

I want to tell you a story this morning—a story about a journey towards Jesus. The story you’re about to hear is pure fiction; it didn’t happen to a particular person, at a particular time, in a particular place. The story will require your imagination, but I suspect it won’t be long before the story will feel familiar, real, and true. I pray you will have ears to hear.

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I woke up this morning, just as tired as when I went to bed last night. “*It can’t be morning already,*” I tell myself, but the sun is pouring in through the window, removing all doubt. It’s time to get up. It’s time to get dressed. I yawn, I stretch, and I wonder, “*what will today hold?*”

I grab a quick bite to eat and then I’m out the door, and off to work. What is my line of work? I guess you could say that I’m in the import-export business: I buy things that people want and then sell my goods for a profit. I’ve been fortunate—my goods are always in demand, my prices are competitive, and I have a way with people—I treat them fairly and they keep coming back. People would call me wealthy, lucky, blessed by the gods, and I suppose I am, so why does my life feel empty?

I live in the city of Corinth, and I am a citizen of Rome—the greatest Empire in the world. Every so often I hear about an army rising up against Rome, but such rebellion is always crushed with ruthless efficiency. My mom used to always say, “never bite the hand that feeds you”...come to think of it, these words have been a guiding

principle in my life. I’ve always tried to keep my head down and blend in, and in a city of 400,000, it’s not been too difficult.

I pay my taxes, I fulfill my duties as a Roman citizen, and I sacrifice to the gods—to as many of them as I can—but I never quite know if I’ve done enough. Just thinking about it makes me nervous. I’ve even been praying to Caesar—everyone says he’s a god—I don’t know if he is or isn’t, but just in case I’ve been joining in. But now I’m not so sure.

Last night, my friend asked if I would bring him to hear a new philosopher in town; I appreciate a good orator as much as the next person and so I agreed to take him. But I almost walked out in the first 10 minutes. This new guy clearly wasn’t from around here. He was short, bald, and bandy-legged. He was badly dressed, had a squeaky voice, and he stunk—someone told me after that he tans hides to pay the bills; I thought something smelled rotten.

This philosopher went by the name of Paul, and he was saying things that I had never heard before. He spent most of his time talking about an “Unknown God”; he said that this God made the world and everything in it—that He was Lord of Heaven and Earth.<sup>1</sup> He said that this One God had determined the exact time and place where every person would be born, live, and die—and if I’m honest, that got my attention. I began to wonder, “*Is there is meaning and purpose to life...is my life is a part of a much bigger story that’s going on?*”

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 17:24-28

Paul also said that God is not far from any one of us, but I dismissed that as soon as I heard it. For starters, everyone knows that the gods live far away in the heavens; they don't live among men. And second, I'm not sure I'd want the gods walking among us—everyone knows they are angry and vindictive; it's best to keep a safe distance. But still...I can't shake some of the things that Paul said...maybe my friend and I will go back to hear him again this afternoon—if we've got nothing better to do.

So yesterday afternoon we went to hear Paul again, my friend and I. Same guy, same bandy legs, same squeaky voice, but he spoke with such authority, and then, the things that we saw...but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Paul talked all night about Jesus of Nazareth—I had never heard this name before. He began by telling us that God loves the world and everyone in it—that alone was enough to take my breath away. A God who loves? Ever since I was young, I've been afraid of the gods—we serve them out of fear, to avoid being punished, cursed, not out of love.

Paul said that Jesus was both God and man, both Lord and Saviour. That line got everyone's attention—Lord and Saviour—around here, only Caesar is talked about in the way. Applying those words to someone else...that's the kind of talk that will get a person executed.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:4-5.

Over and over again, Paul told us that Jesus had died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He had been buried, and that on the third day He had been raised from the dead.<sup>2</sup> Paul kept talking about this “good news”: Jesus is Lord and Saviour, death has been defeated, sin has been atoned for, and God is now inviting people to join His family. Paul's words were dizzying; I had never heard, or hoped for, such things. Could it be true?

