

Youth Week 2007
Friday Evening Lesson

Our Story Tells Us Who We Are

LESSON BACKGROUND

My kids love to hear stories about my life - stories when I was their age and trying to navigate through childhood and my own adolescence. They will corner me on the couch, or when I tuck them in at night and say, "Tell me a story about when you were little." They want to know what my life was like, what went into making me the man I

Students Should Learn: 1. They will identify key moments in their lives when God's story intersected with their own. 2. When our story is enfolded into God's story, we discover a deep sense of significance and purpose.	What You'll Need: Blank paper and pencils
Scripture Focus: Exodus 19:5-6, Leviticus 19:1-2, Ezekiel 36:26-27	

am now. Sometimes I think it's hard for kids to ever imagine their parents as kids themselves.

So I will jump into harrowing tales of escaping the bullies in my life, the times that I went fishing and got the hook stuck in my finger, or about my many exploits in athletics. They will stop me at different points along the way, asking questions, and laughing at me because I was such a knucklehead of a child. At the end of each story, they'll smile and thank me for taking the time to share a little about me. I think they appreciate it because they are starting to realize that their own stories are somehow connected to my own. As I share my story, they can see themselves in it.

I like the idea of our lives being like a story, a narrative that flows each and every day. A story with highs and lows, conflicts and resolutions, stories that we get to write as we live and grow and become. I think that I can relate better to the idea of my life being like a story because I can look back on it and see the different points along the way that shaped the person that I'm becoming. I can see the turning points in the journey where I stepped out and took a risk. I can reflect on the important people that crossed my path. It is a story with many characters. My kids like me to share the story, because somehow in the sharing, it influences the kind of story that is being written in their lives.

Stories are always intersecting with other stories. Our lives come into contact with others who have some kind of influence on or are influenced by one another's story. At one point in my journey, my story came face to face with God's story. In that moment, I began to realize that God's story is one that is greater than my own. It is a story that began long before I got here and will continue on long after I'm gone. It is a story that invites those who come into contact with it to become enfolded by it. When I encountered God and God's story, it changed my story in some profound ways.

In this lesson, we want to assist our students in identifying their own stories and recognizing that moment when their story intersected with the story of God. God's story is one in which God is continually reaching out to His people. The Scriptures are a narrative that shows that God is always at work in the lives of His people. It is a narrative that draws people in and offers meaning, significance, and purpose to their lives. As we grow in our understanding and knowledge of God and His story, we begin to understand more and more who we can be - and who we can become.

Deep in every human heart is a desire to know the purpose of life. We want to know to whom we belong and who belongs to us. We want a clear "ought" to inform our choices. We want to know where we've been and where we're going. We want to know who we are. If we lack these things, we wander aimlessly through life. We fight to secure our place. We compete to prove that we are worthwhile. We use people and things to get our way or find ourselves

used by others in the process. In the end, this need not be. God desires for His story to become my story...to become our story.

In Ezekiel 36:26-27, Ezekiel speaks the word of the Lord to the people. He is explaining that they are capable of cleaning the outside of their bodies with water. But that is all water can do...clean the outside. They need something greater to cleanse the parts of them that really need cleansing - their hearts. In this passage, Ezekiel proclaims the promise of God to do the cleansing that only God can do - the cleansing of a heart. In a real sense, as the people lived out their own stories, it only produced hearts of stone, but when they allow their stories to become enfolded into the loving Story of God, He will soften their hearts and put His Spirit within them. It is the promise of holiness.

For many years, the many Christians have expressed this type of life as that of being a sanctified life, set apart for God's work and the fulfillment of His Story. We believe that God's liberating activity has resulted in this "holymaking activity" through God's sanctifying work. We have used terms like:

Perfection - By this, we mean that God has a vision for our lives. By His Spirit, He is patterning us after Christ. We are becoming what God intends us to be. It doesn't mean that we are perfect, but that we are being perfected as we live out our story within His Story.

