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GRATITUDE AND SERMON JOURNAL

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

August 30 - October 30, 2021

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

October 31 - November 21, 2021

A Special Note from Pastor Tom

This Gratitude and Sermon Journal is a daily guide to scriptures tied to Asbury's weekly sermons. **This Journal's format is different.** Our scripture readings for the sermon will FOLLOW, not precede, the Sunday preaching text. It was strange writing this, but once we get into the new rhythm, we will be fine. To transition, we will read Jesus stories from the Gospels the first week. Then on September 5, we begin an all-church small group study on "The Magnificent Story." Changing the Journal's format allows everyone to start their small groups after hearing the first message. The author, James Bryan Smith, will preach for us twice in this series. Jim is a United Methodist pastor, a theology professor at Friends University, and an associate pastor at a local church in Wichita. He has written a series of excellent books. He also leads the "Apprentice Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation" (check it out online).

We intend for our "Magnificent Story" study to be as much about invitation and hospitality as about learning. We are trying to provide an excellent opportunity to make new friends and deepen existing relationships through small group gatherings.

Concluding this series is one of the most respected theologians and effective communicators in the church today. Dr. Ben Witherington III is a distinguished professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, a prolific author, and is in great demand as a speaker. He will be teaching at our ATS satellite campus before preaching on Sunday. We are pleased Dr. Witherington will be with us on October 24.

On Halloween and the first two Sundays in November, we will look at three parables from the Gospel of Luke stressing Jesus as a "contrarian." I don't mean Jesus was grumpy—far from it—He was incredibly generous. But His teachings were countercultural, including the use of money. November 14 is the time to make our financial commitments to the Lord through Asbury for 2022. The series concludes with Dr. Timothy Tennent, the President of Asbury Theological Seminary, as our speaker. Dr. Tennent is an extraordinary and visionary leader who has piloted ATS into an exciting new future.

The purpose of this Gratitude and Sermon Journal is to help shape our hearts as deeply devoted followers of Jesus. Furthermore, because He is so magnificent, we want to Help Others Follow Jesus, too. Let's form a habit of prayer and Bible reading every day.

Mark your calendars. This should be a great fall season at Asbury.

Tom

Scripture Readings

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

- 8-30 Mark 1:21-28
- 8-31 Mark 2:1-12
- 9-1 Mark 9:14-29
- 9-2 Mark 10:17-34
- 9-3 Mark 15:1-5
- 9-4 Luke 5:1-11

THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT SHRUNKEN) STORY

- 9-5 1 Corinthians 13
- 9-6 Isaiah 9:2-9
- 9-7 John 3:1-21
- 9-8 John 4:7-42
- 9-9 Acts 9:1-22
- 9-10 Acts 10:34-44
- 9-11 Romans 8:26-30

THE TRINITY AND BEAUTY

- 9-12 John 1:14-18
- 9-13 Psalm 27:1-4
- 9-14 Psalm 96:1-6
- 9-15 Ecclesiastes 3:9-15
- 9-16 Matthew 3:13-17
- 9-17 Acts 17:22-31
- 9-18 Philippians 2:1-11

GOODNESS

- 9-19 Romans 15:14
- 9-20 Genesis 1
- 9-21 Psalm 23
- 9-22 Psalm 34
- 9-23 Galatians 4:8-20
- 9-24 Galatians 5:16-26
- 9-25 Titus 3:1-11

Scripture Readings

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

TRUTH

- 9-26 John 14:1-7
- 9-27 John 1:1-13
- 9-28 John 8:31-47
- 9-29 John 15:26-27
- 9-30 John 17:6-19
- 10-1 Colossians 1:15-20
- 10-2 1 John 1:5-10

LIVING THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

- 10-17 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
- 10-18 Acts 2:42-47
- 10-19 Acts 18:24-28
- 10-20 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
- 10-21 Galatians 3:23-29
- 10-22 Ephesians 1:3-10
- 10-23 Ephesians 2:11-23

HOLY SATURDAY

- 10-3 1 Peter 3:18-22
- 10-4 Matthew 27:45-66
- 10-5 John 12:27-36
- 10-6 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
- 10-7 1 Corinthians 15:12-19
- 10-8 1 Corinthians 15:20-28
- 10-9 1 Peter 4:1-6

YOUR FUTURE STORY

- 10-24 2 Corinthians 4:1-18
- 10-25 Isaiah 40:27-31
- 10-26 John 11:17-27
- 10-27 1 Corinthians 15:50-58
- 10-28 2 Corinthians 5:1-10
- 10-29 1 Peter 5:6-11
- 10-30 James 5:7-11

MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

- 10-10 Revelation 21:1-5
- 10-11 Matthew 24:36-44
- 10-12 Matthew 24:45-51
- 10-13 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
- 10-14 2 Peter 3
- 10-15 Revelation 21:6-27
- 10-16 Revelation 22

Scripture Readings

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

THE VINEYARD WORKERS

- 10-31 Matthew 20:1-16
- 11-1 Matthew 21:28-32
- 11-2 Luke 15:11-32
- 11-3 Luke 23:32-43
- 11-4 2 Corinthians 9:6-15
- 11-5 Galatians 6:6-10
- 11-6 James 1:14-18

