

I. Introduction

- A. Once upon a time...
- B. I love those words. So do my kids. That's how you begin a story—Once upon a time.
- C. My daughter asked a very perceptive question this week. She said, "Daddy is Christmas the major holiday?" I think she was sensing something. Not just at our house, but at school, and at the mall, and in the neighborhoods, there's a whole lot of energy surrounding Christmas. And she wanted to know if Christmas was the major holiday.
- D. And I told her yes it was, along with Easter.
- E. Why do we go through this annual reminder of Christmas?
- F. Because Christmas is a story with incredible power and I want to talk about that **STORY** today and for the next three weekends. Once upon a time, God sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

II. Quiz

- A. I thought it would be cool to give you a little quiz today. I want to test your basic story knowledge. I'm going to give you a part of a famous story, and you tell me what story it is. Only one of these is a Bible story.
- B. "Well, he huffed, and he puffed, and he huffed and he puffed, and he puffed and huffed; but he could not get the house down..." (Three Little Pigs)
- C. "The kind villagers left their work and ran to the field to help him. But when they got there the boy laughed at them for their pains; there was no wolf there." (The Boy Who Cried Wolf)
- D. "Then he took his staff in his hand; and he chose for himself five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in a shepherd's bag, in a pouch which he had, and his sling was in his hand..." (1 Samuel 17:40, NKJV). (David & Goliath)
- E. Here's one for our corporate I.Q.: Telemachus searches for his father (The Odyssey).
- F. "As the days went by, the poor grey duckling became more and more unhappy. His brothers didn't want to play with him, he was so clumsy, and all the farmyard folks simply laughed at him. He felt sad and lonely..." (The Ugly Duckling)

III. Stories

- A. See, these stories get into our minds, they get into our kid's minds, they get into our culture and they stick with us.
 - 1. Stories can teach us.
 - 2. Stories can guide us with moral lessons.
 - 3. Stories can comfort us, inspire us, amuse us, and motivate us.
- B. But you didn't come to church today to hear a guy talk about fables and kid's stories. I'm just trying to ease you into our topic, and here it is.
- C. One simple proposition: The quality of your life, now and forever, depends on which story you jump into.
- D. And I'm going to explain that, but first, I want to go back to the story above all stories, which is the Christmas story.

IV. The Christmas Story

- A. *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting"* (Micah 5:2, NKJV).
- B. This prophet, Micah, lived 700 years before Jesus. So this is a very old prophecy. Micah predicted that the great ruler would come for God's people.
- C. He predicted this great ruler would come from a little backwater village called Bethlehem.
- D. But notice this—a Ruler will come from Bethlehem, but even though he comes from Bethlehem, Bethlehem is not his beginning of his story.
- E. His goings is from of old, from everlasting.
- F. His story goes back before his own birthday, before his ancestors, before ancient history, before the dawn of civilization, before the beginning of time, all the way back to eternity past.
- G. In other words, you do not correctly understand the story of Jesus if you see Christmas as his beginning. Jesus is the only person who could ever say I was around long before the day of my birth.
- H. His goings is from of old, from everlasting.
- I. And all those incredible images...
 - 1. No room in the inn
 - 2. The virgin birth in the stables
 - 3. The Star of Bethlehem and the Wise Men from the East
 - 4. The Angel Chorus to the Shepherds
 - 5. And the baby Jesus, laid in a manger
- J. Those are wonderful truths, wonderful historical facts, we believe, and wonderful lessons of God's way of working in the world.

- K. But as mystical and wondrous as that first Christmas Day was, it was only the small tip of a gigantic iceberg of a story that God has been telling for eons, and his story stretches from eternity past to eternity future, and here we are in the middle of it today.

