of us, to join his team.

This is an amazing and humbling thing. God wants us on his team. That God wants you and I to join him on his mission. That he wants to give us a part in his story. God invites us to do what Jesus did, to love as he loves, to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty something to drink, to care for the sick and the poor and needy, to tell others the story of the amazing things that God has done. It doesn't matter how young or old we are, who we are or what we have done, God invites us to look at the world around us and to make a difference.

After a traffic accident took both legs of Grayson Rosenberger's mother, she and her husband formed *Standing With Hope*—a ministry that reaches out in music and prayer to amputees in Africa. For most of his young life, Grayson wondered if he could somehow contribute to his mother's effort, making a difference in the lives of people who are sometimes looked at as "freakish" by their own people. But what could a 15-year-old from Nashville, Tennessee, do to

help? Well, he could become the grand-prize winner in Sealed Air Corporation's *Bubble Wrap Competition* for young inventors!

Grayson used *Bubble Wrap*-brand packing material to develop a cost-effective cosmetic skin covering for prosthetic limbs. Through a careful process of using a heat gun to mold sheets of Bubble Wrap to the steel rod of a prosthetic limb, Grayson was able to give it a muscle-like tone and shape.

Out of the 800 students who entered the contest, Grayson took top prize—a \$10,000 savings bond and a trip to New York City. He hopes to travel to Ghana later this year to fit some of his parents' patients with the low-cost limb.¹

What is God inviting you to do? How is he inviting you to be part of his story? What moves you?

Pentecost serves as a reminder for us that God does not simply invite us into the story and leave us to fend for ourselves, but rather that God gives us all the equipment, all the tools, all the ability, all the resources we need to do the job when He gives us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells within us, unites us, leads us and guides us, and helps us when we don't know what to do or say or even how to pray. The Spirit encourages us and works to transform us to become like Jesus and grow spiritual fruit. The Spirit enables us to do amazing things and gives us gifts and talents and abilities to be used in ministry. We can have courage and take heart, because not only does God invite us into the story and to partner with him, but in providing us the Holy Spirit, God provides us with everything we need.

And so we have a choice to make, a chance to be part of the team, part of shaping the story of God's work in the world. God invites us to live a life that is meaningful and makes a difference and has the power to change the world around us. What are you going to do? What kind of story will you tell with your life?

¹ *Associated Press, "Teen Uses Bubble Wrap to Help Amputees," MSNBC.com (1-30-07); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky*