



THE STORY



Date: September 16-17, 2017
Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: The Story – Chapter 2

If you were a child raised in the 1980's or 1990's perhaps you are familiar with these books. Choose your own adventures. Anyone here read these books as a kid? Parents or teachers, do you remember reading them? Maybe you still do. Choose Your Own Adventure books were unique in that they were children's stories that were written from a second person point of view. The general story line is laid out but the reader has an active role by making choices that determine the main character's actions and the outcome of the plot. These books were a hit and the series sold over 250 million copies. The appeal was that they moved the reader from passive to active role in the story. They were participants.

I was in Indigo Bookstore this week and as I was scanning the shelves, I think these books have been rebranded as You Choose Books. I picked up one called, *Can You Survive An Asteroid Strike? An Interactive Domsday Adventure*.

This is how it describes the Adventure at the beginning of the book;

You are living through a worrisome time in the future of humanity. An enormous asteroid is on a collision course with Earth. As everyone scrambles for safety, can you keep your wits and do what it takes to survive? Start your adventure by turning the page, then make your choices as you go along.

Every decision you make will affect how your story unfolds. Do you have what it takes to survive the impending colossal impact. YOU CHOOSE the path you take through an Asteroid Strike.

Wow, to think when I was a kid all we had was The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew and the Bobbsey Twins. Google them if you want to know what shaped my young life!

If you are just joining with us today, you need to know that last weekend, we launched, as an entire church, a 31 week journey that will take us from the beginning of God's story right through to the end for now. It is the greatest story ever told. And our primary resource through this series is also a book, entitled, *The Story*. In the pages of this book are scripture. It is all scripture, with some passages omitted so it flows a little smoother chronologically. From Genesis, right through to Revelation. It's all here. It is the unfolding of what we can call God's upper story. But connected to his upper story is a lower story. That is the one we are all living out individually in our day to day lives.

God's Story involves us, humanity where we don't just play a passive role as a reader but we are actively invited to get in the game, to join with God in his mission and vision for the world. Is that exciting? It is like a choose your own adventure! The moves you make determine what plotline you write for yourselves. Have you ever thought about it that way?

What makes our journey extra special this season is that we are not just studying *The Story* in here. Almost every other ministry of the church, the children, the youth, the young adults, the small groups, bible studies will also be following along. So, wherever you go in the building, the buzz is *The Story*. And I heard it this week, a lot. Around this

place and in the neighbourhood. From the children to the senior's ministry, everyone is talking about *The Story*! And if you have not purchased a book yet, I encourage you to do that. It is a great investment for \$10. You can buy it at the Welcome Centre, where we also have resources for the children and youth as well.

Just a reminder that we will be preaching through a chapter a week. You can follow along with us by reading the chapter in advance at home. So hopefully many of you have read chapter 2 this week and are ready to engage *The Story* as I begin. And this may be obvious but I will mention it anyway. In the time we have together here, 30 minutes, I can't possibly touch on all the material in each chapter but will try and cover some of the main ideas. That's is why you need to read it during the week.

As a way of a visual, let me just remind you of what we talked about last week and where we are headed.

God's larger story is actually broken down into 5 smaller movements. In our 31 weeks together, we will look a little closer at each of these movements.

They are:

1. The story of the Garden
2. The story of Israel
3. The story of Jesus
4. The story of the Church
5. The story of the New Garden (back where we started)

Last week we began with **Movement 1**. The Story of the Garden and we looked at Creation, the Fall and the Flood. And we did discover that God's vision is to come and be with humanity in relationship in a beautiful garden of his creation. But there is a problem almost right from the beginning. The first two people, Adam and Eve, choose their own adventure and reject God's vision

and are banished from the garden. Their decision introduces sin, produced through this raging battle between good and evil into the human race which acts as a roadblock that keeps us from community with God.

But all hope is not lost. After the flood, God gives a promise to Noah in Genesis 9 and launches a plan to bring humanity back into relationship with him. That is what the rest of *The Story* is all about.

So with that little preamble, let's jump into the text. If you have your book, *The Story*, open it to chapter 2 or if you have your bibles, you can turn to the first book of the bible, Genesis as we transition to **Movement 2, The Story of Israel**. And it begins with God Building a Nation. And every nation has to start with someone, doesn't it?

I don't know about you but I have been transfixed by CNN's coverage of Hurricane Irma over the past few weeks. The devastation across parts of the Caribbean and Florida will in some cases, take years to fully recover. A lot of the focus of the news has been on one of the hardest hit areas, the Florida Keys. I have to admit that I knew little about this part of Florida until this tragedy. And I knew nothing about Conch Republic. Did you know that residents of the Florida Keys called themselves, Conch Republic?

