

Tell Me the Story Again

Sermon by Rev. Tammy Yeager

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Tell Me the Story Again

One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and your dominion endures throughout all generations. (Psalm 145)

If ever the country was ready for a feel good story, it was ready on January 15th, 2009. The America of mid-January was a bleak place, not just because of the winter weather or the after Christmas blues. Last year we faced so much more than that. In the previous months, one disaster after another had battered folks around the country until many were downright scared. Jobs were shed, pensions and savings gone. The stock market had lost almost half its value. Memories stirred of the Great Depression. The country was still fighting two wars. For most Americans the national mood was as bleak as it had ever been.

Then, USAIR Flight 1549, just minutes after taking off from LaGuardia Airport, lost both engines when it was hit by a flock of geese. The plane hydroplaned into the icy gray river somewhere around Fiftieth Street. It disappeared briefly in its own spray, and magically bobbed back into view, seemingly intact. The river quickly ate up the speed of the aircraft's 150 mile an hour crash landing, ripped off its left engine and gracefully turned it almost 45 degrees, pointing its nose at midtown Manhattan. Poetically, the plane seemed to be taking a slight bow to its stunned audience, the city that makes legends, New York.

There were 155 people on board that plane. They all survived. It was such a message of hope. You can read the passengers extraordinary accounts of courage, faith and determination in the book I've been quoting from this morning. It bears the now world famous title of the event, *The Miracle on the Hudson*.

The pilot, Chesley Sullenberger became an instant hero. While Sullenberger received, and deserved lots of credit for his performance that day, the world's attention turned to God as well.

A city whose post-9/11 cry had been, "My God, why have you forsaken me," now had a reason to believe again... that God cares, that God is near and at least sometimes, it seems God intervenes to spare us from disaster. You may have seen the great sketch released on the internet shortly after the crash. It showed a huge pair of hands reaching down from the sky, gently lowering the plane into the river.

Stories have tremendous power, don't they? Stories like these make an impact. The media certainly knows this; politicians do too. Stories shape and mold us influencing our decisions, our desires and our dreams. They have the power to change lives for better or worse. Stories can restore hope, as this story did for so many people around the world. Hearing

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another person's story can motivate us to make important changes in our own lives: to stop drinking, work harder in school, forgive an old hurt, or come back to church.

And even sad stories can inspire new beginnings. People who have heard stories of the homeless or starving children are inspired to start charities that make a real difference in the world. You may have heard of the eleven-year-old boy from Calgary who has raised thousands of dollars for the homeless after he heard a story of one man freezing to death out on the streets. And a young college student collects books for schools in Tanzania after hearing a story about a school there where kids were anxious to learn but had no supplies. The internet is full of these stories of homegrown charities doing remarkable good works.

Stories have the power to bring about huge change. Stories can restore our faith in God or bring someone to him for the very first time. **But a story only has power if it is told.**

There's another story of a miraculous plane landing I'd like share with you this morning. Like the Miracle on the Hudson, it happened against all odds. The pilot's skill and split second decisions also saved lives that day. A World War II air force plane had been making its usual run up China's Burma Road to deliver supplies and personnel in enemy territory. Being shot at from below was a normal occurrence for these supply run planes. But this day the artillery hit its mark, and knocked out an engine and the plane's landing gear as well. Like Chesley Sullenberger, this pilot's choices made all the difference. Rumor has it that he ordered all of the people on board to parachute to safety while he stayed on and did what he could to save the plane and innocent bystanders as well. It could only have been with God's help that he was able to bring the plane down safely as it skidded off the runway and into the thick underbrush of its home base in the jungles of India.

I wish I could tell you more. The fact is, I don't know many details. I don't even know how many people this brave pilot saved that day. I don't know their stories. I don't know what anyone felt or thought or said. I can only imagine that prayers were spoken and lives were changed. This remarkable story, its power to inspire, to influence lives, is lost now. All I have is a worn out photograph of the plane and a hole in my heart for the pilot I love so dearly. He was my father. He died in 1995, and sadly, his story died with him. Despite our best efforts none of us five kids could get Dad to tell us the story of that day before he died and took it with him.

