

Psalm 116: 1-2, 7, 12-14
What's Your Story?

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Psalm 116 is a song of public thanksgiving for a personal deliverance. Full of affection, the writer says “I love the LORD. I love the LORD because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.” He cried out and, in time, God answered. He found the LORD I AM to be the God who hears. God sees us in our desperate plight and responds with affection and rescue. He saves us. He gathers us to himself. He writes stories of mercy and grace in us.

This morning we’re celebrating more than 80 people who have been members of our church for fifty or more years. All of them will have testimonies of God’s deliverance of them at significant times of their lives. No life is easy, but those who’ve stood before you today will testify with the psalm that the LORD has dealt bountifully with them. They will tell you that knowing Jesus Christ is the greatest treasure we can possess in this world or the next. And so today, I want to tell you a bit of my story.

July 22 marked a significant anniversary for me. Fifty years ago, at summer camp, God brought me awake to Christ. He created faith in me. He joined me to himself. He regenerated me. He saved me. Nothing has been the same since. I spent some time reflecting on what was going on in the summer of 1972. In the world. In the church. In my life. I could not have been conscious of all the influences leading me to this conversion. But in hindsight, I see how the Holy Spirit was working to engage me at the level of mind, will, and affection. I’d like to tell you some of that story in a way I’ve not shared before. My hope is that it will spark connection to your own story of Christ’s saving work so that at the end we can say together, “I love the LORD, because he heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.”

1. Mind. In the summer of 1972, I stayed up late every night, listening to great songs on the radio, and reading. One particular book changed my life forever and prepared me to receive the Gospel. George Orwell’s *1984* tells the story of a totalitarian society called Oceania. One character, Winston Smith, fights to keep his mind free from the thought control of the ruling party.

One of the best ways I can communicate the power of Orwell's story is by showing you how a scene from the novel was created years later in an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Captain Jean Luc Picard has been captured. An alien torturer seeks to break his mind by turning on four lights and asking Picard to declare that there are five. Every time Picard answers with the truth, the alien wracks him with pain. Picard fights for his sanity and freedom to know the truth. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moX3z2RJAV8>.



In Orwell's book, Winston has been rounded up by the Party for re-education. O'Brien is his interrogator and torturer. As their sessions go on, O'Brien holds up four fingers and asks Winston how many there are. Winston replies with the obvious, "Four." Then O'Brien asks, "And if the party says it is not four, but five—then how many?" Winston answers "Four." And the pain begins. With every answer of the true number of fingers, the dial is turned up higher and Winston screams with pain. "How many fingers, Winston?" "Four! Four! What else can I say? Four!" Finally, when the pain overwhelms him, Winston relents, "Five! Five! Five!" O'Brien is not satisfied. "You are lying. You still *think* there are four."

"How can I help it?" he blubbered. "How can I help seeing what is in front of my eyes? Two and two are four."

"Sometimes Winston. Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once. You must try harder. It is not easy to become sane." So Orwell illustrated the power of Doublethink. The mind control by which one comes to accept contradictory facts as true. Once a people accept Doublethink, they can be completely controlled. Orwell saw all this before we got trained to think that having two X chromosomes doesn't mean you are female. Before we learned to hold in our minds the thought that a genetically complete human embryo is somehow not a human person. "Sometimes, Winston, two and two are five."¹

In the summer of 1972, I swore to myself that I would never let anyone control my mind. I would pursue the truth no matter the torture. I would hold to reality and let no man trick me or torture me into Doublethink.

You might think that such a resolution would push me away from God, into atheism and away from the thought controlling church. But the opposite was true. I knew, without being able to say it, that knowing the truth about God was the only

way to intellectual freedom. God is the deepest, truest reality. So letting my mind be formed by God in all his truth, would lead me to freedom from the lies and power games of other people. I was ready to give my mind to God, precisely because I felt so strongly that I did not want my thoughts controlled.

2. Will. Earlier in the spring of 1972, several friends in our youth group had been away on a retreat. They came back talking excitedly about Jesus. I didn't know that all around the country millions of young people were seeking a more vivid experience of God through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Young people were coming awake to Christ by reading the Scriptures and worshipping through music that sounded more like our rock than our parents' hymns. But I did know that spiritually, I was missing something. I knew that when we listened to Billy Graham preach on television about a personal relationship with Jesus, I didn't have one. And now my friends did. They seemed so happy.