The origins of this breakaway nation go back to April 1982 when the United States Border Patrol set up a roadblock just south of Miami. Crime was on the rise and they wanted to search those travelling back and forth from the Florida Keys for drugs and illegal immigrants. The result of this roadblock meant that traffic backed up for miles because along the Florida Keys, there is only one main highway. As a result, tourism, the Keys main source of income took a dive. No one wanted to spend hours in a traffic jam to get there. This created a very unique protest. One man, Dennis Wardlow declared the creation of "Conch Republic". A separation of the Florida Keys from the rest of the US. He installed himself as the Prime Minister and the

bizarre stunt gained momentum. Especially among the residents of the Keys who have always had a bit of a reputation for their eclectic nature. The US Border Patrol soon removed the check point but the idea of Conch Republic lives on today. Every year on April 23, they celebrate their Independence Day which launches a week-long celebration, which is a huge tourist attraction. Conch Republic. A nation was born and it started with one man, Dennis Wardlow.

In the bible, we have an example of another nation that starts with one person. But he doesn't choose himself, God chose him. Look at Genesis 12 in your bibles or page 13 in your book. After the flood and a little episode at Babel, God scatters all the people throughout the land and a genealogy follows each tribe right down to a man named Abram. We don't know much about the early days of Abram. His father was Terah. His wife was Sarai and they had no children. We just have the basics. But in Genesis 12, God makes Abram some audacious promises.

Genesis 12:1-3

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.² "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Wow! Those are some pretty incredible statements. Imagine God just appearing to you one day and saying that,

I am going to make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great and you will be a blessing to others. In fact, all people on the earth will be blessed through you. That would kind of shake up your morning won't it? Kind of awaken you from the same old humdrum routine. And for

some of us, many of us, we would respond, *who, me God? Are you talking to me God? Are you sure you've got the right guy/gal?! Understandably, there would be a lot of skepticism. Put yourself in Abram's sandals because there is one more thing we know about him that I forgot to mention, he was 75 years old at the time.*

Now no offense to you if you are 75 or older here today because you guys amaze me with the things you do and your activity level but, what God is calling Abram to is not for the faint of heart. Leave your homeland, your family (big, family was so important in these days) and friends. All that you know. All that you are comfortable with, leave that all behind and travel to a new land. God says to Abram, *I want you to start over. Have you ever had to do that? Start over? Out of necessity or choice? Or maybe God has called you to give up something to follow him. Almost 5 years ago, when we were each on the cusp of 50 years of age, Carolyn and I left our hometown of Kitchener Waterloo, left behind family and friends to follow God's call here to North Park Church. To start over in London.*

And to honest, it was not an easy decision or transition no matter how welcoming you were to us, (which you were very welcoming) because, that was home. Do you understand? Some of you do because you have lived it yourself. Given up or left something to follow God. Left your home, your family, all that was familiar. The good news for us though, is that KW is only an hour drive away. We easily visit anytime.

But God's call on Abram was to pick up and leave everything for another country, another culture, another way of life. And as I said, we don't know a lot about Abram and his history with God but one of the themes we are going to see throughout the Bible, is that God uses the most unlikely people to accomplish his purposes. That is definitely the case with Abram. Not only are he and his wife Sarai getting up there in age, but Sarai had never given birth. They are childless. How is God going to make them a great nation, when they are old and not even

sure they can get pregnant? And Abram's father Terah was an idol maker so we are not certain the history and relationship Abram has with God. Surely there's someone more qualified God could have chosen. At least someone younger because again, no offense to any 75-year olds, but I would be concerned Abram could even survive the rugged trip, let alone populate a new nation.

But let me restate one of the main points that I want you to grasp today if you didn't know this already. In his story, the upper story, God always seems to use the most unexpected person or situation to do some of his most amazing work. The person or the place that we would never choose, God does. Isn't that amazing? We will see that repeated over and over in the next several weeks.

That is why we need to be prepared for unexpected in *The Story*. And some of you sit here today and know exactly what I am talking about because somewhere or sometime in your life, God chose you to do something that you never expected. Something you didn't even know you were capable of, and you have witnessed his provision each step of the way.

But sometimes we disqualify ourselves from God's plans and purposes because of our own insecurity. We just don't think we are good enough, or pure enough or holy enough to be used by God. Do you ever feel like that? How could God ever use me? Or maybe you wonder how God could ever love or accept you because of some of the things you have done in your life. That deep sense of self-doubt and insecurity can be paralyzing and stall your relationship with God ever moving to the rich and vibrant life he has for us.