After Paul had finished speaking, he asked if there were any sick among us, and before the words had left his tongue, my friend stood and shouted, “*I am blind; I cannot see!*” He grabbed for my hand, pulling me to my feet—he dragged me through the crowd. My childhood friend, my business partner, had blind from birth—cursed by the gods the priests told him—were these priests wrong? Could Paul and his God, Jesus of Nazareth, do something for my friend?

When we came to Paul, he was smiling—that's what I remember about his appearance, not the squeaky voice or the smell, but the smile. I told Paul that I didn't have any money with me to give, and certainly no animal to sacrifice to his God—Paul assured us that such things were not required.

He stretched one hand to heaven, placed one hand on my friend's eyes, he smiled, and then he prayed. His words were simple, he prayed in Jesus name, asking for sight to be restored. When he removed his hand, and my friend opened his eyes—I knew, I could see that Paul's prayer had been heard.<sup>3</sup> My friend threw his arms

around me and started pounding me on the back, and for a brief moment I thought to myself, “30 years of blindness and the first thing he sees is my ugly mug?”

Our celebration was quickly interrupted. Someone from the crowd yelled, “*A god has come down to us in human form!*”, and everyone began to prostrate themselves before Paul. You could see how distressed Paul was by these words—he began pulling people to their feet saying, “*I’m only human, like you. I am bringing you good news concerning Jesus—He is Lord and Saviour and you have been witnesses of His power today.*”<sup>4</sup> With these words, and many others, the crowd began to calm; others began to stream forward, asking Paul to pray for them in the name of Jesus.

We walked home in the early evening, my friend and I, arm in arm as we had done since childhood, but for the first time he saw the sunset. We took the long way home on purpose, we walked for hours, and on the way I taught him his colours. When we got to his house, he paused at the door, looked me in the eyes and said, “*I believe; I will pledge my life to this Jesus of Nazareth. I will never worship another.*” As he walked through his door, I whispered—too quiet for anyone to hear, “*I believe too.*”

The next night, my friend picked me up, and we went back to see Paul—my friend had become an over night celebrity. Just like the previous nights, Paul began to teach and reason with the crowd concerning Jesus: “*Jesus is Lord and Saviour, death has been*

*defeated, sin has been atoned for, and God is now inviting you to join His family. Every one who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved.*”<sup>5</sup> *Believe. Repent. Receive the Holy Spirit. And be baptized.*”

The last one rattled me—be baptized. The first three (believe, repent, receive) sounded like individual activities—private transactions between me and my new God—but not baptism. As Paul described it, I realized I had seen this ritual before, down by the bay where my trading ships come into port. I was never close enough to hear what was being said, but I saw people being immersed in the ocean and a crowd gathered round on the beach.

And the thought hit me, “*If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar isn’t. And some time, some where, I will need to take a stand—I can’t follow Jesus and blend into the crowd.*” Paul’s next words woke me from my thoughts, “*Who will stand and be counted with Jesus?*” I’m not sure who stood first, me or my friend, all I know is that we were both on our feet and on our way to the bay to be counted among those who follow Jesus.

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I love stories—I love reading them, hearing them, and even writing them. I’ve told you this fictitious story, with some Scripture woven in, so that one more time you might hear God’s invitation. *Jesus is both Lord and Saviour, death has been defeated, sin has been atoned for, and God is now inviting people to join His family. Every one who*

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 14:11, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 10:13.

*calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved. Believe. Repent. Receive the Holy Spirit. And be baptized.*

In many churches, when a person is invited to become a Christian, only the first two are emphasized. **Believe:** put your faith in Jesus, in His sacrifice on the cross for your sake—His death secures your pardon. **Repent:** turn away from your sin, and turn to Jesus—follow where He leads.

But the next two are equally important. **Receive:** the one who confesses Jesus as Lord, receives the gift of the Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit is God’s Empowering Presence; He comes to indwell you, to strengthen you, to remind you that God loves you. Romans 8:9 tells us that the one who belongs to Jesus has been indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

And then, **Be Baptized.** As we read through the book of Acts, we get a sense of just how closely belief and baptism were tied together. Over and over again, a person would believe (or repent), be filled with the Spirit, and immediately be baptized—Acts 2:38; 8:35-38; 9:18; 10:47; 16:13-15; and 16:29-34 are just a few.