V. Stories are Powerful

- A. I want to prove to you how powerful a story can be.
- B. Back in the 1990's, a lot of restaurants in New York served a delicious fish, but people stopped ordering it. In fact, when people saw this fish on the menu, they got mad. So mad they made a stink, and even threatened to boycott the restaurant altogether.
- C. The fish was dolphin.
- D. If you have half a heart, and if you've ever seen even one episode of Flipper, or if you've ever been to Sea World, and saw a loveable dolphin flip and splash happy tourist, and take a toy out of its trainer's mouth, there's no way you're going to order dolphin from a menu.
- E. Except for one little problem...
- F. The dolphin fish on the menu is nothing like the friendly dolphin mammal at Sea World.
- G. Dolphin fish look like fish. They are cold blooded. They don't do tricks. They don't bond with humans. They don't make cute little flipper noises. They're fish.
- H. There's a huge difference between the bottle-nosed dolphin that we've grown to love and the dolphin fish that would be as about huggable as a carp.
- I. But try telling that to a mom and dad who's eight year old just spotted "dolphin" on the menu, "Mommy, Daddy, they're killing Flipper!"
- J. So waiters at fish restaurants across America went on an educational campaign. "I know its called dolphin, they would say. But this kind is a fish and not a mammal, and it doesn't do tricks. It's a different dolphin."
- K. How much success do you think they had?
- L. None, even though it was delicious and tender and flaky, and even though chefs loved to prepare it. And even though it is abundant in the oceans of the world, nobody would eat the dolphin.
- M. Why?
- N. Because it's hard to shake the story of Flipper once it grips your heart. That's how powerful a story can be!
- O. Be careful what story you buy into, because stories have the power to change your life.
 1. They affect your choices.
 2. They affect your feelings.
 3. They affect your behaviors.
 4. They affect your spending.
 5. They affect your self-image.
 6. They affect your mood.
 7. They affect your career.
 8. They affect your parenting and marriage and dating.
 9. They affect your relationships.
 10. They affect every aspect of your life.
- P. Yes, stories are that powerful.
- Q. So do you know what fish restaurants finally did?
- R. They changed the name. The no longer called it dolphin. Dolphin now became known as "Mahi-Mahi" and I'll bet you've eaten some.

VI. Stories

- A. Stories are so powerful, that right now, in our day, there's a huge battle over the Christmas story.
- B. Is it a sentimental fable of giving and not being a Scrooge, and good feelings and chestnuts and Frosty the Snowman, and Santa?
- C. Or is it the story that owns all other stories, and defines the nature of the universe.
- D. If the prophet Micah is correct, Christmas is the story of how the world gets its Ruler.
- E. But it's bigger than that because this ruler inhabits a realm bigger than the space-time continuum. He comes from outside of time, into time. He comes from above creation, into creation.
- F. He stretches back to eternity past, when there is nobody but God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he stretches forward into eternity future, when he has arranged every person, place and thing its proper orbit around his own glory—some close and in warm fellowship—some far out, lost in outer darkness.
- G. Here's what I'm saying:

VII. Your Life

- A. Your life is one chapter in very, very big story.
- B. Now, choose which story:

1. Once upon a time, the universe came into being through chance and impersonal blind energy. There is no PERSONAL BEING called god. There is no eternity. There is nothing but chance, and time and energy. You as a human being are the complex interaction of matter and energy, and if we were smart enough, and if we had a big enough chemistry set, we could reproduce YOU in a laboratory. Your thoughts, and feelings, and loves and memories, and what you hate, and what you hold dear and precious and near—you are just like a light bulb, only more complicated. One day you die, and that's it. You're finished, and there's no happily ever after. So you either have to live like a lifelong frat boy, or girls gone wild, or give in to pessimism and nihilism, because not much else makes sense.
2. That's one story, and it depresses me to say it and I'd say most people choose it NOT BECUASE THEY'VE THOUGHT ABOUT IT, BUT BECUASE THEY HAVE HEARD IT SO MANY TIMES.

c. Here's the second story:

1. Once upon a time, there was God. Just God, the uncreated creator and though God was alone, he was not lonely, because he was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God decided to create a race of mortals, and shower them with immortality. God knew we would fail, and made perfect provision to restore us. God the Son volunteered to enter the human race, and to become a man without ceasing to be God. He volunteered to die on the Cross, thereby justifying a holy God's boundless love for unholy people.
2. At the right time, he was born into poverty, to a humble virgin named Mary. Angels sang of his birth, and kings from the east worshipped him. Infinity interpenetrated the finite; eternity entered time.
3. Jesus grew and taught and loved and served. He gave dignity to all he met. He lifted up the lowly, and brought down the uppity. He came to rule the world in grace and love, but the world clamored for his death, and said, "We will not have this man to rule over us."
4. And so they killed him.
5. But God wasn't finished telling his story. God used that death to redeem the world. To forgive. To embrace. To set free. The cross was the devil's mousetrap, and through it, God crushed evil at its source.
6. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead and later ascended to heaven. He is the Coming King, and one day you'll meet him face to face.
7. Until that day happens, he offers you a gift. A free gift called everlasting life.
8. This gift is all inclusive: you give Jesus your sins, he gives you his forgiveness. You receive...
 - a) Adoption into God's family
 - b) A new start every day
 - c) Perfect provision for every need
 - d) You receive power to rise above temptations
 - e) A royal status in the household of God
 - f) Access to the throne room of heaven through prayer
 - g) God's own presence through his spirit
 - h) You receive promises that will get you up and strengthen you to fight another round
 - i) You get healing for the broken places in your soul
 - j) You get heaven and rewards and an infinity of time that will make all the struggles of this life seem like just a momentary blip on your life's radar screen.

