

# Sign Here

September 7, 2014

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This morning we are beginning a preaching, teaching and reading series – or perhaps we should call it a preaching, teaching, reading journey – that we’re calling The Story. And the Story we’re talking about is the great sweeping story of God and God’s children that we find in the Bible. I am guessing that all of us are here this morning because to some degree or other we have found the Bible to be God’s word for us. Somehow, somehow we believe that God uses the words and books of the Bible as an instrument of revelation, if only to point us to the Word of God we know in Jesus Christ. Every ordained leader in this church “accepts the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, and God’s Word to them”. As Presbyterians we have held to the centrality of Scripture in the life of the Church. The Bible is at the center of all that we do.

Now the truth is not many of us could say that they have read the Bible cover to cover, page for page. A lot of us are familiar with the great Bible stories – the headline stories. But just about in every church you will find that most would have to admit that there is more of the Bible they have not read, than read. It’s understandable, I suppose, because the Bible is a tough book to read. It’s got about every genre of literature and a lot of it makes for tedious reading. Not infrequently do I get asked about how to read the Bible or is there a Bible without all the begets and begats? Not unlike *Moby Dick*. *Moby Dick* usually ends up on the top ten lists of the greatest books of history but most fear reading it as Ishmael feared the great white whale.

But to not read the Bible (or perhaps *Moby Dick* for that matter) is to do so at our own peril. For the truth is the Bible tells a great story. From its very beginning to its very end the Bible is this wonderful story of the love and grace of God. The love and grace of God. This great narrative arch through history from our creation, to our redemption and to the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit. There is this great plot of love and grace afoot and we are characters in the drama. The Bible is the script and we are the actors stepping onto the stage in the later scenes and adding our own lines to the story. Our stories fit into The Story. God the great author is not through writing. The drama continues to unfold in us. We are encompassed in God's great story. So we are going to take a journey through this story. From Genesis to the New Testament we will travel from September through May, each week focusing on the pivotal stories, the turning points, of this great drama. On top of this we will also be giving folks a chance to tell their own stories of how God has shown up in their lives. And then you will be invited to read throughout the week during a daily time of devotion to which we invite you scripture texts that will bridge the stories we will focus on on Sundays. If you look on the back of your bulletin – on the inside and outside cover you will see a devotional that invites you to reflect, pray, read a daily passage of scripture and then even suggests something you can do this week in response to what you've read. So when you get home tear that back page off and tuck it in your Bible and make it apart of your daily routine. The good news is that the whole congregation is taking the same journey – children, youth and adults, the Garden. Dale Vollrath is teaching a class on Sundays on The Story. Our children are learning these stories in Sunday School. Literally we will all be on the same page. Taking the same journey together. We are very excited about this and we hope you will join us in our daily and weekly journey through the great story of love and grace.

We begin The Story with the story of Noah. Assuming we all know the story of Adam and Eve and how God spoke into chaos and brought forth life – good life -- including man and woman and how it didn't take long before humanity insisted on its own way which led to an expulsion from the splendor of the garden and then to the violence of Cain and Abel – we are only into the sixth chapter of Genesis when this great story of love and grace reaches a crisis point – men and women

are living without regard for the goodness and love of God. And the Genesis writer tells us that as a result God is grieved. One of God's first acts toward his creation is grief. Now you can't grieve if you haven't first loved. One of God's first loving acts is to grieve. God enters into the depths of his love and finds grief. And in God's grief the chaos ensues. The rains fall, the floods come. Have it your way, God says, return to the chaos out of which I created you. But the good news is that is not all God says. God cannot help himself but to give humanity another chance and he directs the righteous Noah and his family to build an ark. We pick up the story in Genesis 6:14-22.

So for the next few chapters the rains come. And floods come. And chaos ensues for forty days and forty nights and the representatives of all creation are afloat on the seas. And finally in chapter 8 the writer tells us that in the midst of the chaos God did not forget Noah. God remembered Noah and his creation and God brings an end to the rain and the chaos and the waters reside and the dove brings a sprig of hope. And finally it's safe to let the animals out of the ark and Noah's family worships and give thanks to God. And then comes the end of the story in Genesis 9: 8 and following.