Baptism is an act of public commitment in a “keep your options open world”. Baptism answers the question: *who are you living for?*

Baptism answers the question: *who do you belong to?*

Now you may be wondering, *if I already believe, why is this physical ritual important?* I suspect it has a lot to do with the fact we are, in part, physical creatures—because we are embodied souls, flesh and blood, gristle and bone, we need something concrete. When I became

a member of MEC, they gave me something concrete—I received a membership card that I carry around with me. When I graduated from Regent College, I received a diploma. When you join a sports team you wear the team jersey. When most people get married they wear a wedding ring.

Baptism is a physical act of commitment, devotion, and allegiance. Baptism makes public, a profession that may have been private: “*I believe in Jesus Christ, He is both Lord and Saviour—I will never worship another.*”

While baptism answers the question, “*who am I living for?*”, it also answers the question, “*who is for me?*” At Jesus’ baptism, the Father spoke over Him the blessing of identity (*You are my Son*), the blessing of affection (*whom I love*), and the blessing of affirmation (*with him I am well pleased*). We enter into this same blessing when we are baptized.

In Matthew 28:19, we are told to baptize disciples “*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” When we baptize someone in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we are making an incredible statement—we are saying that our life is bound up with God’s life. One author puts it like this, we have been “immersed into, plunged into, the three-fold-ness of God...to participate in the inner life of the Trinity.”<sup>6</sup>

The question is, *are you ready to stand and be counted with Jesus? Is it time for you to be baptized?*

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<sup>6</sup> Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing The Trinity*, 75.

We are planning our next baptism service for the afternoon of July 6th, at Ambleside, close to John Lawson park. If you would like to be baptized, please call or email the church office and ask to speak with one of our pastors.

Over the next 5 weeks, we are going to focus our teaching around some of the symbols, rituals, and practices that define our life in Christian community—baptism is one such ritual, so too is the Lord's Supper. As we teach about baptism, the Lord's Supper, Giving, Membership, and worship, our prayer is that God will draw this community together under the leadership of Christ.

### Worship

### Transition

We have 10 minutes before the conclusion of the service and I wanted to take this time to let you know about a staff transition that will be taking place near the end of July—Pastor Keith has accepted a call by Mission Creek Alliance Church (in Kelowna) to become their Lead Pastor and he will begin on August 1st.

Because of the sensitivities involved in job transitions, this news—while brand new, and abrupt—is the end result of a process that has been going on for a few months. Keith and Gina have had a small circle of people who have been journeying with them through prayer and dialogue, as they have been discerning what God has store for them and their kids.

In just a moment, Keith is going to come and share a few words with us, but before he does, there are a few things that I would like to say. This kind of news comes with an array of emotions that includes surprise, loss, and sorrow. Keith and Gina have been a part of our church for more than 10 years, and Keith has been on our staff team for 7. I know firsthand that it has been a painful decision for them to leave, painful not because of what awaits, but because of what they have right here.

In the book of Acts, chapter 20, there is a beautiful scene where the Apostle Paul sails into the port in Ephesus, and invites the church where he pastored to come and meet with him—God was calling Paul to Jerusalem, and this meant saying good-bye to people he loved.

We're told that the church gathered, and after Paul had said his goodbyes, "*he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.*"<sup>7</sup> Paul loved this church, and the church loved him. It's always painful to bless and release people we love, but, this has always been the way of the kingdom.

God picks up a woman, places a calling on her life and the next thing you know, she's planting churches in Cambodia. Or God picks up a couple, by way of a job transfer, they find themselves in Calgary, and God leads them to a church that needs their exact experiences, gifts, and personality. And sometimes God picks up a pastor and transplants them in another community—while we feel loss, they knowing the blessing of God. Mission Creek Alliance will be blessed to have Keith and Gina in their church.

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 20:36-37.

Keith, why don't you come and share a few thoughts with us.

**Pray for Keith and Gina**

**Benediction:** may you stand and be counted with Jesus. May His love encourage you, His strength embolden you, and His wisdom guide you. May you stand firm when your allegiance is tested; may His praise ever be on your lips, and in your actions.