I asked them what I needed to do. They told me quite simply, "You need to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord." *OK, How do I do that?* "Easy. Admit that you have sinned against God." That wasn't hard, after playing Spin the Bottle with Mary Ann Swanko under Tom Pepper's house, I was pretty sure I'd sinned significantly. "Believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay for you sin." *OK, that sounds good.* "And then ask him to come into your heart and take control of your life." *What does that mean?* "Well, if your life is a car, invite Jesus to take the wheel. Ask him to be in charge, to be Lord of your life, the King on the throne." *Not OK. I can't do that.*

My resistance was not because I didn't want God to lead me. I did. I believed the true God was the deepest reality and I wanted in on that. But there was a bigger problem involved in surrendering my will to Christ. It had to do with

3. Affections. In the summer of 1972 I was hopelessly in love with a girl named Holly. She was the girl who at 14 looked 17. To be within ten feet of her was to be intoxicated. That she loved me too was stunning. I didn't mind making the thirty minute ride on my Schwinn Varsity ten speed to her house. I loved talking to her on the phone late into the night. One day we would be married and have a child named Christopher Robert. Holly didn't believe in God. At first they hardly mattered to me. It seemed kind of cool. But when faced with giving my life to Jesus, I realized that Holly's atheism posed a huge problem. If I accepted Jesus, and became like my Jesus People friends, I knew in my bones that Holly would dump me. She wouldn't want a boy that placed God over her, or even a boy who

just became super spiritual. As much as I wanted to know Jesus personally, I did not want to surrender my romantic affections.

That July, at church camp, I talked often with my friends about Jesus. They kept urging me to accept him. I told them I couldn't. They replied, as only friends in middle school can, "That's all right. It just means you're going to hell, that's all." I was in an agony of spiritual decision. I wanted to give my life to Jesus, but it wouldn't come. Then, on the last morning of camp, just an hour before our parents were to pick us up, we had a final gathering. The lead counsellor shared about his own faith. Then he invited us to accept Jesus as our Savior, and to surrender our lives to Jesus as our Lord. And all of a sudden, I could. I did.

The change was immediate and powerful. I felt personally connected to Jesus. I could feel his Spirit within me. I felt cleansed of my sin. Joy flowed through me. Prayers felt like they were getting through. I only had camp songs to sing, but I sang them constantly. The words to "Do Lord" were precious, "I took Jesus as my Savior, you take him too, look away beyond the blue." That night, when I read my Bible, I felt like I was reading a word addressed intimately to me. I had been trying to read the Bible that summer. But it had seemed like a closed book. I didn't get it. I couldn't find a way into what it was talking about. But now it was like I'd been given a key to the treasure house. Fifty years later, my mind and heart still flame with love for the Scriptures. I can stretch every fiber of intellect into its depths and feel two things all at once: this is so satisfying. And I'm only scratching the surface. We will quest into the beauty of God forever and forever be filled and forever discover there is more to fill us.

Yes, Holly did dump me. Early on I had to learn about the peace that passes understanding, and the comfort that comes even in sorrow. I also learned that we cannot make a god out of a person. No human being can do for me what only God can do. I learned about the mystery of entering salvation. On the one hand, it was the hardest thing I ever did up to that point, to release control of my life to Christ. On the other hand, when it happened, it was incredibly easy, because I wasn't doing it. The Spirit was enabling me to do what I could not do by myself, but in such a way that I truly, with my heart and will and mind, gave my life to Jesus. But he gets all the credit. He made me alive. He woke me up. He birthed me anew. He regenerated my heart. He joined me to himself. He washed away my sin and filled me with his presence.

The Psalm writer said, "I love the LORD because he has dealt bountifully with me. What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will lift up

the cup of salvation.” Indeed. Cheers to you, Lord Jesus! I give you thanks in the presence of any who will listen. For all you did for me in the summer of 1972.

What about you? What’s your story? Can you remember a time when the Spirit woke you up to the truth of Jesus Christ? Even if you were a Christian all your life, normally there are experiences of coming to a new level of faith, of surrender, of need and fulfillment. Can you recall any of those times?

If not, you may have a momentous decision to make. Is the Spirit calling you to faith in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord? As the one who rescues you from emptiness, guilt, brokenness, fear of death and loneliness. As the one who calls you to submit to his benevolent kingship? It is never too late to say, “Lord I am yours. I accept my need for a savior and you Jesus are the one. I give my will, my mind and my affections to you. Make me the person you created me to be, for your glory.”

For all of us, I thought it would be joyful to jot down a few notes about when Christ awakened you. In your bulletins, you’ll see a section where you can do that. There should be pens on the end of every pews. We’re going to take a few minutes to each do some personal reflection. Here they are:

What do you recall of a time or season when you came awake to Jesus?

If you struggled with God prior to faith, was it more a matter of mind, will or affections?

Recall how the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. If you feel like you want to talk this through with one of us, check the blank next to the sentence, “I’d like to talk more about this with a pastor or elder” and include your name. You can offer these reflections or questions by placing them in the offering plates as you leave.

So let’s remember our story, the story of how Christ gave us life, and give thanks.

¹ George Orwell, *1984*, originally published 1949. Part 3, chapter 2.