

Title: Your Story is a Great Story
Date: 5/18/25
Subject: Our testimonies aren't as boring as we might think.
Scripture: Acts 9:1-9

Time for a little Shakespeare. Before you stick your finger in your mouth and make gagging sounds, people know more Shakespeare than they realize. Which of his characters said, "Romeo, Romeo. Where for art thou, Romeo?" Juliet. She also said, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other word would smell as sweet" and "Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow." The play also gave us the phrase "wild-goose chase."

Who said, "To be or not to be—that is the question."? Hamlet. That play also had the line: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

Who said, "Et tu Brute (you too Brutus)," "It was Greek to me" "Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once." Julius Caesar.

Other familiar quotes: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players" (As You Like It). "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (Henry IV). "All that glitters is not gold" and "love is blind" (The Merchant of Venice). "Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them" (Twelfth Night). "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!" (Richard III).

How about this quote for which I feel I should be holding a skull: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Guesses? He also referred to himself as "the worst of sinners."

The answer is Paul. Forgive me. I did mislead a little but I didn't say it was another Shakespeare quote.

It's summer. I thought it was going to be summer. It's supposed to be summer. Isn't it? Since it's summer, we're going on a road trip with the traveling man of the New Testament. We'll walk beside the apostle Paul using the book of Acts as our travel brochure. Weave in insights from Paul's writings of which the Lord had him write a lot. We first meet Paul when he was called Saul - in Jerusalem.

Read Acts 9:1-9

Saul later shared his testimony, story of his conversion, with an angry mob and the king. He provided more details about his pre-Christian life which underscore the totality of the change in his life. Conversion is a good word. We should use it more often to describe the change people undergo when they become followers of Jesus. They've converted from whatever they'd been trusting in to placing their trust in Jesus.

He said, "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished (Acts 22:4, 5). I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of

the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them” (Acts 26:9-11).

Saul's desire to persecute the church began when Stephen, a leader of the church was martyred (Acts 7:57 - 8:3). Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen and gave approval to his death. Those who provided false witness against Stephen laid their coats at Saul's. Some feel this meant Saul was in charge of the execution.

The day of Stephen's death created an open season for persecution of Christians. Saul took a lead role as he went from house to house, dragging off men and women and putting them in prison.

Saul was a bad man. In Greek: kakós ánthropos. In Hebrew: various words like ish or rasha. In Spanish: a muy mal hombre. He had hatred in his heart, vengeance in his mind and blood on his hands.

Saul felt he could spot a fake when he saw one as well as blasphemy and heresy when he heard it. This Jesus character hadn't received any training and yet presented himself as a teacher. The unmitigated gall. The stories about him were preposterous nonsense, including the one about his resurrection. It was worse than the Greek myths. Sure, Saul believed there would be a resurrection, but it would be at the end of the world.

Saul zealously protected his belief system and couldn't believe anyone could believe in someone like Jesus. He despised Jesus and all things and people connected to Jesus. If he couldn't persuade them by his powerful intellect, the solution was to eradicate the accursed brood or so demoralize them they'd crawl back into the dimly lit corners of society and stay where they belonged, if they knew what was good for them.

He was on his way to Damascus, just minding his own business of persecuting Christians when... a bright light from heaven, brighter than the sun blazed around him and his companions. They fell to the ground. Saul was the only one who heard The Voice. Others just heard an indistinguishable sound.

At first The Voice got Saul's attention by saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Not sure Saul needed clarification, but he asked anyway, “Who are you, Lord?” The Voice responded, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Jesus gave Saul instructions to go into Damascus. His companions led him because he'd been blinded by the light. He didn't eat or drink anything for three days, probably meaning during the daytime when he was likely praying and fasting.

The Lord appeared to one of his disciples and told Ananias to go to Saul as his representative. He did, reluctantly, as he'd heard about the terror Saul was inflicting on the church. He put his hands on Saul, in a nice way, and prayed for him. Immediately Saul could see as something like scales (cataracts?) fell from his eyes. He got up and was immediately baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ.