THE WIDOW AND THE SCRIBES

- 11-14 Luke 20:45-21:4
- 11-15 2 Samuel 24:18-25
- 11-16 Acts 4:32-37
- 11-17 2 Corinthians 8:1-7
- 11-18 2 Corinthians 8:8-15
- 11-19 Philippians 4:10-20
- 11-20 James 1:26-27

THE SHREWD MANAGER

- 11-7 Luke 16:1-13
- 11-8 Genesis 14:17-24
- 11-9 Deuteronomy 23:19-20
- 11-10 Malachi 1:6-14
- 11-11 Malachi 3:6-12
- 11-12 1 Timothy 6:3-10
- 11-13 1 Timothy 6:17-19

CHRIST, THE SECOND ADAM

- 11-21 Romans 5:12-25

The Magnificent Story

August 30 - October 30, 2021

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Having finished our summer series of growing: “Up,” “Together,” and “Out,” we combine these three topics into a specific application: forming or joining a “Magnificent Story” small group. Most studies are about knowledge. This study is as much about relationships. Invite. Welcome. Reach out. The author of “The Magnificent Story,” James Bryan Smith, will be at Asbury on September 5 to preach. Jim will return on October 10 to talk to us about the end times.

“The Magnificent Story” is **JESUS’ STORY**. It is all about Him. Our Gospel readings describe His teaching, preaching, and healing ministry. Jesus embodied a new way. People could not grasp His message until after the Resurrection. We can have some great stories without Him, but a truly magnificent story ends with *“And they all lived happily ever after.”* Only Jesus, because of the Resurrection, can back up His claims and give us eternal life.

We are stuck in what Jim calls “**SHRUNKEN STORIES**.” God created us as good, but sin has diminished God’s original intent. Narcissism is not magnificent. Self-centeredness reeks with insecurity. James 4:1 tells us quarrels result when we dwell in the kingdom of self. Our shrunken stories bounce between arrogance and shame. There is a better way.

The **GOOD NEWS** is Jesus invites us to participate in His narrative. We find a new and magnificent story when our relationship with Jesus **BEGINS**, not after we die. When we help others follow Jesus, we offer a new identity, a new community, and a greater purpose for this life. He enlarges and blesses our stories. We have a purpose in life because of our attachment to Him.

In addition to using this Gratitude and Sermon Journal, let me invite you to do two things:

1. Commit to be in worship every Sunday during this series.
2. Participate in a **SMALL GROUP**. Consider creating a small group to meet weekly in your home, office, or restaurant. Invite friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Make it simple and friendly. Use the discussion questions in this journal or in the back of the Jim’s book. You don’t have to have all the answers. This book has a lot of depth, but we hope it will be more about hospitality than about teaching. Invite. Care. Ask questions. Listen. Encourage. Be humble.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS:

For those who said, “yes” to joining a Magnificent Story small group, we are glad you did.

Here are a few tips to get you started:

Get your own copy of “The Magnificent Story” by James Bryan Smith to go with your Gratitude and Sermon Journal.

- Commit to meeting with the group each week.
- Pray for your group throughout the six weeks. A successful small group is a God thing.
- Read the chapter(s) and reflect on the questions in the Journal.
- **Write or track your answers to the questions.** This will make the group discussion more effective.
- Come prepared to listen and share. Remember the group discussion rule: Listen twice as much as you speak. But do speak! The other group members will learn from your ideas and experiences.
- Relax and have fun. This is as much about being with others as it is about learning.

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Thursday, September 2, 2021
Mark 10:17-34

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Saturday, September 4, 2021

Luke 5:1-11

THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT SHRUNKEN) STORY

“The Magnificent Story” is about Jesus. We cover chapters 1 AND 2 this week. A few synonyms of “magnificent” include “*wonderful, splendid, glorious, brilliant, stunning, grand, marvelous, and superb.*” People came to Jesus in physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual brokenness and pain. For many reasons they were living with shrunken narratives. Romans 3:23 says we all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. Our stories have been shrunken because of sin. We need to be redeemed. Our stories and our understanding of the gospel need to be enlarged.

Jesus constantly amazed people with His healing and teaching ministry. This entire study is about trading our shrunken stories to finding new life in Him. Jesus constantly invited and welcomed various people in: He LOVED children, women, lepers, demoniacs, tax collectors, outcasts, Samaritans, and all sorts of sinners (including the religious ones). Nobody had ever known a person like Jesus.

Note in our readings how people responded to Jesus’ grace, love, and forgiveness. He was not mean or hateful. He did not boss or bully. He did not compromise compassion or Scripture. His story is one of beauty, goodness, and truth.

If you have not formed or joined a “Magnificent Story” small group, it is not too late. We can help. Invite a friend, too.

THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT SHRUNKEN) STORY

WEEK 1: APPLICATION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

(Adapted from “The Magnificent Story” study guide)

Jim writes, “*We were made not just to enjoy stories but to enter them. We long to take our lives, our stories, and merge them with another story.*” Spend time discussing some of your favorite stories or movies. What do you find appealing about them?

- What stories have you been told about God? Jesus? The Christian life? Heaven?
- What stories have you been told about who you are? If you are comfortable, share one of your answers with the group.

Jim tells his experience with the “social (do good works) gospel” and the “shaming and scary” gospel. Jim writes, “*In the social gospel, God is distant (if God exists at all) ... In the shaming gospel, God the Father is angry ...*” Neither gospel leads him to love God. He also writes, “*These stories are too small because they start with us. The social gospel puts humans at the center of the universe ... the shaming gospel also starts with us: ‘you are a sinner.’*” Both gospels put humans in control.