And I know this one first hand. I am almost ashamed to admit that when I first felt the call on my life to leave my position as a school teacher and enter into full time vocational ministry. It was a very clear message from God, there is no other way to explain all that happened in my life around that time. But, I responded, *No*. I said *no* to God. And

here is why? I didn't feel I was good enough. To be a pastor. Are you kidding? I wasn't holy enough, I wasn't pure enough.

In my mind, there were some stains on my life from the past that I wasn't sure that even the blood of Christ could cover and I said *no*, when God asked. Pastors have to be next to perfect. Don't they? Well, than I met Matt, and I began to realize God can use anyone. But here is the thing. Even though I have learned to trust God a lot in this area over the years, I am here, aren't I?! There are still times, this insecurity, this internal battle, sin can rear its ugly head in my life.

This past summer, as most of you know, Carolyn was in an air cast with a broken ankle and torn ligaments. Second summer in a row for her. As you also know, we have two rather large dogs that need regular exercise and daily walks. For about six weeks that responsibility fell exclusively to me. I think it would be safe to say that they are Carolyn's dogs. It is not that I dislike them, well sometimes I do, but I just can take them or leave them, mostly leave them. But, with Carolyn down, I knew that I had to pick up my game and walk these dogs.

The bizarre thing is that for all of my apathy towards these dogs, the one, Yebo, really likes me and the frustrating part is that she is actually pretty stupid. You say *sit, lie down, fetch*. She just looks at you. I call her to come, she just turns her head, *Huh?* She has destroyed walls, baseboards, chairs and carpeting in our home because apparently she has anxiety when she hears loud noises like thunder, fireworks and as we found out this week, the beeping of the fire alarm that needs a battery changed. It causes her to destroy my house. *Put her in a cage Paul*, I did. She destroyed that too! She is a constant thorn in my flesh but, and I will only say this once publicly, there is something about her that is loveable.

I faithfully walked this dog most days while Carolyn was laid up and Yebo had this routine. We would walk around the block and once on the next

street would do her “business”, like clockwork. I would dutifully be ready with bag in hand to stoop and scoop. Until one day. We made our way around the block but before we reached her grassy dumping ground, she started posturing too soon, right there in the middle of the street. I sprang into action, *No, not there* and I pulled her along to reach her proper destination. And that is when I heard it. The Voice. *Hey buddy*, I looked around and saw no one. I stammered, *what? Speak Lord, your servant is listening*. The voice replied, *your dog messed on the road. Pick it up*. I hadn’t realized that in my efforts to pull my dog from front to get on to the grass. Something had slipped out the back. *Sorry*, I replied in the direction of the disembodied voice which I now had detected was coming from an upstairs window of a house across the street. I did the walk of shame back to the scene of the crime, retrieved the evidence and continued on my way.

But here’s the thing, for the remainder of that walk, this wave of insecurity came over me. I always pick up my dog’s mess. That guy is going to think I am a bad dog owner. And horrors of horrors, what if he finds out I am a pastor. What would he think of that? It was that old spiral of insecurity. Not good enough, not measuring up. Does that ever happen to you?

It happens to most of us and again, it is the remnants of what happened in the Garden of Eden that we talked about last week. When Adam and Eve sinned and ate from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, the first thing they felt was shame which resulted in vulnerability and insecurity, so they covered up. They went into a defensive mode and because of sin, humanity has been in this posture ever since. That is why insecurity is so rampant in our culture and can drive a wedge in our relationship with others and with God. But all hope is not lost, God is at work redeeming and restoring his people back to him and it starts with Abram.

God chose Abram and Sarai, who were very old, and childless, whose parents and grandparents probably worshipped pagan gods. Why? Why did God choose unexpected Abram to build a nation? God may use the unexpected but it isn’t random, what does God see in Abram? The answer lies in the text. Look at the top of page 14 in *The Story* book or turn in your bibles to,

Hebrews 11:8

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

That’s it. It is faith. Abram, whose name God did change to Abraham had faith in God and obeyed him. See it doesn’t matter whether Abraham worried if he was good enough, God deemed him so. He saw something in him. Faith. And because of this faith and obedience, to pick up and leave everything and everyone and go to a foreign land, all of Abraham’s problems went away and he lived happy ever after. Right? Because that is the way it works doesn’t it? If only you have a little faith, all your problems will go away. How has that worked out for you?