VIII. Two Stories

- A. Western civilization offers two stories right now. There's the Jesus-story and the secular story.
 1. HAVE YOU EVER CHOSEN THE JESUS STORY, BECAUSE IF YOU HAVEN'T YOU CAN DO THAT TODAY.
- B. You have to choose.
 1. The secular story reduces human life to chemicals; the Jesus story makes human life sacred, and says that you matter to God.
 2. The secular story announces, Life sucks, and then you die. The Jesus story proclaims, an eternal state in which there is no more sorrow, or suffering, or death, and God himself wipes every tear from your eyes.
 3. The secular story offers morality based on mutual assured destruction; the Jesus story offers self-giving love based on totally assured resurrection. You can afford to give your life away because this life isn't all there is.
 4. The secular story offers makes your self-worth depend on your own performance; the Jesus story predicates your self-worth on your creation in the image of God.
 5. The secular story holds out a ticking clock with time running out. The Jesus-story holds out an hour glass with an infinity of golden sand, and time that stretches out forever.
 6. The secular story makes your body organized dust; the Jesus story makes your body the temple of the Holy Spirit, and promises to raise you up in a glorified body with no wrinkles, sags, or aching joints.

7. The secular story sings Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, and Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire and the Jesus story sings, "Oh Come, All ye faithful, joyful and triumphant."

a) (And I love those secular songs at Christmas. They bring warm memories, and we play them around our house. They're not wrong, they're just incomplete.)

- C. Which story are you living in?
- D. You might say, Bill, there are a lot of other stories and I would say, fine go pick one. And if I were another part of the world, I would include other stories today.
- E. But I'm in America. And right here, right now, there are two big stories. And they're competing for your allegiance.
- F. Because your life is just one chapter in a much larger story; which story is it?
- G. The quality of your life, now and forever, depends on which story you jump into.
- H. So, I'd like to ask you, on this first week of December, have you ever jumped on board the Jesus story? You can do that today. I'm going to show you how.

IX. Let's think about that.

- A. All the basic stuff of your life flows out of which story you jump into, let me prove it.
- B. How many of you lost some money, any money, in this current recession? Would you please wave at me?
- C. I have to be honest, for a while, I actually stopped opening my financial statements when they came in the mail. They went to the shredder unopened. It was too depressing. Anybody else feel like that?
- D. Then I caught myself and asked why. Why am I worried? Why am I depressed over this stuff? Why am I anxious?
- E. And Jesus said:
 - 1. *"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (Matthew 6:31, NKJV).*
- F. I read that, and I want to say, but Jesus, you don't know our economy. And how we lost our equity, and our retirement accounts shrank, and our friends and neighbors don't have jobs, and can't sell their houses.
- G. And you say, do not worry!
- H. Ha! Jesus, how can you be so insensitive!
 - 1. *And the word of God comes to me and says, "Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30, NKJV).*
- I. See, I worried because I treated my money like it was part of an impersonal secular story. JESUS SAYS, Bill, treat your money like its one small part everlasting, very personal Jesus-story, in which your Father has you covered.
- J. And it's the same way with dating and marriage. Some of you are panicking because you're 25 or 35 or 40 or 50 and you feel lonely. Is your sex life part of a pointless secular story, or part of an everlasting sacred story in which true love lasts forever?
- K. We could talk about family life, and career, and education, and marriage. In every sector of your life it's the same.
- L. The quality of your life, now and forever, depends on which story you jump into.
- M. Which means, if your life stinks, maybe you have chosen to place your life inside a stinky story—and the cool thing is you can change that.
- N. Would you like to? In a few moments, I'm going to pray. And I'm not going embarrass you or mess with you, but I am going to invite you to buy-into the Christmas story as Jesus told it. And when I give that invitation, if you feel God tugging at your heart don't tell him no.

X. Come to Jesus

- A. *Jesus said these words: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, NKJV).*
- B. I love this. He didn't say, "Come to my way of thinking." He said, "Come to me."
- C. In that one invitation, Jesus did something to every story of every person who has ever lived: **JESUS MADE HIMSELF THE TURNING POINT OF EVERY PERSON'S STORY.**
- D. Either your story has a "come to Jesus" moment, or it doesn't. Christianity is not simply a philosophy, or a moral code, or a worldview—it is an encounter with a person who was born on Christmas morning, though Christmas wasn't his beginning.
- E. Christianity is your free, willing, deliberate choice to set your life in his hands—your story inside his story.
- F. Jesus said, Come to me. And I'm wondering if you are ready to come to Jesus right now.