Without judgment or condemnation spend time sharing with the group which of these gospels formed your background.

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

In the journal readings this week, we see shrunken stories with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), the Woman at the Well (John 4:7-42), and Saul (Acts 9:1-22). **Read one of these stories aloud.**

1. What is the shrunken gospel that might be at work in this story?
2. What evidence is there that Jesus is inviting the main character into a magnificent story?
3. If you were in this story, who would you be (a bystander, a fellow Pharisee, an outcast, or the main character)?

How would you explain the “magnificent story” in contrast to “shrunken stories”?

Reflect again on the gospel story that formed your background. How does the magnificent story lead you to love God more fully, as well as your neighbor and yourself?

The TV series, “The Chosen,” shows us possibilities of “the rest of the story.” There was so much more to Jesus’ story than what we know. Consider watching an episode or two with your small group.

THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT SHRUNKEN) STORY

Sunday, September 5, 2021

1 Corinthians 13

Sermon Notes:

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Monday, September 6, 2021

Isaiah 9:2-9

THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT SHRUNKEN) STORY
Tuesday, September 7, 2021
John 3:1-21

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Friday, September 10, 2021

Acts 10:34-44

THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT SHRUNKEN) STORY

Saturday, September 11, 2021

Romans 8:26-30

THE TRINITY AND BEAUTY

We cover chapters 3 AND 4 this week in “The Magnificent Story.” These two chapters describe the Trinity and the beauty of the relationship within the godhead. Several people in the Bible are mentioned as being beautiful (Sarai, Rebekah, Rachel, Tamar, Job’s daughters, Vashti, Esther, and Moses as a baby). Yet, beauty has as much to do with relationships and function than with appearance. It’s not often we say feet are beautiful, but Romans 10:15 says, *“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”* Our appearance is important but is not ultimate. We should be good stewards of our bodies, but people deemed beautiful by the culture may be deficient in more important traits like hospitality, kindness, faith, and love. Proverbs 11:22 says: *“Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.”* We have memories and awareness of the “cool kids” (of any age) who reject those they deem inferior.

Like every believer, I have wrestled with the concept of the Trinity, but I have seldom thought about “beauty” in spiritual terms. I was intrigued to find the word in several Psalms. Our culture stresses beauty, especially for women. Women can be led to believe they are only significant if they are outwardly beautiful as defined by the culture (and fashion is always changing, keeping us addicted to buying new products). Since beauty can lead us astray, some Christians take the other extreme. They use 1 Peter 3:1-6 to resist outward beauty. Both are shrunken stories.

The redemptive note of beauty is seen in the relationship of the Trinity. It is fascinating that the New Testament never hints at the appearance of Jesus. The Scriptures don’t focus on what He looked like; it was His magnificent story and gracious invitation to all that attracted so many people to follow Him.

WEEK 2: APPLICATION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

(adapted from “The Magnificent Story” study guide)

Close your eyes and imagine God. After a few moments, if you are comfortable, share what you pictured.

Jim writes that a colleague recently asked his class to do this exercise. Most of them saw the same thing: an image of God the Father as an old man floating on clouds. His colleague told the class, *“If what you imagine God to be like is anything other than Jesus, then you have the wrong image of God.”*

Why do you think our image of God the Father is often so different from that of Jesus? And why do you think the Holy Spirit is so often left out of the picture?

The main thing to note is how the Trinity is united in community. How the “three are one” is a fascinating concept. Remember, we only worship what we cannot understand. The Trinity as a circle rather than a triangle (hierarchy) is a helpful illustration. Jesus becoming a human being to help us understand the godhead is the best gift ever given.

Jim summarizes the two false narratives this way: *“There is no need for the Trinity”* and *“Jesus is the asbestos suit that saves us from the white-hot wrath of God.”* Which has been more common in your journey? How has it affected you? Jim gives this definition of beauty: *“Beauty is that which, when seen, pleases.”* Do you agree with the author that neither of the false narratives are beautiful? Why?

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

The true narrative is reflected in two Greek words the early church theologians used to describe the relationship of the Trinity: **Kenōsis** is the act of self-giving for the good of another. **Perichōrēsis** means “mutual submission” and “dynamic intermingling.” How can our understanding of these two words affect our relationship with God?

Richard Rohr writes, “*The greatest dis-ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of disconnection.*” Jim writes, “*The fact that we, who are made in God’s image, are invited into the trinitarian community is the greatest invitation we could ever receive.*”

Read Galatians 4:6 aloud. How does this scripture draw you into God’s magnificent story?

Close your eyes and imagine God again. Write what you pictured. How has the image of God become more beautiful in your mind?

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Wednesday, September 15, 2021
Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Friday, September 17, 2021

Acts 17:22-31

GOODNESS

We cover chapter 5 this week in “The Magnificent Story.” God is not only GREAT, but God is also good. Being great and being good are not always linked. We can think of people who have been great in some capacity but were not good people. “Good” appears SIX TIMES in Genesis 1. And “VERY GOOD” appears only after God has created a human being. God is all about goodness. That is the nature of God.