The person who was the least likely to become a Christian, became a Christian, a bold Christian who quickly began proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to any who would listen and to many who wouldn't listen. He had been a good man with a long list of credentials: born an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews in attitude and lifestyle, a highly respected religious leader, extremely zealous, kept the entire law, received the best training. Nice stuff. The problem was he didn't know Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Saul regarded himself as the worst of sinners (1 Tim 1:16). He saw himself as having been deeply depraved, wicked and evil. He had a dramatic life changing personal encounter with Jesus.

How many others have a testimony like Saul? How many of us do? Probably not many.

There are times Christians think because they don't have an amazing story like Paul, they don't have a story at all. Because they haven't been a gang member, drug smuggler, human trafficker, the sole survivor of a plane crash that killed 180 other people, or a war story like Louis Zamperini who'd run in the Olympics and shook Hitler's hand because of his performance, became a WW II hero – his bomber was attacked receiving 594 bullet and shell fragment holes, where he administered first aid to 5 wounded crew, saving the lives of two - who later survived 47 days on a life raft with two crewmen after their bomber was forced to ditch in the Pacific – fighting off sharks, drinking rainwater, watching one buddy die - before being taken prisoner by the Japanese, interned in 4 POW camps, beaten and tortured for 25 months. Four years after getting out of the service, he went to a Billy Graham Crusade where he put his trust in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

In contrast, our stories all seem so boring. Nothing...could...be...further...from...the...truth. We have an equally dramatic story to tell. It's dramatic to the max. Here's why.

We've gone from blind to sighted. Saul was physically blinded as an adult and had his sight restored. It's different if a person was blind from birth and then receives the ability to see (John 9). Jesus stunned people when he healed a man who'd been born blind. The religious leaders concluded, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath" (John 9:16). They felt he was a sinner. The Pharisees weren't fair at seeing.

The former blind man was on the right track: "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (John 9:30-33).

The religious leaders kicked the man out of the temple. Jesus looked for him and presented himself as the Son of Man. The man gained spiritual sight.

Rhithu Chatterjee wrote about Manoj Kumar Yadav from India who was born blind because of cataracts (science.org/content/article/feature-giving-blind-people-sight-illuminates-brain-s-secrets, 10/22/15). In the world's developed areas, a simple surgery to give sight can be performed a few months after birth. However, he lived in a poor province with substandard medical care and his parents didn't realize he was blind until he bumped into things while crawling. Years later regional doctors told him he'd never see.

When Yadav was 18 eye specialists from New Delhi visited his village. They screened blind children and youth and gave Yadav hope he might someday see. He and his father took a 13-hour train to the Dr. Shroff Charity Eye Hospital. A surgeon removed the faulty lenses and replaced them with synthetic ones. When the bandages were removed a day later, he was bombarded with light and a flood of visual stimuli. Shapes didn't make sense. His brain gradually learned to interpret the signals from his eyes. He gained the ability to read and understand what is meant by red or purple.

People are born with spiritual cataracts. Jesus addressed people as being spiritually blind. They can't decipher the meaning of what they see. When a person is converted, Jesus performs surgery and removes the blindness. He grants the ability to see and understand though they don't understand everything immediately, You have experienced that miracle - being blind to Jesus and then given sight.

Related to this is being moved from darkness to light. This idea was part of the testimony Paul presented to king Agrippa (Acts 26:18) - "to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light."

Paul frequently contrasts darkness and light in his writings (Rom 13:12; 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 5:8-14; Col 1:13; 1 Thess 5:4, 5). Paul writes bluntly, "for you were once darkness" (Eph 5:8). Darkness represents evil, wickedness. The sum total of a person's existence is the absence of light.

On Thursday, some of us got up close and personal with darkness when we lost power. It was odd, weird. You can get in lots of trouble in the dark pretty quickly. For instance - brushing teeth. Find way to the bathroom. Out of habit flip the switch for the bathroom light and nothing happens. Think don't need a light because know where everything is. Open the medicine cabinet, reach in, grab toothbrush and toothpaste...but grab something that isn't tooth paste. We couldn't wait for the power to come back on and let there be light.

