

up life with a passing parade through the marital bed, Jesus can take our story and write us in to his breathtaking purposes.

Because even though our earthly lives are just dots in terms of eternity, our stories can take on extraordinary significance when we take up our part in His story.

Jesus says, "Go, call your husband".

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband."

Jesus shining light onto her darkness. And she responds, "I see you are a prophet" and then in a remarkable moment she says "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes he will explain everything to us." To which Jesus (equally remarkably) declared "I – the one- speaking to you – I am he"

Now, this woman, (who was possibly in the habit of avoiding people) then went back to her town and said to the people "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" And they came out of the town and made their way toward him.

V39: Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."

This anonymous woman was not someone who had grown up steeped in the Jesus story. She didn't have a well thought out theological argument, she didn't have training in how to do this ... she was even possibly keen to keep to herself but something about this Jesus made her tell her story, she simply told people what had happened and as a result of this many and then many more Samaritans saw the light, discovered the truth and were embraced by the grace of Jesus. Never ever doubt that your story can be used by God to intrigue, to stir and to point people to Jesus. She told what she knew and then people investigated for themselves. She didn't have all the answers. She just told what she knew. A brilliant encouragement to us all.

The Story of humanity, without the intersecting Story of Jesus is a tragedy. It cannot end well no matter how much we hope it might. We are barred from God's presence with flaming swords. The relationship for which we were created is broken.

But thanks be to God: He sent Jesus, the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us and then took the punishment for all our sin, so that whoever believes He is Lord, he has given the right to become his children, in restored relationship with God the Father. Acceptable to stand in His presence. Welcomed to be in constant conversation with him. Encouraged to get involved with His work.

And when the story of Jesus intersects our own, our story then becomes all about how to get the Story of Jesus out to the world in which we move, using whatever gifts He has given us. Whether we have never known a day when we didn't understand who Jesus was or whether we have been taken from a crazy messed

I'm going to rattle off five fun facts about John the Baptist, see if there's anything here for you.

1. He himself was not the light: he came only as a witness to the light. John knew his story was not about him. John was not a "look at moi" kind of guy. He was a "look, behold, that's the one you want to get to know".

2. He knew his place: "Jesus is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie"

3. He confessed freely "I am not the Messiah" John 1:20. Again, so good for us to remember. I'm not the one who will be able to answer all your questions or solve all your problems. But I can point you to the One who might.

4. John knew who he was. He was "the voice of one calling in the wilderness: Make straight the way for the Lord". This was a prophecy straight out of Isaiah. John knew his purpose. He lived out His purpose. And it didn't end well for him.

5. He recognized Jesus for who He was "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1: 29)

John the Baptist's story is of someone thoroughly steeped in the story of Jesus. As a six month old foetus in his mother Elizabeth's womb, he leapt for joy when in the presence of the embryonic Jesus. There was not a time when he was not aware of who Jesus was. He was given a very particular mission to carry out and he knew his purpose. He never waived from what he was called to do. Even though it cost him his life. He lived his life using every opportunity to point others to the forgiveness and cleansing that Jesus was offering.

In short: John's whole life was about pointing people to Jesus. He was a human signpost.

And his life motto: John 3:30 "He must become greater; I must become less" is a fine daily prayer for us all.

But he was a giant of a man, wasn't he? And that can be daunting.

So for the last little while I want to head to another well known story in John, where Jesus talks to an undaunting woman whose cultural background meant that she had limited understanding of God and whose life suggests that there had been a lot of sadness and lot of darkness for her. John Ch 4 tells the story of Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman.

And Jesus makes a point of intersecting His story with her story. He meets her around midday drawing water from the well. Many have suggested this alone might be because she is wanting to avoid the sneering crowds. But Jesus is more than happy to engage her in conversation because he knows what He can bring to her. He offers her thirst quenching water but before this grace there must be acknowledgement of the truth about her life.

shine some of His light into their darkness. When we offer a word about the eternal Word. We are our daddy's girls when we share the story of Jesus.

And here we arrive at the major point of the weekend.

The Story of Jesus was The Word became flesh, Jesus revealing the Father and opening up the way back to him. The Story of Us, who have been given the right to be children of God is the story of our flesh, of our earthly lives now being used to get the word out about the Word. To point to Him. God doesn't need us to do anything for Him but in His kindness He invites us to be part of the family business: His extraordinary work of saving this world. When we become His children we become part of a much bigger story than just living the quiet life in a beautiful part of the world. Our tiny dot of a story gets caught up in the most majestic story ever. God's rescue plan for humanity.

And the story of how we came to take our place in His Story is unique. If you have moved from darkness into the light, you have a story of grace to tell. You may or may not remember the exact moment. It might have been dramatic or it might have been a slow burn but if you are now trusting that Jesus is your Lord, if you are saying and living out "You are the boss of me". You have been rescued. This is not nothing. Don't think you have "nothing to tell", or "my story is really dull" ... we all have a story of grace and it gives weight to the truth of who Jesus is. And God in His kindness can use our stories which is why we're going to spend some time thinking and practicing them in the workshop to follow.