The Trinity is beautiful in relationship. God's goodness is so much greater than our ability to understand the godhead. And yet, we are invited into a relationship with Him. 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 can be misquoted. It begins with *“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”* but we must keep on reading the rest of the text: *“these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.”* Not only that, but the Lord gives us His goodness. And His goodness comes through the magnificent story of Jesus. We attach ourselves to His goodness, not to our own “shrunk stories.” “Goodness” makes it into Paul's list of the “fruit of the spirit” in Galatians 5:22: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, GOODNESS, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*

GOODNESS

WEEK 3: APPLICATION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

(adapted from “The Magnificent Story” study guide)

When Jim heard Rich Mullins’ story (confession), Jim realized he was still hanging on to the old shaming narrative that God only works through the righteous, and that the power of the message depended on the purity of the messenger. Since Rich was a sinner and God used Rich, then a different narrative must be at play. Jim writes, “*despite our sin, sin is not our identity.*” He also writes that “*instead of starting with our original sin, we ought to start with our original goodness.*”

Reflect on things you consider “good.” If comfortable, share your thoughts with the group.

Jim defines goodness as: “*that which works for the benefit or betterment of another; it leads to wholeness.*” One of the first prayers Pastor Tom learned as a child was: “*God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food.*” Do you relate more to God as being “great” or “good?” How so?

God is great, and He is also good. What’s more—in Romans 15:14 Paul wrote, “*you are full of goodness...*” Do you find that hard to believe? That you are full of goodness? Why or why not?

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Read Genesis 1:26-31 aloud.

1. The dominant narrative of the shaming story is that we are sinful by nature (to the core). In what ways have you been exposed to this narrative? How have you grappled with it?
2. The truth about our nature is that we are originally good. And we are created to “do good” (Ephesians 2:10). As the author writes, *“The Trinity is beautiful, good, and true. We are made in God’s image ... This means that we are—in our essence beautiful, good, and true.”* How does that make you feel?
3. In your own experience, can you see how temptations are distortions of beauty, goodness, and truth? How might those distortions replace the ultimate, which is trusting in a good God and being known fully by Him?

Relational connection is our most important need. How do you feel about being known and loved by God? Why?

Jim writes, *“In addition to how we see ourselves, seeing others as sacred as opposed to sinful will impact how we relate to one another. If we see others as worthless, we will treat them with disregard and disrespect. If we see them as persons of great worth, we will treat them with dignity and due respect.”* What do you think we can do to draw out the good in others?

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Wednesday, September 22, 2021

Psalm 34

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Friday, September 24, 2021

Galatians 5:16-26

GOODNESS

Saturday, September 25, 2021

Titus 3:1-11

TRUTH

This week we cover chapter 6 in “The Magnificent Story.”

I have two concerns about stories:

1. We think the story is about us, but the magnificent story is Jesus’ story. It truly is the greatest story ever told. Colossians 1:15-18 is mouth-dropping. Jesus came in the flesh to show us the way to God. In fact, He is God. Because of His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out the Holy Spirit, we can have a magnificent story, too. Knowing this compels us to worship.

We have a magnificent story only when we are in relationship with Him, shaped by His Word.

2. Some stories are insufficient. To be magnificent, the story must have all three components: beauty, goodness and truth. Just because I have had an experience or feel a certain way, does not necessarily mean that it is beautiful, good, and especially true.

In chapter 3, “Participating in the Trinity,” Jim wrote about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (see diagram). We test truth based on four things:

Scripture is the foundation. John Wesley was a man of one book, the Bible. However, we also need to steep ourselves in nearly 2,000 years of Christian **tradition**. What has the church taught? We learn from others. Third, we are not anti-intellectual—so we insist upon using **reason**. Finally, the candle on top of the cake is **experience**. Unless we experience Christ as real in our hearts, we are not personally connected with Jesus. Too many Christians today begin conversations with “I think, I feel,” and “this is my truth.” Pilate famously asked Jesus, “*What is truth?*” Pilate didn’t comprehend the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is the One who sets us free. Our story cannot be magnificent unless it ends with “*And they all lived happily ever after.*” Only Jesus can help us live happily ever after. We can never do that on our own.



TRUTH

WEEK 4: APPLICATION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

(adapted from “The Magnificent Story” study guide)

What stories do you know that are both beautiful and good but are not true? (Mythologies, fiction, children’s stories, etc.) How do you know if a story is true? If you are comfortable, share who or what is the authority of your life and why.

Truth is what you get when you bump up against reality. Jesus IS the greatest teacher who has ever lived: Jesus’ teachings are true, meaning, they work. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive, to bless those who curse you, and to do unto others as you would have them do to you. Jesus’ teachings are in line with reality. His teachings are also good and beautiful.

Yet, Jim writes, *“Jesus does not merely tell the truth, Jesus is the truth. The truth is always in sync with reality.”* Have you ever considered Truth as a person? How does this change your perspective of truth? Of Jesus?

Read John 8:31-32 aloud. Jesus said He will set us free if we know Him. Truth, as an abstract principle, does not free us—knowing Jesus (the Truth) and His Word is what does.

Knowledge in the Bible is more than intellectual—it is physical and experiential. As John Wesley said, *“I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation ...”* Jim writes, *“Most Christians assume that eternal life begins when we die. Not according to Jesus.”* **Read John 17:3 aloud.** How does this passage change your perspective of eternal life?

