

“Telling a Better Story”

Mark 6:45-56

Wednesday morning, our group of 23 coming home from Montana got a late start because one of the train cars had to be removed in Spokane, WA. Those people had a three and one half hour delay while they did that. We boarded about 2 hours behind schedule and prayed the train would make up time because we only had a 2 hour layover in Chicago.

Because a car had been removed, we had no seats until we got to Shelby, MT and a group of 21 got off. The Lord did provide. Some people went most of the trip without a seat and had to sit in the observation car – which is great while going through Glacier National Park, but the rest of Montana and North Dakota does not draw you to the observation car.

At one point, I think we were only an hour and a half behind, but as we traveled through North Dakota and Minnesota, it was 2, 2 and a half, 3, three and a half. Not only did we sometimes have to stop and wait for a freight train, one time, we started backing up. We were tracking our progress on Keith's GPS—I think it started laughing at us – time of arrival: NEVER. I didn't know it had that function.

The good news is that the normal 7:00 AM Thursday morning stop in Minneapolis got pushed back to 10:00 AM, so my mom and dad brought us 4 dozen donuts for breakfast. The bad news is that Michele Urban's aunt and uncle in Winona, MN had already ordered 4 dozen donuts from a bakery and were going to bring them 3 hours later. So we had donuts for breakfast and for lunch – so it wasn't REALLY bad news.

So after eating 5 or 6 donuts, I am a little jittery from the sugar high and we begin contemplating how we will get home, because it is clear we are not making the train to Quincy. We knew we were going to take a bus. The conductors on the train knew we were going to take a bus. We were told before we arrived in Milwaukee that AMTRAK had officially decreed that we will take a bus home.

We arrive in Chicago 3 hours late. It is now 7:00 PM. The Quincy train left an hour earlier. We are told the bus driver has been called and he should be there in about a half hour. Stay right here; don't go anywhere. We will call you. You need to be ready to go. 7:30 comes and goes. By 7:45, some of our group needs to use the restroom and we need food. Many of us have eaten nothing but donuts and granola bars all day.

I ask an AMTRAK official if it is OK for some to go to the food court and bring back some food. They say that is not a problem. We send them. 5 minutes later, a different AMTRAK official says, "Your bus is on Canal Street. You need to go NOW." We are calling cell phones,

Keith runs up to the food court to spread the word. The AMTRAK lady is upset at me for not being ready. Oh the irony. These people had more than a day to anticipate our train being late. 2 hours after our train had left the station, our bus had finally arrived, and they were upset at me.

We pack up, get on the bus, and drop off a woman and her granddaughter in Galesburg. We are thankful this is our only stop. However, my confidence was justifiably shaken when the driver's assistant came back to the woman from Galesburg and asked her which exit he should take. I am not kidding.

We drop them off and then take a 20 minute tour of the residential neighborhoods of Galesburg. Galesburg is a nice town, and I know we didn't have to pay extra for the tour, but I just wanted to get home.

Finally, we get back on the road. We get to Macomb, and we stop – for a freight train. I found great irony in that. An hour later, we arrive in Quincy, our planned destination, and we are received by people we love. It wasn't the path we would have chosen, but our story ended the way that we were told it would end. It was a happy ending. It was the perfect ending to our week in Montana.

The theme of our Bible study this week was “Telling a Better Story.” Pastor Kaarre talked about how screen writers approach telling a story when they write a movie and how our lives in Christ have similar characteristics.

Every story has a hero called a “protagonist”. That word literally means “Prime or first agonizer.” In the movies, a good story always has conflict or agony. The hero, the protagonist is never perfect. He has flaws. He ends up being humbled. He needs help to overcome the conflict or suffering in his life.

In the movies, the character whose life is “perfect”, who goes through life with no conflict, that person is always the villain. The protagonist is the prime agonizer. You are the protagonist in your story. You are not perfect. You have flaws; you have faults; you have failures.

Jesus comes as the Ultimate Agonizer. Yes, He is perfect in that He is God, but He chose to take on flesh, weakness, and carry your burden of sin for you.

We hear how Jesus sent Peter and the disciples on the boat ahead of Him. He sent the wind that slowed them. He gave them a painful struggle. He appears and they greet the presence of God with fear – they think He is a ghost. Immediately, He brings calm and resolution to their struggle.

Our journey home wasn't the only struggle we had. The Lord provided opportunities for our travelers to rise to the occasion. One vehicle had a flat tire on the way to Glacier. We had one sprained ankle; one with altitude sickness; one with bad leg cramps while hiking. We had a scheduled servant event where we were going to help an elderly woman with firewood. A storm got in the way. This storm blew down the tarps over our eating area and kitchen, flooded the kitchen

area. The guys dug a small trench to drain it. It took some time and effort, but the tarps were back up and most everything was cleaned up by supper time.

All of these events gave others the opportunity to serve. Serving others is an opportunity, not a burden. Dealing with all of these issues, the presence of Christ was evident. He filled His people with a desire to serve, and He brought calm and resolution to our struggles.

In the movies, in addition to having a protagonist and the agony of his conflict, something else that is necessary for telling a better story is resolution. Movie writers write the ending first. They know how the story ends.

God wrote your ending first. Before He laid the foundation of the world, He knew Your name. God knows the ending of your story. It is already written. You will live happily ever after, but this is no fairy tale. Like all good stories, your life will have conflict. You will have struggles. At times, you will express great faith, like Peter and the disciples. Other times you will fear and feel like you are sinking into the depths, like Peter and the disciples.

Your life on earth will never be perfect, but you have a good story. What is the end of your story? It is already written. As the Lord has written, your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Amen.