

The Bible is full of stories that help us understand who God was, is, and will forever be. These stories also reveal who we are in relationship to God. From beginning to end the Bible shows us how God's love and grace is always directed to human creation.

These stories are not just ancient myths having little if any meaning for our lives today. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is as much our story as it was the stories of Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Judas, Mary, Jesus, Phoebe, and Paul. These people, full of love and hatred all at the same time, represent each of us in our own mixture of good and evil. Just as they struggled with knowing how to receive God's unconditional love and then give unconditional love away to others, so do we. It is in this ongoing struggle to love and be loved that we are invited into the biblical story unafraid. Unafraid because just as God captured and recaptured, healed and healed again the broken lives found in the pages of scripture, so God continues to capture and heal our own lives today.

The Story begins in a garden where love is coupled with free will. Free will because that is one of the greatest expressions of a deep and abiding love. If love does not set us free, then it is not real love. Yet, at the same time it is this gift of free will, this ability to choose for ourselves, that often gets us into our deepest troubles. From the beginning of human history we have repeatedly chosen to love ourselves more than God. We choose to leave the garden of intimacy with God and creation in order to strike out on our own and become our own little gods, and it this journey into selfish love that continues to divide us from one another and from God.

But this Story does not end here. For all who see themselves in it, this story is good news. It reveals a God who Saint Augustine described as being like the hounds of heaven that are forever on our trails. The point being, even our own willful separation from God cannot change the will of God from pursuing us in love.

And yet God's love is not just an abstract echoing from the sky. For God's love is made real through real people - people who have responded to a call from God to help lead others on a spiritual journey that introduces them to this relentless God of love and graceful purpose.

The people whom God has called to lead us in this way include Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Ruth, Esther, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and many others. They led from the Land of Ur to the forming of a new nation called Israel – God's chosen people to be God's incarnate presence to other nations. They led people from slavery in Egypt and on through the desert and into the Promised Land. They led on as judges and priests who spoke for God and as kings who ruled with power and might. From the Temple in Jerusalem they were led out as exiles in a foreign land. Through it all God never stopped showing unconditional love, yet in spite of this love the people continued to choose their own way over God's way. While in exile a remnant group of people formed. They hoped, believed, and prayed for the coming of a Messiah, a Savior to come and rescue them. Even while being far away from home they never forgot the stories of God's love. And so day after day they prayed for and preached about a day when God would send the Messiah.

That day came hundreds of years later in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Mysteriously, the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in the womb of his earthly mother, Mary. And in that act we once again see God coming to meet us in human flesh. Fully human and fully God – the

true embodiment of God's original creation when God created us in God's image – that is how Jesus came to us.

After his birth he too was exiled. When he returned home he grew up in a lower middle class family. He began his public ministry through the waters of baptism where he was declared to be the Beloved Son of God. He then spent 40 days in the desert fasting and praying. There he was immersed into the full human experience. Repeatedly he was tempted to love himself - his power, his prestige, and his possessions more than he loved God and every time he refused to bow to the temptations. And in so doing he showed us that there is a way to overcome our own temptations to power, prestige, and possessions.

From then on Jesus declared that a new kingdom was being established – The Kingdom of God. He preached about this Kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount. He showed us what this Kingdom looks like as he gave sight to the blind, healed broken limbs and hearts, advocated for the poor and forgave the sins of prostitutes and tax collectors, rich and poor alike he forgave them all.

Jesus travelled from place to place always calling others to welcome the Kingdom of God into their own hearts and then to come and follow him and help him bring the Kingdom of God into their homes, villages, and regions.

However, those with government and religious power did not like what they saw in the person of Jesus. They were threatened by how this new group constantly talked about and demonstrated life in the Kingdom of God's love. And so one day they decided to kill Jesus thinking that his death would put an end to this new way of life that was more about God's justice, love, and grace than the ruler's rules and reprimands.

Yet those who killed him failed to understand that God's love, justice, grace, and forgiveness cannot be stopped even by death. Three days later the never-ending love of God resurrected Jesus to new life. Indeed he was the long awaited Messiah. Not a political or religious savior, but a savior from all the sin, the selfish choices, and everything else that separates us from God and one another.

Even though Jesus showed the way, revealed the truth of what God cares most about, and provided the way to eternal life, people still choose to go their own way. So once again God called a group of people to incarnate God's love to life in the world.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit the church was born. The church was now the incarnate Body of Christ in a thousand and more ways and in all the places on Earth. The church was given the responsibility to declare the good news that God's love had come most fully in Jesus. The church was now inviting people into the Kingdom of God. The church was declaring that in Jesus the walls of race, economics, sex, and politics had been broken down completely.

The church embodied the presence of Jesus by meeting regularly in homes to pray and fast and regularly they attended the synagogue to stay connected to the story of their faith. But more than just meeting together in Christian fellowship they showed the world around them that there was another way than the way of power, prestige, and possessions to live.

They shared their possessions with one another. They had no political or religious power and yet through the power of the Holy Spirit blind eyes were opened again, broken hearts and limbs were healed, and the widows, the orphans, and the men and women on the streets were cared for.

They were the living and loving presence of Jesus day by day and each new day more and more people were responding to the call to come and follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God right where they lived. Then they were instructed to go out and invite others to come and follow Jesus as well.

This invitation to follow Jesus has not been revoked. The primary mission of the church today is to continually sound the call to all who will listen; to come and follow Jesus. And it is in this call to come and follow and invite others to do the same where our stories intersect most fully with the stories found in the Bible. Although there are no more pages to be added to the Bible, we are the new pages of the biblical story.

The Story that began with God's love and grace being given to humankind in a garden ends the same way. God's ultimate plan includes the restoration of this broken and fallen world back to the beautiful garden it once was. The crooked paths will be made straight. The lion and lamb will befriend one another and sleep side by side. Jesus will inaugurate this when he returns once again to bring the fullness God's Kingdom on Earth.

And when that day comes tanks will be reformed into tractors and guns will be smashed into the ground and nuclear weapons will be dismantled so that nations can live without borders and in perfect peace. Crying will cease and death and mourning will no be no more.

And what we must know is this, this story only has value for us as we respond to the invitation to bring our own stories into these pages and find that these words of love and truth are deeply indelibly inscribed on the pages of our own lives. This is why your story, with all its beauty and brokenness, matters. It matters to God. It matters to your family. It matters to your peers. It matters to the world. You are a Beloved child of God who has been invited into an intimate love relationship with God in the same way Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Ruth, John, Mary, Martha, and all the other people in the Bible were invited. It's an invitation into the Kingdom of God where your story continues to thicken the story of how God comes to capture and recapture, heal and heal again our broken lives.

From beginning to end it is a story of God's love intersecting the lives of people like you and me. You are invited to share your story...the world is waiting!