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Consider how false narratives shrink Jesus. The “good works” gospel sees Jesus primarily as a teacher and is not interested in His miracles or resurrection. The shaming gospel needs Jesus only for His blood—His death on a cross. Why do we choose to make Jesus into what we want Him to be, and not who He is in His fullness?

Read Colossians 1:15-18 aloud. How do you respond to the notion that Jesus has created all things, that all things came through Him and are made for Him (including you!)?

Jim writes, *“We like to control Jesus because it lets us control the narrative. We find the Jesus who makes us feel safe.”* But *“the reality of Jesus is beyond anything we can ask or imagine.”* Jesus is more than a teacher and a redeemer. He is also the Creator. He who made all things, can (and will) make all things new.

What happens when “your story” or “my story” negates Scripture and/or church tradition?

How does the reality of Jesus as the Creator and Sustainer of all things change your view of the world? How does it enlarge any shrunken stories that may have shaped you?

TRUTH

Sunday, September 26, 2021
John 14:1-7

Sermon Notes:

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Wednesday, September 29, 2021

John 15:26-27

HOLY SATURDAY

I have never preached on the topic of “Holy Saturday” but I’m so glad Jim included it in his book (we cover chapter 7 this week). The President of Asbury Theological Seminary, Dr. Tim Tennent (who will speak at Asbury on November 21), wrote a book of meditations on the Apostles’ Creed called “This We Believe.” He writes, *“The early Church did not understand the death of Christ on Friday and His resurrection on Sunday as two separate events (as they are often understood and thought of by modern Christians). Rather, they understood the entire drama to unfold as one continuous event. For most Christians, Good Friday and Easter Sunday have great meaning, but we are not so sure how these events are connected by Holy Saturday.”*

We spend time this week looking at 1 Peter 3:18-22 and the description of Jesus’ descent and proclamation *“to the spirits in prison.”* There is a reason I have never preached on this text—it is VERY complicated and strange. So, when you hear the sermon, grant some extra grace in its delivery. (In fact, you could extend that grace every Sunday.)

WEEK 5: APPLICATION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

(adapted from “The Magnificent Story” study guide)

Jim begins this chapter with the devastating news that his daughter, Madeline, might not live. He felt abandoned by God and angry at Him after learning about her condition. What is your reaction to this story? What emotions does it stir?

Have you experienced a traumatic event and wondered where God was in that event? How did it make you feel?

Focusing on doctrine, over the larger story, can lead to false narratives. A doctrine is a “soundbite” statement of faith. Doctrines, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, help us grasp the mysteries of our faith. But the story is what gives the doctrine its meaning (not vice versa).

What other Christian doctrines are you familiar with? How might they, by themselves, present a shrunken story?

The doctrine of penal substitution (that Jesus died for our sins on Good Friday) is not wrong, but it is just a small part of a much larger story. While we are sinners in need of forgiveness, penal substitution by itself, is neither good nor beautiful. Jim writes, “*When a doctrine stands alone, it can end up telling the wrong story.*”

The larger story is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe demonstrated the full extent of His love through the events of Holy Week (John 13:1). *Kenōsis* is self-sacrifice for the good of another. Like a loving parent, the Trinity did for humans what we could not do for ourselves. The results of Holy Week are much more than the forgiveness of sin and more than eternal life—it is fellowship and unity with God.

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

The Apostles' Creed is a summation of the magnificent story using short clauses. An overlooked phrase that comes right after "was crucified, dead, and buried," is: "he descended to the dead." Jim writes, "In his descent, Jesus experienced extreme separation and alienation from God the Father. In his abandonment, he redeemed our times of abandonment ... it means there is no part of the human existence to which Christ did not 'descend' ... there is no place where the encompassing love of God can't be present ... there is no place where God is afraid to go. It is a beautiful part of the magnificent story."

Have Jesus' actions on Holy Saturday been a part of your experience of God's redemption in your life? If they were, what impact would it make on you?

You may know that Jesus washed your sins away at the cross. But how does it feel to know that God stands in solidarity with you in the moments of your worst afflictions?

HOLY SATURDAY

Tuesday, October 5, 2021

John 12:27-36

Wednesday, October 6, 2021

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

HOLY SATURDAY

Thursday, October 7, 2021

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

HOLY SATURDAY

Saturday, October 9, 2021

1 Peter 4:1-6

MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

We cover chapter 8 this week in “The Magnificent Story.”

“Eschatology” comes from a Greek word that describes the end times. I’ve been amazed in ministry how so many Christians obsess over the return of Jesus. I have a 1998 book with a wonderful title, “The Last Days are Here Again.” It was addressing the terror Christians had about “Y2K” and the year 2,000. Speculation about Jesus’ return has been rampant throughout church history even though Jesus said, *“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.”* (Mark 13:32-33) When people get into debates about the end times with charts, maps, and explanations, I want to say two things: First, *“What part of ‘no one knows’ do you not understand?”* Second, *“Be on guard, keep awake.”* There is work for us to do. Speculation is not our worry or our work. The Father will take care of that!

Jim has a wonderful treatment on the end times. Please read his insights on the “rapture.” John Wesley never heard of the rapture theory. He died in 1791. John Darby came up with the theory in 1830. Paul told the Thessalonians about the end times and concluded with this line: *“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:11) In other words, have a calm, non-anxious presence.

WEEK 6: APPLICATION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

(adapted from “The Magnificent Story” study guide)

This could be a lively discussion. Be respectful as you interact with the book and each other. Listen twice as much as you talk.