Sanctification - This seems like a scary word to many in the Church today. But it doesn't have to be. There comes a moment in our story where we place every facet of our being into the hands of God. It is in this moment that our entire story - all that it was and all that it will be - is enfolded into the will and desires of God-at-work-in-the-world. It is our complete removal of any claim to control or will to direct our own story. God enters our experience through the power of the Holy Spirit and the sacrificial life of Jesus and cleanses our heart and sets us apart for His service. We are no longer slaves to the bondage that our story-before-God had led us. We are free to live out a story of complete devotion to God.

Love - Holiness finds its greatest expression through love. God being love, to be filled with the Spirit of God is to be filled with love. Love pervades the plot line of those whose stories have been committed to God. The person of love is merciful and compassionate, loyal to the love of God and reflect that love into the world around them.

Christ-likeness - God's Story is a story of transforming human hearts and lives into the likeness of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers each believer to become more like Jesus in every facet of our lives.

Part of our responsibility as believers is to wrestle with what these words and concepts mean within the Story of God and His people. They have often been twisted to mean things that Scripture did not intend them to mean. Our history includes times when we were more concerned with how we "looked" to the world than with "seeing" the world as God sees it. We often interpreted God's law as a narrow, individualistic guide to sainthood when it was meant to create a new community. We sometimes thought of sanctification as a private experience when God meant to sanctify us into a Spirit-shaped community. We sometimes made this second moment of grace (sanctification) the goal of our experience rather than the gate to wholehearted service to God and others.

Despite our previous missteps, our optimism isn't diminished as our stories are radically transformed by God who liberates us from sin to make us a holy people. Our stories take on eternal significance as God's treasured possession, the people of Jesus. When we are identified within the Story of God we discover that we are saints, which means "holy ones." It is this story that truly tells us who we are.

(adapted from article *Our Story Tells Us Who We are* by Dan Boone in the book, Holiness 101, Beacon Hill Press)

THE LESSON

This Is My Story

Hand out a blank piece of paper and pencil to each student. Instruct them to draw out a timeline of their lives, beginning with their birth to present. Tell them that they need to include at least five incidents from their lives that

they feel were defining moments. Give students about five minutes to complete their timelines and then invite those that would like to share some of their key moments.

When students are done sharing, ask the following of the group:

- **Are there any incidents on the timelines that we had in common with others?**
- **What makes a person's story unique?**
- **When a person shared their story with you, did it give you a better understanding of who that person is? In what way?**
- **What is special about our story?**
- **Does this group have a common story that we share?**

Say something like, **Each of us has a unique story. It explains how we got here and gives us a glimpse as to where we're headed. When we encounter God and accept His love and forgiveness into our lives, it radically changes our story because we become part of a bigger story. It is a story that adds greater significance and meaning to our lives. Do you know God's story? Can you share that story as if it were your own?**

This is God's Story

It's important for our students to understand the story of God so that they can discover where they fit into it. The following is an excerpt from an article written by Dan Boone, in which he dramatically illustrates the story of God found in Scripture. You can either read it aloud yourself to your students or select students to come forward and read certain parts of it. Prior to the reading, instruct students to use the backside of their paper that they drew their timeline on to doodle while the story is being read. Encourage them to draw out different aspects of the story that stick out to them. At the end of the reading, invite your students to share their doodles with the rest of the class.

We were slaves. Brick making defined our existence. Collect straw. Tramp it in mud pits. Pour it into forms. Let it dry. Build Pharaoh's empire. Then Moses announced that God had heard our cries and was moving to liberate us. Pharaoh first responded to Moses' demands by raising the daily brick quota. But 10 plagues later, he told us to get out. We remember that dark night, that meal of lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread. We ate hurriedly, dressed to travel. While we waited inside, God moved outside. Egypt's hold on us loosened as breath left every firstborn. Our future no longer belonged to Pharaoh but to God. We walked beneath blood-smearred doorposts into freedom. But freedom for what? We would soon find out.

Months later we stood at the foot of a smoking mountain. Moses announced God's vision for us. "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6 NRSV). "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2, NRSV). Next came the Ten Commandments, God's vision statement for creation. In the first four, God described our relationship with Him: unquestioned loyalty, undivided worship, uncompromised obedience. In the next six, God called us to treat each other with respect and care and to extend the same to strangers, to property, and to animals and the earth. Being a holy people meant right relationship with God, others, and the world.