There are so many stories out there that are never told. I know that it's hard for some veterans like my father to retell their stories. But it isn't just war stories that are being left behind. Greg Mortensen, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, was October's Town Hall South speaker. In his opening statements, Greg said that as he traveled across the world lecturing in schools he noticed that if he asked students in countries like Pakistan if they knew their family's stories about 90% of the crowd would raise their hands. But in America if he asked our young people less than 10% say they know their families stories. That's so sad and such a tremendous loss not only for our kids today but also for the generations to come.

Part of the problem must be technology. Years ago, listening to each other's stories was just about the only source of entertainment. Today there is plenty else to take our attention. We're too busy to sit and listen to each other much anymore.

But there are lots of other reasons stories aren't told too. We tend to be very private people; we aren't very good at sharing a story that might reveal our brokenness or our failures, even if we've managed to overcome them. Sometimes stories of great accomplishments aren't told because we try to be humble. We don't want to toot our own horn. And other stories are just too painful to repeat. Even though they hold valuable lessons, we just want them to fade away so we don't have to live through the pain again.

There are stories, especially ones where God shows up, that are just too far out of the ordinary; and we worry that people won't believe us or that they'll think we're some kind of religious kook if we tell them. Other people think their stories aren't worth telling, that no one would be interested, and that everybody else has a story that's bigger or better. Many people are afraid that telling their story makes them vulnerable, that it reveals too much and puts them at risk of being hurt. Telling our stories takes trust; but it builds trust too.

Our stories hold the secret of who we are. They give our life meaning and purpose. They are what connect us to one another. When we share our stories, we realize what we have in common and where our lives intersect. We realize we're not alone in what we face in this life. We discover that so many people around us are going through the same things we are. Community is formed. I believe great things would happen if only people would find the courage to tell their stories and all of us would take the time to listen.

On the rare occasions I didn't have any calls to make as a chaplain, I would ask the nurses if anyone on the floor needed a visit. They loved to tease me. One morning when I asked, they suggested with a very suspicious smile that I go into room 1056; it would be a true test of my calling. "But, duck as you walk in the door," the nurses said, "because he'll probably throw something at you. He has some major anger management issues." These nurses knew me. They knew I could never resist a challenge. So, I braced myself for attack and walked in.

The room had a single bed and all I could see peaking out of the white sheet was the head of an elderly, small-framed, African American man and he seemed to be shaking all over. I told him who I was and asked if he was cold. He could barely talk to me; but he managed to nod his head. I got him some warm blankets from the hall. I spoke a few words to him and said a prayer. As I turned to leave, thinking what a strange experience that had been, much different from what the nurses had led me to expect, he stopped me and in a voice just above a whisper he thanked me and asked me if I would come back later to meet his family.

That afternoon I did a double take as I walked back into that room. The patient was sitting up in bed. His grown son stood beside him and his beautiful wife sat at his feet. After quick introductions, a heart felt thank you, with an explanation from his wife that her husband always seems to be cold, the stories started flying.

The three of them were so animated and they were talking over each other. It was a cacophony of conversation. But here is what I managed to catch; Mom was one of the first black models in Pittsburgh and quite a dresser back in those days. She still is. The son spent time as a missionary out on an Indian reservation and continues to be passionately involved

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in mission work. Years ago the couple loved to go hear all the famous jazz artists when they came to town. They rattled off names faster than I could keep track, asking me with each one if I knew their songs and liked their music. The son proudly pointed out a military pin to me on his baseball cap and he told me some unforgettable stories about his father who was one of the buffalo soldiers.

In the midst of it all, I looked over in amazement at the man in the hospital bed. He had looked so small and frail just hours ago. Now, he seemed to sit up taller and stronger with each story. And his eyes had a twinkle as bright as the North Star. I will always cherish that moment. I can still see the scene in my mind as if it was just yesterday.

I was shocked a few weeks later when another chaplain mentioned he had been called into the ICU the night before, because a man was dying. I couldn't hold back my tears when I realized the man he was describing was the buffalo soldier.