The next phrase in Paul's testimony says those who haven't trusted Christ as Savior are under the power of Satan. That's a horrible, deplorable, no good, terrible place to be - being pro devil, ruled by the devil, facing the same judgment that he is, being condemned by God because are anti-God.

That's the condition of people until Jesus came. "The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Mt 4:16). Jesus promises "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

From Paul's writings: "For God, who said, "let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6)...For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves...(Col 1:13).

Because of what Jesus has done and our trust in him, we are now in the light. We are now under the power of God. We are in Christ's kingdom.

Another transformation. From dead to alive. There's a medical phenomenon known as the Lazarus Syndrome or autoresuscitation. Doctors and researchers aren't sure why it occurs but there've been 40 cases since 1982. It happens when CPR, medications and defibrillation were administered and failed. No sign of life. The person may have been declared dead. Then, mysteriously, the heart begins to beat and establishes a normal rhythm, blood again flows through the arteries and veins. The person comes back to life...just like Lazarus.

While the stories of people's miraculous returns to life are wonderful, it isn't the same as what happens to a person spiritually. Those people had been alive, then were dead, but only temporarily, before living again. In the case of people who are dead spiritually, they hadn't been spiritually alive previously and then died and then came back to life. They were dead, completely dead, dead like a rock.

I have a stone/rock collection. This looks like gold...but it's not. This is a slice of agate geode. I found this on my mom and dad's farm. It looks like a face - but it's not a face. It's not alive. There's no way to make it alive. I could give it some water or protein shakes, feed it some yogurt or ice cream, perform CPR and shock it with the paddles. Nothing will happen. It won't become **alive**. It's...a rock. It's an inanimate object.

The Lord has the prophet Ezekiel talk about people who have a heart of stone (11:19, 36:26) which represents people who have no life. They're unresponsive to God. It's up to God to give life. In the same verses the Lord said he would give new hearts, hearts of flesh.

We shouldn't think of it like a human heart transplant. In that situation the person had a heart that was functioning at one point and then needed a replacement. Our spiritual heart was never functioning. It was a cold, hard rock. The totality of the being was dead to God. Paul wrote in Ephesians. "We were dead in our transgressions and sins in which we used to live when we followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air...We were dead in transgressions" (Eph 2:1, 2, 5). We get it Paul. Did you really have to write it twice within a few verses? The answer would be "Yes" because he wrote it again in Colossians, "You were dead in your sins" (Col 2:13).

D.E.A.D. Dead. Nothing we could do about it. We were as the Jeremy Camp song puts it - Dead Man Walking. Life had to come from an outside source. It sounds like evolutionists saying alien life came from outer space to start life on earth, but not really. God made us alive through his Son from heaven (Eph 2:5, Col 2:13). He is more than a spiritual surgeon. He is the creator of life - from nothing.

Jesus explains how it comes: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

Mercy Me new song Oh Death: "Oh death, I will not be afraid. In the end, you will lose. I will dance on your grave with the one who buried you. You ain't nothin' but a stone that my Savior rolled away, Set you straight and set me free. Oh death, you are dead to me."

There's one more phrase to describe our predicament - without hope and without God (Eph 2:12). We were alienated from God and were enemies in our minds because of our evil behavior (Col 1:21).

Sounds like bad news. Because it is. It's extremely bad news. The kind of bad news that could ruin a person's life in the here and now...and forever... Oh, if things could be different. There's more to the story.

It's between those two places where Paul said we were dead in our transgressions and sins. He uses that great word **but** - "**but** because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead (Eph 2:4). When it said we were alienated from God and enemies in our mind, it starts by saying **once** you were, meaning you aren't now, "**but** now he (God) has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col 1:22).

From blind to sighted. From darkness to light. From under the power of the devil to under God's power and domain. From dead to alive. From without hope and without God to hope and with God. Who says you don't have a great testimony?