But for now, we're going to head back into our Overture and look at the parts that we've skipped over. The parts about John the Baptist, not the John who wrote this book.

John 1:6-8: There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

John 1: 15: (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "this is the one I spoke about when I said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.")

John the Baptist was one of us humans. A unique one with a very particular task: to prepare the way for Jesus. We learn from two of the other gospel writers that he wore camel hair clothes and ate locusts and wild honey. Our writer John doesn't bother to note these facts ... they are of secondary importance. 50 or so years down the track when he was writing this, what the Baptist ate or wore was unimportant. Of primary importance was his purpose, what he said and most important of all, who he spoke about.

Well, what on earth do we have in common with a man, born over 2000 years ago, with questionable fashion sense and strange eating habits? What can we learn from him?

The true light came into the world to shine up all the imperfections, no wonder we prefer to potter about in the dark and pretend we're ok. Admitting ugliness is never easy but this is the first step to the turnaround in the human story. This is where the beauty starts.

And the beauty is this: v12 "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

So, another pause moment, to those who believe in His name, the name of Jesus; he gave the right to become children of God. He gave us the right to become children of God. Years ago I used to do children's talks. And I'm sure I learnt more from writing them than anyone else did listening. I remember musing in one about how as a child it would have been awesome to be Alison Wonka, heir to the Wonka world, or Alison Cadbury or Alison Ferraro (I'm on a theme here aren't I?) imagine the fringe benefits of being born into one of these families! Perhaps the Ferrari family or the Ferragamo families are more your style. But there is nothing on earth that comes close to the privilege of becoming a child of God. To have the relationship that we were created for, made right. To be guaranteed an eternity with a loving Father is priceless, to be assured of forgiveness, to be able to stand before the creator of the universe knowing that Jesus has you covered. What does that do to our hearts?

No. Seriously. What does that do to our hearts!

If we have been given the right to become children of God, do we have the right to just kick back and enjoy the rest of the show? Or are there family responsibilities? Do we take our place in the family business? Serving behind the counter or hitting the road for the family business?

Do you think an adopted child takes on the loves of the adopting parent? I'm sure that if I had been adopted into a family of horse riders I would have learnt to ride a horse and although genetically I might not have been a natural, I would have been nurtured and encouraged in all things horsey. If I had been adopted by Steve Irwin I probably would have learnt to love all things reptilian and not freak out at every rustle in the undergrowth.

My earthly father loved oysters and one of my favourite memories from childhood is floating in the warm waters of the Barrier Reef with him and him showing me how to open oysters with his special knife and enjoying them straight from the sea. He loved them. And I loved him and so I learnt to love those strange slimey critters. I am my daddy's girl when I order a half dozen.

When we are given the right to become children of God, we will grow to love what our Father loves. The more we understand His heart, the more our hearts will beat with His. And our story changes from being all about us to being all about Him. We are our daddy's girls when our hearts long for those around us who are pretending He's not there to find Him. We are our daddy's girls when we

the only human being who never directed anything other than pure love and total obedience to God his Father.

I was at college when I first heard the term “total depravity” to describe the human condition. And before you take offence at this, it is not saying that we are as evil as we possibly can be but that there is not one area or aspect of our nature that is left untouched by sin, untainted by this blackness. Of course there are times we can think, speak and act in a way that is “relatively good” and is pleasing to God but there is no one getting close to the entire lifelong righteousness that is required to be able to stand alone before God. Total depravity means that we are utterly unfit for God’s presence, unfit to enjoy the relationship for which we were created and sadder still, unable to do anything about that on our own. Total inability to save ourselves from the coming justice.

If we go back to the story of the Fall when Eve believed the lie, in Genesis 3 you’ll read that “The Lord God banished him (Adam) from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life”. The flaming sword flashing back and forth that barred the way back to Eden after Adam and Eve sinned is a picture we need to consider. That relationship is broken. It is damaged. We can’t get back to that beautiful relationship by ourselves.

I think we’d do well to remember this flaming sword when we start to excuse ourselves of a couple of little sins. It’s easy to start thinking we’re not so bad. I’m certainly not as bad as her. She doesn’t even go to church. If we think we have any confidence to stand before our great God on our own natural “goodness”, this is dangerous ground. Any confidence to stand before God on our own merits is horrifically unfounded. All sin is abhorrent. It is utterly offensive to God. He cannot tolerate it in His perfect presence. There is no language strong enough for this which is why the fiery swords are brilliant. We cannot enter His presence in our natural state. That is picture one of how serious sin is. Picture two: is the cross. God is deadly serious about sin but He was deadly serious about giving His children a way back into the garden. And it cost Him dearly.