We come alive in our stories. The fact is, if you don't know someone's story then you really don't know the person. We are our stories. We're a product of all the stories we've ever heard, and lived, and many we've never heard as well. Our stories identify us and help us make sense of our experiences.

Stories make the connections among past, present and future. They draw the line from where we've been to where we're going. Stories tell us our reason for being, where we fit in to the bigger picture. *Story is the language of life*. If you truly want to know a person, you need to listen to their stories.

God is no different. If you want to know God, then you have to know his story. God's story holds the key to eternal life. And like all these other stories, the power is lost if it isn't passed on.

In the book of Deuteronomy God commands his people to, "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; write them on the doorframes of our houses and your gates. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Are we doing that?

Our youngest daughter Brittany, was shocked when she discovered one day how many of her college friends had no idea what happened at Easter. To them it was no more than a day for chocolate, jellybeans and bunnies.

All evidence points to the fact that we're just as bad at passing on God's stories as we are our own. We have just as many excuses for why we aren't telling them.

In one of the recent surveys we did here at Westminster, we found we were good at lots of things. But, our lowest score by far was in sharing our faith with others. We're not alone. News polls claim that the percentage of Christians worldwide is declining; more people are

saying they have no religion at all.

Jesus Christ seems to be losing relevance in our world. Instead of a living Lord who is present with us, lots of people perceive Jesus as just a historical figure. Someone like Abe Lincoln or George Washington that you can only read about instead of get to know by personal experience.

People point to the stories in the Bible and say, "Nothing like that is happening anymore. God isn't speaking out of burning bushes these days." We look at the problems of the world and our own problems and ask, "Where is God in all of this?" Most of us have doubts.

God is present among us now by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's easy to forget and sometimes hard to believe that he's around. For now we see in a mirror dimly. Only later we will see God face-to-face.

But the fact is, at Westminster we're hearing and experiencing amazing stories of God's presence almost every day. So many of you have told us giant stories of near death experiences, miraculous healings and life-changing transformations. And there are plenty of smaller stories too, but no less significant, no less powerful. God is showing up everywhere, guiding and directing us in just the ordinary circumstances of daily living. Lots of you here today have had these experiences.

When we tell these stories to one another, *we are sharing the gospel story*. We're making it come to life. We're telling the story of a God who from the very beginning created us with the intention of always being *with* us.

God is here and revealing himself. The problem is that we're keeping these amazing stories to ourselves. Almost every single story I've heard starts out this way... You know I've never shared this story with anyone before, or I've only shared this story with a few people. That's exactly how this story began the day I first heard it.

A little girl stood in the bathroom with her Daddy watching him shaving one day. And as she stood there, she noticed the huge scar on his leg, a big boo-boo that really had her upset. She looked up at her father and asked what had happened to him. The little girl was so young, too young for the whole story. So her Daddy told her a silly tale to ease her worry about his leg. And as I found out, even though she is grown now with children of her own, he never got around to telling her the real story. But he told it to me one day over dinner. And because of my own father, this story tugged at my heartstrings and wouldn't let me rest. After hearing it I couldn't let it go. I was determined that it not be lost forever.

And so with the father's permission, a member of our congregation, I share his story with you this morning. But I have to tell you first that he is concerned that people will think this story is all about him, and he knows that it's not. His story is all about God and what God can do in someone's life. It's about a miracle that happened in a desolate part of North Korea in 1952. It's a story of hope and faith and building a personal relationship with God. He has agreed to share it after all this time with hopes that it will give some of you the

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courage to come forward as he has and tell us your stories. And he also hopes that by telling his story others might come to know the power and the presence of God.

The little girl's father had grown up in a family that went to church every single Sunday. He went along with what his family expected of him. But, when he was older and went away to Wooster College, he began questioning things. He questioned the validity of the Bible, recognizing its human element. He eventually pushed the book away, but he never pushed away God.

Like so many young people do, this young man questioned his own identity too. Realizing that he didn't know who he was, he thought joining the Army might help him find himself.

