

Our Story Faith Study

Session 2: Telling Our Story



Opening Questions (select 1 or 2 questions)

- Tell us about something that was a big leap or a new adventure for you at that time in your life.
- What inspiring story have you heard or read? What was inspiring about it? What impact did it have on you?
- Who has been a cheerleader or encourager for you? Who is someone you'd like to encourage?

Opening Prayer

Dear God, thank you for this day and for the opportunity to gather with one another to contemplate the power of story. Open our hearts to see your love and your presence, as we listen to the stories of others and remember our own stories. Thank you for the people in our lives who have been encouraging, inspirational and loving. Help us to bless others in the same way. We pray that we will be energized by our discussion today. Amen.

What Does the Bible Say?

Jewish leaders want to put Paul to death for preaching the resurrection of Jesus. Paul is a Roman citizen so he has the right to plead his case before the Emperor. However, before he can go to Rome, Paul must defend himself before King Agrippa in Caesarea Maritima. When he comes before Agrippa, the Apostle Paul tells the miraculous story of his conversion from a persecutor of Christians to a witness for Christ one final time.

Acts 26: 1, 9-18 (NRSV)

...Then Paul stretched out his hand and began to defend himself...

“Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

“With this in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.’ I

asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Think About... *(optional, depending on time)*

- What do you notice in this text today?
- How did Paul react to the vision? What are some of the other possible ways he could have responded?
- What do we discover about Paul from this story? What personality traits did he use before and after his conversion?

What Do Others Say?

Throughout this small group series, we are talking about our story. We all have our own stories, our own faith journeys. There are a lot of ways to tell our stories. We can tell our story through the ups and downs in our lives or by the people that we meet. For me, there are a number of women that pop up throughout my life and my faith story.

I have a group of women that have shown me the way. I would not be where I am without them. Representation matters. Growing up, I didn't see women in the pulpit. I didn't see that until I went away to college. Thanks to Pastor Emily in Grand Rapids, Pastor Ruth in Colorado Springs, and Pastor Jeanne, and Pastor Janet here at Incarnation, I've had a chance to see women serve as pastors. Not only was I able to see them as a pastor, but as friends and as people who encouraged my faith journey through their stories. Because of them, I was able to see myself as a leader in the church. Because of them, I am working towards my Masters of Divinity at Luther Seminary. And, for that, I am blessed.

Donna is my godmother. She has played a significant part in my faith story. My godparents, Donna and Ron, along with their 3 boys were a regular part of my childhood. I was their "daughter." Donna is the only person who actually calls me by my given name, Jennifer.

Donna is the biggest Jesus cheerleader that I know. She sends out Easter cards, along with Christmas cards, because she doesn't want people to forget the "reason for the season." Whenever I need cheering up, Donna is the one I talk to. She reminds me how much I am loved by her and by God. And there is always a "Praise the Lord" for something good that I have done. One would not think that she is a cradle-Lutheran.

When I turned 10, Donna gave me my first “real” cookbook and a “gift certificate” for bread baking lessons with her. I still have that cookbook and her recipe cards. It was the best bread I have ever made. I still invite her over to help with my Christmas cookie baking and we both love every minute of it.

Donna has a caring heart and wonderful listening ear. She was God-sent for my family during my mom’s last months. My godfather, her husband Ron, died suddenly of a heart attack the summer before my mom died. Donna was a comfort to Mom and Dad as they went through a similar experience. She was there to clean their house, drive me to appointments for my own medical issues, cook, do whatever was needed. Donna was at my mom’s bedside during her last days praying for and comforting us all.

After my mom died, Donna asked my dad if it would be OK to give a donation to Incarnation and my first upcoming Tanzania mission trip instead of my parents’ church. She knew how important it was to my mom for me to go and so she honored my mom while she encouraged my faith journey too.

While I was weighing the decision to attend Luther Seminary, I knew that Donna would be one of my biggest supporters. As I explained my plans, the tears ran down her face and the “Praise the Lord!” came out in abundance...along with a few “Oh, how proud your mom would be.” As much as I knew my dad and other family members and friends would support me, I knew this would have special meaning to her and her response held a special meaning for me as well.

As I was starting to think about applying to work overseas in a Lutheran church in Slovakia, I asked Donna for her opinion on it. “Is this crazy?” I asked. “Crazy, no, it’s that Holy Spirit working in you and you better listen to it. It won’t let you down.” Donna had no doubt that God knew what was the best for me. I may be a doubter at times, but she is not. When I found out that I got the job, again, “Praise the Lord!” and “Oh, Jennifer, I love you so much and miss you already!”

The first time I was able to FaceTime with her from Slovakia was wonderful. She was so excited for me, so happy for me. I got multiple letters and cards from her while I was in Slovakia, just as I had received in college, reminding me that she loves me and God loves me.

When I think of my faith story and Donna.... first off, it just puts a smile on my face. It’s not so much specific events. It’s the example of being a true and faithful servant. It’s the overall encouragement, support and unconditional love that I received and continue to receive from her. She took her pledge at the baptismal font to heart. I have always known that God has loved me because of her.

-Reflection by Jennie Norberg (Seminary Intern)

Think About (select one or more questions)

- What parts of Jennie's story remind you of something in your own life story or faith journey, if any?
- Who is someone who has had an impact on your life story or faith journey? Who has helped shape and nurture your faith?
- What significant events have affected your story? How has your story been shaped by everyday experiences?
- If you were telling your story, what part of your story would you focus on?
- Does your story have multiple chapters or storylines? What are the themes?
- What have you discovered along the way in your life or faith?
- Some people share in our losses and our joys. Who has been there for you? What did you appreciate about their presence?
- What makes your story *unique*... What makes it *YOUR* story?
- How do you feel about telling your own story? Eager, shy, cautious, reflective...?
- What holds us back from telling our story? What are the benefits?

Discovering Your Story –

(optional)

Your small group may want to spend a few minutes in silence writing or doodling about one or more questions:

- Where did your faith story start?
- Who told you about Jesus? Who has been a faith-encourager?
- What other things shaped your faith (summer camp, music, readings, friends...)
- What life experiences have been important?
- What would you want to tell someone about faith?

Connecting Faith with Daily Life

(for individual reflection & action)

- Write a portion of your faith story. You might discover more about your story or create something you add to over time. Starter questions and writing prompts are under "additional resources" at www.incarnationmn.org/our-story/.
- Think about a part of your story that you'd like to tell a family member. Find a way to share it. For example, what does your family know about your baptism? If helpful, start by telling them you are in a small group on "telling our story".
- Ask someone else to tell you something from their story.
- If someone has walked with you through a difficult time, write or call them to thank them or tell them what they've meant to you.
- At the end of each day, write something that you'd like to remember from that day... a person you met, something funny, something that spoke to your soul...
- Write a gratitude list or start a practice of writing three things you are grateful for each day. How is gratitude part of your faith journey?

- Check out *StoryWorth* - a way for family members to record perspectives and stories and share them with one another. Note: this is a subscription service with a fee. <https://welcome.storyworth.com/>

Prayer

Read this blessing responsively, as a blessing you offer to one another. Select which group members will be part A and which group members will be part B.

Or, use the illumination and guided questions (see box below).

A: The LORD bless you and keep you;

B: *the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;*

A: the LORD lift up his countenance upon you,

B: *and give you peace. Amen*

-Numbers 6:24-26 (NRSV)

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The Lord Bless You

(optional—for any session)

The blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 has also been used in Sunday worship with an illumination (artwork) from *The Saint John's Bible*. If time allows, view the illumination and use the guided questions. Both are available under "additional resources" at:

www.incarnationmn.org/our-story/