Some of you here are dealing with health concerns or relationship strife or a financial set back and those around you say, just have a little more faith, a little more faith. Pray a little harder.

I am going to say something that may rock your world. More faith doesn’t mean all our problems will go away. God never promised us an easy life, remember the consequences of the garden, but when we turn to him, he did promise that we are not alone, he will be with us and sustain us through the tough times. And he is daily transforming our lives through the Holy Spirit.

For Abraham and Sarah (God change her name from Sarai to Sarah), things were difficult for them on the journey that God called them to.

They experienced famine where they settled and had to be on the move again. They experienced separation from some of the family that chose to travel with them and then went off on their own. But probably their hardest of all was when they experienced... nothing.

God promised them a child and almost twenty-five years later, they are still waiting. Nothing. And you do the math, Abraham is approaching 100 years of age. And for some couples in here today, this is a sensitive topic because you too find yourself waiting on God for a child. Dealing with issues of infertility. One, two, five years.

Have you ever had to wait? Last January, I shared with you that Carolyn and I received news that there had been an error in the amount of income taxes we had paid going back ten years and it probably meant that we would have some money coming to us. We filed all the paper work with the Canadian Revenue Agency, CRA and today, nine months later, we wait. Waiting is difficult isn't? A few hours, a few days, a few months, but years? Waiting almost 25 years. Someone can lose their faith waiting that long for God to answer their prayers, can't they?

Surely Abraham's faith was wavering in God's promise. Who could blame him? But look at bottom of page 15 in your book or turn to,

Romans 4:18-21

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Who is this guy?! Not only did he not waver in his faith, but it was actually strengthened. Holding on to the promises that were spoken to him by God.

Genesis 15:4 God says to Abraham,
but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

Abraham held onto this promise for years!

Now that does not mean that Abraham and Sarah did not have their moments, they were human after all and the family line was a little dysfunctional. We know from scripture at least two occasions in which Abraham lied regarding his relationship to Sarah in order to protect himself in potentially hostile lands. Insecurity. In the text we are told Sarah gets impatient about having a son so she pushes Abraham to sleep with her servant girl Hagar, a surrogate (which was not uncommon in this day).

Hagar gives birth to a son, Ishmael which causes a whole bunch of drama in the family until finally, finally God fulfills his promise. In his timing, at just the right time, Sarah gets pregnant and in Abraham's 100 year, a baby boy is born to them and they call him Isaac. God takes care of Hagar and Ishmael but he assures Abraham that it is through Isaac that his holy nation will be built. Now we are getting somewhere.

Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, God's plan revealed years earlier, after all the waiting and bumps in the road, can now finally move forward. Full steam ahead. That is until God appears to Abraham, again. Look at the middle of page 19 in your book or

Genesis 22:1

Sometime later God tested Abraham.

I mean hasn't he done that enough already!? Tested him. The last time this happened, Abraham ended up leaving everything to follow God on a 25-year odyssey into the unknown with lots of waiting and trusting. What could possibly top that, right? Have you ever been tested? We used to play this game when I was a teenager called "Chicken". Have you

heard of it? Me and a buddy would line up our bicycles facing each other at a distance and then we would ride towards each other as fast as we could go. It was a test. To see who would turn away first and avoid a crash. Hey, we were teenage boys. Have you ever notice, teenage boys kind of check their brains for a few years in there. Of course, we discovered that you both can turn away but if you both turn the same direction, you are still going to crash into each other anyway. *Duh!*

Have you ever been tested? By God? That is the language here, God tested Abraham. And it seemed like a rather surprising test given all that has happened to this point and all that God promised Abraham. Look as the text continues.

Genesis 22:1-2

Sometime later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

Abraham had obeyed God many times in his walk with Him over the years but no test could have been more severe than the one in Genesis 22. God commanded, *Take your son, your only son, Isaac. The one that you love more than life. The one that you have waited so long for. Go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering.*

This was an astounding command because Isaac was the son of promise. God promised. Several times he promised that from Abraham's own body, his offspring would come a nation as vast as the stars in heaven. And later, Abraham was specifically told that the promise would be through Isaac. What is going on here? How would Abraham respond? How would you respond? Just sit with that one for a moment. Put yourself in Abraham's place again. After all of it. Leave your family, your country, go to a foreign land, settle down. The waiting, for a child, the years go by and waiting and

waiting and finally a miracle. God provides two elderly parents a baby boy and now, take him up the mountain and sacrifice him. Is this some kind of a joke?

Won't you expect Abraham to finally look at God and say, *Enough is enough. I have done everything you have asked of me up to this point, God. But now, this is it. Now you gone too far.* Really, could you blame Abraham if he responded like that?