Why do you think people are so fascinated by end time prophecies?

Are you familiar with the “Left Behind” series (which has sold over 65 million copies)? How does this narrative depict the end times? Is it good and beautiful? Why or why not?

Most importantly, we must consider if it is true. The rapture theory and the popular understanding of the Great Tribulation are based on misreading various New Testament passages and taking them out of context (especially Matthew 24:40-41 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Jim writes that most prophecies in Revelation reference the Roman persecution of Christians—*which has already happened*. Chapters 21-22 describe future events.

What do you think the connection is between this shrunken “scary ending” story and the shaming gospel?

Jim notes another popular belief is the faithful will live in heaven forever. Yet from Genesis to Revelation the Bible is clear about the end: *God will make all things new*.

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Jim does a great job describing Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (pg. 136, or look at the last chapter of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John if you need more clues). How do these details paint a picture of our future? For example: He had a physical but transformed body, therefore, we will also have physical but transformed bodies.

Read Revelation 21:1-5 and 22:1-5 aloud. What do these verses tell you about the end of the magnificent story? How does this differ from the “floating on clouds” version that is often portrayed?

Jim writes, “We must admit that there is great mystery in our story. The Trinity is a mystery. The incarnation is a mystery. The return of Jesus and the restoration of all things—including judgment—are also mysteries. I am certain, however, that the magnificent story will end as it began: beautiful, good, and true. When Dallas Willard was asked what the end will be like, he said, “Whatever God does in the end, we will think it’s a great idea.”

Jim describes Jesus' return: Those who are alive on earth and those who are dead, in Christ, will rise to greet Him and accompany Him on His descent. *“In other words, it is a big party—on earth.”* What is your response to this version of the end times?

MAKING ALL THINGS NEW
Sunday, October 10, 2021
Revelation 21:1-5

Sermon Notes:

MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

Saturday, October 16, 2021
Revelation 22

LIVING THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

This is our last chapter in “The Magnificent Story.” There’s only one magnificent story because there is only one **Magnificent Person**. That’s not me or you. However, Jesus’ grace invites us to join His story. We swap our broken, wounded, and shrunken stories for a new creation. When we know Him, we have direction, guidance, comfort, and hope. We have a way forward. No matter what happens to us, we will win.

A wonderful book, “The Patient Ferment of the Early Church,” answers the question about why the early church was so dynamic in growth and impact. The early Christians had a great belief—Jesus the Magnificent One is Lord. He not only saved them from their sins, but He also gave them a community with other believers. They were not alone. They had a message to share. They wanted to Help Others Follow Jesus. They had great habits. They worshipped. They learned Scripture and doctrine. They had depth. They prayed together, gave to one another, and encouraged each other because they knew they were going in the right direction. In the end, no matter how awfully they were treated, they would prevail because of the magnificent story. They had eternal life. Thus, they could be patient with their sufferings. They were “fermenting” like wine—even though from the outside it looked like nothing was happening. They had patient energy. Something remarkable was growing and developing. They knew who they were, why they were here, and where they were going. They had three key things: a prevailing identity (“in Christ”), a community to share life with (the church), and a purpose to life (the redemptive message of Christ). Furthermore, it could even be said about their martyrs *“And they all lived happily ever after.”*

WEEK 7: APPLICATION AND OPTIONAL SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

(adapted from “The Magnificent Story” study guide)

Jim opens the chapter by describing how his dog, Winston, lives with trust, loyalty, freedom, playfulness, and presumption. How are these indicators of living in the magnificent story?

Jim writes, *“The shrunken, fear-based, works-based stories have had their day. They have proven too weak to transform the human heart and, in turn, transform the world.”* Has your experience of Christianity lacked a narrative larger than yourself? How has this affected your faith journey?

How do you respond to Jim’s statement that the church “knows stuff”? What kind of stuff does the church know? How much of the stuff we know helps others?

Read John 14:1-7 aloud. Spend time discussing knowledge, particularly the fact that it is not only mental but also experiential and physical. How do you respond to Jesus’ statement: *“If you know me, you will know my Father also”*?

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Belief is acting on what we know. Jim writes, *“Like Winston, I am learning to be presumptuous. I assume God loves me, cares for me, and protects me. I am living with God in the strong and unshakeable kingdom. I know stuff. And I believe stuff. Faith is an extension of knowledge; it is based on knowledge. We do not take leaps of faith; we take leaps with faith.”*

The magnificent story works. It is real. It is true, and good, and beautiful. When Jesus met people, He offered them a chance to replace their shrunken stories for a magnificent one. His grace was magnanimous. Meeting Jesus was life changing. However, there was a condition: they always had to respond. Meeting Jesus is still life changing. How are you responding to the invitation of Jesus and His magnificent story on your life?

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Monday, October 18, 2021

Acts 2:42-47

THE MAGNIFICENT STORY

Wednesday, October 20, 2021

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

YOUR FUTURE STORY

Asbury is pleased to welcome Dr. Ben Witherington III on Sunday. Dr. Witherington taught a class at our Asbury Theological Seminary satellite campus this week. One of his books, “Encounters with Jesus,” is a creative narrative of people who met Jesus (similar to “The Chosen” TV series). It goes behind the plain account of the Gospels and tries to imagine what factors precipitated the crisis of those who met Jesus.