These two events - the midnight liberation and the gift of the Law - changed everything. We understood what our lives were to mean. We were no longer slaves to Pharaoh's old ways. We were free children of God, liberated for worship and service. We would walk into a future we could never have imagined, guided by God's law.

But we proved our fickleness. Our story is saddened with words all too descriptive of our response to God. "Stiff-necked." "Hard-hearted." "Did what was right in their own eyes." At times, God's anger blazed. But He refused to give up on us. God loves stubbornly. So new promises were made. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I

made with their ancestors which I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt - a covenant that they broke...But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:31-33, NSRV). "A new heart I will give to you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ezekiel 36:26-27, NRSV).

These promises marked new possibilities. We would be energized from within by the breath of God. We would be empowered by the Spirit to live God's vision. We would be holy because the Source of our life is holy. After a long time, God moved again. The Spirit came upon Mary, and the Child she bore was holy, God's Son. Filled with the Spirit, Jesus became the flesh-and-blood vision statement of God. Everything the Ten Commandments required, Jesus lived. Ever promise in the Law leaped to life in His words and deeds. In Him, we saw holiness. His loyalty to the Father was unquestioned; His worship, undivided; His obedience, uncompromised. He treated His brothers and sisters with respect and care. He moved mercifully toward the poor and the outcast. He viewed all creation a gift, from bread to fish to pungent perfume. "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:4, NRSV).

Jesus moved among us, liberating us from demons and disease, labels and legalism, death and destruction. Then, one dark afternoon, He died in our place. We stood once again under a blood-smearred post. He took our sin upon himself and went into every dark place we would ever be asked to go, even the pit of death. Then God raised Him from the dead, and 50 days later He poured the Holy Spirit on us. Holiness is possible because gives us the Spirit of the risen Christ. We embrace each day as a new creation. We live as the sanctified, free children of God. Our hope is fueled by the promise of God: One day the lamb will lie down with the lion, peace will cover the earth, justice will flow like a mighty stream, and every knee shall bow and ever tongue proclaim that Jesus is Lord!

After each student has had an opportunity to share their doodles, ask the following questions:

- **How do you feel about yourself when God's story is read like it is our story?**
- **How do you feel connected/disconnected to it?**
- **In what ways does being connected to the story of God change the future chapters of our own stories?**

This Is Our Story

Say something like, **"When our story is enfolded into God's Story, we become a part of His people and give Him control over our lives. Let me illustrate for a moment what it looks like when we enfold our story into God's."**

Ask for a volunteer to come forward and to stand in front of you. Instruct the volunteer to hold up his or her right hand and to do the following: pat themselves on the head, pull on their right ear, rub their stomach, give you a high five. Have them sit down and ask them this question: **"Who controlled your right hand?"** If they answer that they controlled it, then explain that they wouldn't have done any of those things if you hadn't been up there with them giving them instruction. If they say that you controlled their right hand, then tell them that if you have *that* much power, then you are going to have them come up and stick a butter knife in a wall outlet (don't really let them do it).

Say something like, **"You won't do everything that I tell you to do, but you did let me control your right hand when you chose to cooperate with me and do what I asked you to do. What took place up here was the combination of two stories, mine and yours. You let me tell you what to do, but it was your hand that did the patting, pulling, rubbing and high fiving. That's what it's like when we allow God to take control of our story, when we let God be the Lord of our lives. We continue to live out our story within a bigger story. Our story takes on new significance because it is enfolded into the greater story of God. And when we truly live**

under the Lordship of Christ, we begin to experience the holiness of God taking shape within us.”

Read Ezekiel 36:26-27.

Ask the following questions:

- **What do you think about the idea of control as described in the exercise?**
- **What keeps us from giving God complete control of our lives, of our stories?**
- **What are we afraid that God will do if we give Him control over our lives?**
- **What kinds of things do you think a heart of stone would produce in your life?**
- **What do you think Ezekiel means when he says that God will give us "a heart of flesh?"**
- **Ezekiel says God will "make you" follow His statutes? How do you think God does that based on the idea of control that we experienced in the exercise?**
- **How does following God's statutes and observing God's ordinances shape your story?**

Closing

Close in prayer, inviting God to soften our hearts and give us the willingness to submit our stories to the story of God.