Twenty-six years ago, after seven years of infertility and pursuing adoption, a new born baby girl finally become available for Carolyn and I to adopt. Everything was in place, we brought her home from the hospital and began to raise her as our own. But, then we hit a glitch. Because it was a private adoption, our lawyer needed both Leah's birth father and birth mother to sign off. To simply agree to the adoption. But the birth father refused. Which raised the possibility of Leah having to go into foster care until the whole situation was settled, which could be months. By this time, she had already been with us for almost 2 years. We loved her deeply. We could not fathom, someone taking her away from us now.

So, we began to put into place plans for Carolyn to take her to some relatives in Europe and hide out for a while. We were desperate. No one was going to take our little girl away from us now. Thankfully, everything was worked out but there was a sense of desperation for us. Can you imagine Abraham?

How could a father sacrifice his own son whom he loves so much? Hmmm. Foreshadowing part of God's rescue plan. See Jesus is revealed all throughout scripture. That is another thing we will see in *The Story*.

Now the bible doesn't record everything and we don't know whether Abraham had it out with God that night but here is what we do know.

Genesis 22:3

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of

his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

He is going to do it! He is going to carry out this command of God. He could have gone his own way, chose his own adventure but he stays faithful to the way of the Lord. Why? Faith. He knows God has never failed him. God has kept his promises. God promised Abraham, a fallible human being, that he would bless him and make him a great nation and all the other nations of the world would be blessed through him. He promised that he would provide a son for him and this son would be his heir through which this nation would be built. And each step of the way, God had remained faithful to his promises. In fact, if you get a chance to read Genesis 15, it describes a powerful ceremony that God used to make a covenant with Abraham. To seal their relationship.

God kept his promises and Abraham remains faithful to him. He knew that if God was calling him to surrender his son, then he would provide. See, this was a test not so much about sacrifice as it was about obedience. Would Abraham trust God with everything, hold back nothing; believing that the Lord will provide.

And he did. Abraham held out everything to God, and the Lord provided. When they got to the top of the mountain, God provided a ram for the sacrifice instead of Isaac.

Genesis 22:16-18

"I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

And that is exactly what happened. God built a nation through Abraham's line. It was part of his rescue plan to bring his people back to him. Isaac grows up and gets married and had children that included Esau and Jacob. But some of the family dysfunction continues.

The thread of sin makes its way from Abraham to Isaac and his children. Jacob, the younger brother wants the family inheritance that rightfully belongs to Esau the older brother. So he devises a plan to steal it. He dresses up as Esau and deceives his elderly father, Isaac who was now blind and frail. Hey, you think your family has problems.

But remember, God always seems to use the unexpected. Jacob's plan succeeds which creates a bit of tension between him and Esau. But in time, God irons that out and we follow Jacob as he marries and begins a family of his own that includes 12 sons. The eleventh of which, perhaps you have heard of, Joseph. You know, of the coat of many colours fame? We will pick up his story next week in chapter 3.

What can we learn from the life of Abraham? In calling Abraham and Sarah to begin this new nation, God reveals a pattern. He often selects the most unlikely people who are not necessarily the smartest, the most attractive or the ones with the greatest resume to trust and obey him. It says in scripture, that people see the outward appearance but the Lord sees the heart.

God chooses ordinary people like you and me to be a part of his Story, no one is disqualified to be used greatly. But he does give us an option. Are we in or are we out? Will we choose our own adventure or step into the greatest story ever told? Do we have faith in the one who has saved us, the one who promises to never leave us or forsake us, or do we not? It is our choice. So what do you say? Do you have the faith of Abraham to say yes to God, yes to Jesus? To hold everything out to him. Hold nothing back, wherever he takes you and whatever he asks you to do? **Amen? Amen.**

Points to Ponder

THE STORY

God Builds a Nation ~ Chapter 2

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Abraham left his homeland and family to follow God. What did God say his reward would be?
2. What might God be asking you to give up to follow Him?
3. What made Abraham righteous in God's sight? How is this fact relevant to your life?
4. Why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac? What did Abraham and Isaac learn from this experience?
5. Because Jacob had shrewdly acquired Esau's birthright and stolen their father's blessings, Jacob feared his brother's revenge. How did Jacob prepare for his meeting with his Esau?
6. What attitude did Jacob have when he wrestled with the "man" who Jacob realized was actually God?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for those who may be experiencing God's specific call in their lives at this time. Pray for the faithfulness to follow wherever God calls no matter what needs to be surrendered to Him.