Ben will preach from Paul’s marvelous text of encouragement to Christians who were suffering persecution. While suffering is part of the faith, Paul reminded the Corinthians of the goodness of God through Jesus. Paul uses startling images: “light out of darkness,” “treasure in jars of clay,” “surpassing power,” and “afflicted.” At the heart of this passage is the vital importance of the resurrection of Jesus. The Resurrection changes everything—including us and our future.

Paul warned Timothy that following Jesus was costly: “... *indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*” (2 Timothy 3:12) He repeatedly emphasized this. However, death (by any means) is not the end of the story. Those who trust in Jesus, the resurrected Lord, also share in His resurrection. Of all the reasons that Asbury’s mission is Helping Others Follow Jesus, this one is vitally important. As is said, “*Begin with the end in mind.*” No matter what else happens in life, our story ends with victory in Jesus.

APPLICATION: What is your “elevator speech” for Helping Others Follow Jesus? How might the magnificent story (over and against shrunken narratives) make you rethink the way you share your story? What would you say in one minute about why you are in a relationship with Jesus and why you want others to know Him, too? Practice it. Be prepared to witness for Christ. Hint: The Bible begins in Genesis 1 with God’s goodness, and not in Genesis 3 with our sin. Always witness to God’s goodness first, not to human nature. While our sin is part of the story, we always begin and end with good news. When we are in Christ, we are known, and we are loved. We have a forgiven past, a constant presence, and a glorious future.

YOUR FUTURE STORY

Thursday, October 28, 2021

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Jesus the Contrarian

October 31 - November 21, 2021

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

“Contrarian” isn’t a word we often associate with Jesus, but as I thought about these stewardship parables, that term came to mind. He was, and is, counter intuitive. He took a road less traveled. His teachings can seem nonsensical: *Blessed are the poor in spirit? Pray for those who persecute you? Love your neighbors and your enemies* (maybe they are the same people)? Jesus said He came “*not to be served, but to serve,*” “*I have not come to bring peace but a sword,*” and “*the first shall be last.*”

Furthermore, it isn’t just what Jesus taught—it is how He lived. The Apostles’ Creed says, “*Born of the virgin Mary.*” He was born in a stable in a tiny backwater town in a third-rate nation. He should have grown up like Moses in the grand palace in the greatest city of the world with all the power and trappings that normally accompany a king. Jesus said, “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.*” The Savior of the world was homeless. He loved children, women, and tax collectors. The lost, lonely, and unlovely sinners were worthy of His attention. A potential disciple, Nathanael, scornfully wisecracked, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” It seems He should have shopped around before choosing this motley crew of disciples. The only one with a good resume turned out to be a traitor. Jesus offended the wrong people, so Pontius Pilate crucified Him between two thieves. Mocked by soldiers, derided by those passing by, He prayed, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” It is no surprise people have always hated Jesus—everything about Him is contrary to the natural way we want to organize life.

A contrarian doesn’t have to be grumpy but will see things in a different way. The Gospels present Jesus as a contrarian. He loved the unpopular and the ugly. His style was unconventional. He turned things upside down (including the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple). Jesus was contrary with the cultural, religious, and political leaders of His day. The kingdom He preached was countercultural. He dealt with money in a contrary way, too.

Over the next three weeks, we will look at what Jesus had to say about priorities, faith, God, and money. Initially, I was going to call this series, “Jesus the Generous,” as He IS that. However, after further review, this seems to be a good approach, too. His words were shocking to the original audience. Unfortunately, we have heard them so often, they have become more like clichés. I am eager to learn more about my faith. I also want to translate what I have learned into action. As James 2:26 says, “*Faith apart from works is dead.*”

THE VINEYARD WORKERS

This is a crazy story! Who would pay someone a full day's wage for a one-hour shift? Why didn't the owner pay more to the people who did more work? Imagine living with the anxiety of not knowing if you could feed your family for the day. The laborers who got the job early knew they would receive a day's wage, but their gratitude turned to greed when the johnny-come-latelies arrived. Yet, the punch line in this story is, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

This story is about grace. Grace is the hardest concept for the self-righteous to swallow. We prefer earning God's favor by our virtue while refusing it to those beneath us. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a crazy story, too. The father should have punished his wayward boy. It is easy to side with the older brother and think the dad is clueless. However, the father sees things in a different way: "And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Jesus is a contrarian. He is also generous. His generosity goes to those who need it. The longer I have been a Christian, the more I tend to be like a self-righteous Pharisee. After all, I am WORKING long hours in God's vineyard. How dare those slackers show up at the last moment and get the same wages. Contrary to human wisdom, Jesus is generous with grace. I do not deserve His grace, either. Furthermore, God is in control. Not me. The great reversal comes in verse 16: "So the last will be first, and the first last." Jesus will receive us no matter when—just as He told one of the criminals crucified with Him. However, those who wait until the last moment must live with anxiety and fear until then.

APPLICATION: After looking at Jesus' contrarian parable of the vineyard workers; this week's readings focus on God's grace. Three questions:

1. How would you explain "grace"? This is conceptual.
2. How have you experienced grace? This is personal.
3. How have you expressed grace? This is practical. Respond to 2 Corinthians 9:6-15.