He ended up in Korea as a rifleman. His assignment took him to the front lines and then beyond. On February 4th, 1952 this young soldier and the other 28 men in his platoon were on guard duty at Outpost Kelly, 2,100 yards ahead of the Main Line of Resistance. Most of the time they were dodging just a bit of direct firing lasting only a few minutes. But on this fateful morning, at 6 a.m., they came under heavy fire, in an attack that was to last a full six hours.

He remembers the time, because he was hunkered down in his trench clasping his rifle; and his head was resting near his watch when the attack started. As the initial bombardment lightened, the soldiers looked above the rim and one of his comrades cried out, "They're coming up." And as he looked, sure enough, over the horizon came a terrifying sight, a full battalion of 500 Chinese soldiers. The attack was successful. The hill was soon overrun. All of the men were either killed, wounded or captured, with one exception.... our young soldier.

As the onslaught tore through them, he stood up with his helmet on and his 19-pound Browning automatic rifle in his hands. But just at that moment, another mortar round came in and tore off the thigh muscle of his right leg, leaving him unable to stand. He fell down, in searing pain and in the sure knowledge that his life was over.

But then he heard a voice and the dialogue with the divine began. "Get up, get up, get off this hill," the voice said. "I can't," was the soldier's silent reply, to a command coming out of nowhere. "Drop the weapon," the voice told him. "I can't," the wounded soldier repeated. "Riflemen never give up their weapon under fire." But the insistence of the voice was overpowering. Acting against all of his military training and human logic, he finally dropped the weapon, only to continue struggling under the weight of his heavy gear. "Get rid of the vest, get rid of the helmet," the voice kept repeating. "Keep down, get out." Finally, he submitted completely, trying to do everything the voice told him. He stumbled and rolled down the hill and found he could almost stand if he used his knee for support instead of his foot. But then the voice came again, "Get up. They're coming. You have to get out of here now."

All the dying soldier saw before him was a rice paddy with a long winding path filled with barbed wire, that was the only way to avoid the land mines, an insurmountable challenge to him in his present condition. But, he began to move again. "Get back to the Main Line," the

voice warned.

The force within him got him up and he moved as best he could, crawling through the rice paddy, walking on his knee because his leg could no longer support him. Slowly he managed to cross those 2,100 treacherous yards, pulling himself past the maze of barbed wire that left his hands torn and bleeding. No weapon, no vest, no helmet, rifle or grenade. Leaving behind every logical worldly element of protection he had, and trusting himself completely into the hands of God. And then finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, he found himself at the Main line the voice had been spurring him toward. He had made it close enough that now human assistance could take over. He fell to the ground and passed out.

Choppered to a MASH unit, and then flown to an army hospital, more than 300 stitches later, the various levels of remaining flesh on his right leg were held together creating the lasting scar that so many years later had concerned his little daughter as she watched her Daddy shave.

From then until now, Ted Cook has never forgotten that voice. "It lifted me up when I couldn't stand on my own." Through 54 years of marriage to Jan, raising his kids, working for various companies, and traveling the world, Ted knows that God remains there for him. "God was taking care of me then and he does to this day." Ted continues to talk to God. And every day he looks at a little reminder, a saying he's written down to keep him going. It says simply, "Lord help me to remember, nothing is going to happen to me today that you and I together can't handle." When he reads it now it probably sounds a lot like that voice.

I am deeply honored and grateful that Ted Cook gave me permission to share his story this morning. But he made me promise we wouldn't make a big fuss. He let me tell it to help us launch a project here at Westminster. We want to capture our stories. Together let us get better at sharing our faith, to tell our children and our children's children that God is alive and here among us. So they can believe in God's promises.

The holidays are the perfect time for families sitting around the dinner table and by the fireplace to share their stories. It's my prayer that this season you'll do that. Ask questions and encourage one another, take the time to sit down and listen.

Let the stories be told. Let our children know who we are. Let the world know that God is near. Amen.

If this sermon has inspired you to share your story, please contact me. I am very anxious to help you capture it. I promise to honor all requests, even if you want to remain anonymous. Our hope is to first share them one by one in the Spire and then to make a collection of our stories. 412-835-6630 X216 or yeager@westminster-church.org. I can't wait to hear them!

(Many thanks to Carolyn Kerr for recording Ted Cook's story.)