The sad story of humanity continues and here we pick up our passage for the weekend. John 1:9 “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” That is the natural state of us. On our own we choose not to recognize God. We don’t want the light that He sent. We prefer the darkness thanks. It’s easier to hide. We look better in the dark.

Speaking of which: have you ever been to one of those nasty beauty skin care places which offer to show you your skin under UV light? It is it is hideous, it reveals all the blemishes, all the spots all the ugliness that day to day we are completely unaware of. And then of course, they want to sell us all sorts of expensive cures for this hideousness. Just turn the light off and let me get back to my dimly lit bathroom and my failing eyesight. So much more bearable.

Why do you care God? What is humanity to you? And this is where I want to start the Story of Us, with that enormous question: who are we?

John Calvin has said “Humanity never achieves a clear knowledge of itself unless it has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize itself” In other words we must have the Story of Jesus straight before we can begin to understand “The Story of Us”.

And as we saw yesterday, John starts the Story of Jesus as the eternal God, the creator. God, according to Genesis, has created us in His image, which distinguishes us from all other life forms. We are created in God’s image which means man was made to be like God and represent God: perhaps referring to intellect, moral awareness, our social nature, creativity, our authority to care and rule over the earth or our immortality. Or all of the above.

The creation story speaks of God intentionally bringing us into being. Which means we are neither self made nor the product of some ridiculously flukey cosmic happenstance. Every single one of us exists because God made us, we owe our existence to God. And because he has made us, every human being is invested with a special dignity, a worth that can never be taken away. Even if our physical bodies fail or our mental capacities desert us. Our worth to God is unchanged. There is so much beauty in the theology of creation that the world desperately needs to hear. Worth. Value. Dignity.

But, and of course there is a “but”: the sad story of us, is that every single one of us, if we were given the choice that Eve was presented with, would have done exactly as she did. We would have disbelieved God, we would have believed the lie that “You can be like God”. That is just too delicious for any of us to resist. Because as humans, we think we know best. We want to run things our way. This one act, believing Satan’s lie rather than God’s truth has meant that we are no longer a beautiful image of God, we are a fallen, broken, distorted likeness.

I’m sure you’ve heard the petulant toddler say “You’re not the boss of me”. And it’s usually to someone who clearly is the boss of them. I smile (inwardly) when I hear this in the shopping centre because this is us. This is exactly how we treat the one who has brought us into existence: with the childish retort “You’re not the boss of me”.

The story of humanity that the Bible tells is a story on repeat. Human rebellion against God. God’s gracious response or swift judgment. Humans yelling “you’re not the boss of me”. God showing that, actually, He is and extending grace and mercy.

This rebellion, this thumbing our nose at God is universal, this is the natural human condition. You can call it rebellion, missing the mark, moral failings, wanting to run our own show but it is sin. And sin is universal. Romans 3 tells us “There is no one righteous, not even one”. When the Word became Flesh he was

THE STORY OF US, Alison Whalley
Anglican Church of Noosa
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If I were to ask you your life story, I'm guessing you'd start with: I was born in _____, I had x number of siblings. Grew up and went to school in _____ Left school in _____ and then worked/went to uni. Fell in love, Fell out of love. Right up to ... and then I went on this ReTreat with the women of my church. Done. That's our personal story told from our earthly perspective, getting our significance from possibly where we came from, who we married, what we did.

But how would Jesus tell our story? You know he would take a slightly different approach. And much like John starts the story of Jesus waaaaay back, I think Jesus would start our collective story waaaaay back, when the Word spoke us into being.

But before we get too far, let's remind ourselves of the passage we're in: John 1:1-18

And we'll pray.

Two volunteers. I want you to imagine that this piece of ribbon is eternity, which is a ridiculous thing to ask because this is clearly a finite piece of ribbon, it has a beginning and an end and two edges, but imagine it keeps going in both of these directions to infinity and beyond. So, if this piece of ribbon represents eternity ... how big is the average human life? Mathematically it's an inconspicuous dot. The oldest living person on earth today is 117 year old Nabi Tajima, a Japanese woman and her life, against eternity is an inconspicuous dot. The precious little baby who is born today and who fails to take its first breath ... that little life is also an inconspicuous dot.. Whether we get 1 day or 43,800 days we are mathematically equal if I'm not mistaken. We are nothing more than an inconspicuous dot in eternity. Nothing like a large dose of reality to kick us off.

Psalm 139 marvels that even before we began our life as an inconspicuous dot, He knew us.

"For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb ... My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

We might appear to be inconspicuous against this backdrop but we have the full attention of the creator. He always knew that one day you (Susan) were going to come into being. And He knit you (Ruth) together. You (Jo) were always intended. Have a moment to relish that thought. You (plural) have been watched over and loved by God since before you were a single cell. I wonder if your inconspicuous heart then cries out, again like the psalmist: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"