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

Saturday, November 6, 2021

James 1:14-18

THE SHREWD MANAGER

This is a troubling parable. Why would Jesus tell such a story? Is He rewarding dishonesty? This manager seems incompetent at best and at worst, a crook. (What does “*wasting his possessions,*” mean?) When he learns he will be fired, he thinks he is too weak for manual labor and too proud to beg. It is commendable that he thinks ahead. He comes up with a plan to curry favor after he is terminated. When the master discovers the manager’s deceptive practice, he does not condemn, but commends. Is Jesus saying the end justify the means?

Part of our difficulty in reading Scripture is trying to understand the context, such as a culture with practices far different from our own. Two possible explanations of this story are:

First, it could be about the OWNER’S dishonesty. Charging interest (“usuary”) was forbidden under Jewish law. However, as with Sabbath laws, it could be cleverly bypassed. If the manager’s actions revealed the master’s usuary, the master would be put to shame. The only thing he could do to save face was to applaud the manager.

Second, it could be that since the manager earned his living by inflating the bill with a commission, he could have simply eliminated his commission. He and the owner would both look generous.

Jesus’ point in the parable is about having a good plan for the use of money. Tithing (one-tenth of one’s income) is the Old Testament model. It started with Abraham’s recognition of “the priest of God,” Melchizedek. At the end of the Old Testament, Malachi asks those who are not tithing, “*Will man rob God?*” The New Testament emphasizes giving generously (2 Corinthians 9:7). A tithe is a great example, but the grace of Jesus far surpasses the Law. We want to follow HIS example.

APPLICATION: Most of us struggle with finances. How foolish/wise are you about money? How stingy/generous are you with the Lord and with others? A good practice is the 10/10/80 plan: 10% goes to the Lord, 10% goes to long term savings (i.e., “I.R.A.”) and 80% to live on. “Automation is our friend.” Using bill pay, even for giving, saves time.

Next Sunday is our “Commitment Sunday. It seems contrary to give to God first and trust in His provision for the rest, but if we seek God’s kingdom first, these other things will be given to us, too (Matthew 6:33). Begin asking the Lord how He would direct you to steward your money.

Sermon Notes:

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

Tuesday, November 9, 2021

Deuteronomy 23:19-20

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

Thursday, November 11, 2021

Malachi 3:6-12

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

Saturday, November 13, 2021

1 Timothy 6:17-19

THE WIDOW & THE SCRIBES

Jesus was certainly a contrarian with the Pharisees. He condemned their pride and outrageous hypocrisy. He warned people about them and how they “devour widows’ houses.” In contrast, Jesus commended an elderly widow. Being an elderly widow was almost a proverbial statement describing poverty. She would have been living on the thinnest of margins. Two copper coins was a meager gift. This story illustrates how important every gift is in the kingdom. That is a contrary teaching. A child’s small gift or that of a poor person is important because THEY are important. A gift represents someone’s life and affection. Some can give generously (like Barnabas), but we want all to know the joy of giving. We strive for equal sacrifice, not equal gifts, because of the way money shapes the heart. As King David said, “*I will not give that which costs me nothing.*” Paul described the Macedonians, who were extremely poor, as a great example of generosity. He also commended the Philippians.

APPLICATION: A question is often asked, “How much should I give?” John Wesley said: “*Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.*” Today is our opportunity to make financial commitments to the Lord through Asbury in 2022. These pledges are not legally binding but show our intention to do the best we can because we love the Lord, and we love His church. We give in gratitude for the gift of grace which He has given so lavishly to us. This is a great opportunity for parents to have a family conversation about stewardship and finances. If you have never given, especially in a methodical way, consider this your invitation to find a new and better—perhaps even contrary—habit.

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

Sunday, November 14, 2021

Luke 20:45-21:4

Sermon Notes:

THE WIDOW & THE SCRIBES

Monday, November 15, 2021

2 Samuel 24:18-25

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

Thursday, November 18, 2021

2 Corinthians 8:8-15

JESUS THE CONTRARIAN

Saturday, November 20, 2021

James 1:26-27

CHRIST, THE SECOND ADAM

We are delighted to welcome Dr. Tim Tennent, the President of Asbury Theological Seminary, as our speaker this morning.

As we have spent time this fall describing “shrunk stories” because of the sin of the first Adam in the Garden, we also have the delight of sharing again about the magnificent story of Jesus. Paul describes the difference between the two types: the first Adam sinned and brought separation between Adam and Eve, creation, God, and even within Adam. However, the second Adam, Jesus, came to redeem and restore. The first Adam brought sin, curse, and death. The second Adam brought forgiveness, blessing, healing, life, and eternal life. The second Adam also poured out the Holy Spirit on another gift—the church. The first Adam spiraled into a downward trajectory of pride, fear, anger, blame, and guilt. The second Adam raised us to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As N.T. Wright said, *“Jesus is the resolution to a story in search of completion.”*

APPLICATION: How is Jesus as the second Adam good, beautiful, and true? Why would anyone not want to welcome the presence of Jesus into his or her life? Look again at all the benefits of Jesus being in our lives (listed above). After we receive Jesus as Lord, we are on mission to help others follow Him, too. The wonderful season of Advent begins next Sunday. This season paints a picture of the magnificent story. Who could you invite to Asbury (or to join online) during Advent? Be generous with your time and attention this Advent season.

Sunday, November 21, 2021

Romans 5:12-25

Sermon Notes:

Monday, November 22 begins the Advent Journal.
We will resume the normal format at that time.

*And they all lived
happily ever after!*