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One of the benefits of living in Florida is that we come to learn what the word "deluge" means. It seems during the summer we can pretty much set our clocks to the late afternoon darkened skies, flashing light, and downpours of rain. Some are longer than others and some are stronger than others. But you can count on a deluge coming. I've not lived long enough in Florida to experience much tropical storm activity. Some of you have hurricane stories. But whether it is an afternoon thunderstorm or a category 5 hurricane – the meteorological forces have their way of deluging us, or to say it another way, putting us at their mercy. As if we needed any more reminders

of the craziness and randomness of our lives – nature’s fury helps us to see how vulnerable we are to the chaotic forces of the world.

But from the very beginning of God’s good story we learn that the movement of God is always to speak into the chaos. In the beginning, Genesis tells us, when the earth was a formless void and darkness hovered over the deep – in other words, in the beginning when chaos consumed – God spoke and said, “Let there be light.” And the world began to come together. This is who God is – one who promises to speak into the chaos and bring the world together. And so when the world started falling apart again – and the chaos crackled through the sky and descended to the earth in deluge – the grieving God spoke and said, “Let there be an ark. Let there be a man who will bring the world back together again. Let there be another chance for my creation.” And it was so. Two by two God brings the world together again. And so as to not let us forget that this is who he is – God sets his bow in the sky. The black sky of chaos is devoid of color – but the spectrum of the rainbow displays all color. This is who I am, God says to his people – I bring beauty and order out of the chaos.

What a great way for the story to begin with this great sign of promise. That no matter how dark the skies or how drenching the deluge or how chaotic the forces – God promises to speak into the swirling void and bring some sort of goodness. Let there be light. Let there be an ark. Let there be the bow in the sky.

For Lord knows we need it, don’t we? This sign of promise. The promise that somehow and someday God will speak into the chaos of our lives and bring something good and beautiful. That while we may have a way of messing things up, God has a way of never giving up. Maybe the storm is centered in your family. Maybe the storm is centered in your place of work. Maybe the storm is centered in your health or lack thereof. Maybe the storm is centered in the deep recesses of your mind. Wherever the chaos swirls, wherever the clouds grow dark, wherever the forces seem overwhelming – wherever that is true in your story – the promise of the great story is that God is about to speak, “Let there be light. Let there be ark. Let there be the promise.”

Years ago I received a phone call from a young woman who lived a long ways away. She was standing next to her father's hospital bed. She told me that her father – a good friend of mine who was struggling with cancer – was beginning to get overwhelmed with pain and discouragement. She asked if I would talk with him on the phone. She handed her father the phone and we talked and I listened to the doubts, the discouragement, the worry and most of all the feeling that God had left him alone to the chaos. And while I knew I would eventually end the phone conversation with a prayer – I knew that wouldn't be enough. So I said the only thing I could think to say, "Scott, is your daughter still there?" Yes, he said. "Was she there yesterday?" Yes. "Will she be there tomorrow?" Yes. I said, "Scott, do me a favor and grab your daughter's hand and hold it. Squeeze it hard. Because Scott, that is the hand of God. He is holding you right now in the most perfect way he can." For wasn't it the prophet who said, "For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.'"

In the midst of the storm, a sign. In the midst of the chaos, a hand. A hand to hold. A sign to see.

For is this not what took place that dark night of long ago – when the chaos of arrest and death swirled about that band of brothers. When the evil darkness grew heavy and the forces seemed unrelenting – the Holy One spoke into the chaos and said, "Let there be bread, let there be cup. Let there be a sign – that God speaks into the chaos with the feast of the kingdom. And when the next day's clouds grew black and darkness covered the face of the deep and the forces of chaos shook the earth – the Holy One was raised and God said, "Let there be a sign in the heavens. Let there be a sign of sacrificial and suffering love. Let there be forgiveness for they know not what they do." And it was so.

And it will always be so.