



Every child and child at heart knows that when they hear the words “once upon a time” they are about to hear an epic story. It’s certain to be a story with heroes and villains, with twists and turns, plenty of darkness and despair, even moments of seeming hopelessness. But we keep reading because in the end, no matter how desperate or hopeless the plot may seem, we know that they all live “happily ever after.”

What we hold in our hands today is that kind of story. We too often think of this book as a bunch of rules or a collection of ancient and irrelevant history, but this book is an epic story. Open it up to the very first page and underline those first three words - “In the beginning”. That’s just a Hebrew way of saying “Once upon a time” so write “Once upon a time” in the margin to remind yourself that this is an awesome story! Like all great stories this story is filled with villains and heroes, twists and turns, plenty of darkness and despair, and even moments of seeming hopelessness. And, like all great stories, the promise of this story is that in the end everyone lives happily ever after.

One of the things that makes this story unique is that it is our story. It’s the story of all humanity. This story traces the broad arc of the human race as well as the small arc of each of our individual stories. In the characters we’ll encounter we’ll see reflected the best that we are, and the worst that we are. And so, just as we did last fall, we’re going to begin reading this epic story from beginning to end over the course of the next nine months. We’ll focus on different sections of the story than we did last year, but once again we’re going to dive deeply into this story together because we believe that this story speaks to us and changes us by telling us the truth about ourselves, our world, and most importantly about God. So every week, bring your bible along and let’s live the story together. Are you ready? I’m excited!

As I said this story, like all great stories, is filled with heroes. And that’s a theme that we will return to over and over again in the next few months. We’re going to focus on what it means to be heroic. I know, some of you are thinking, “Wait a minute. I thought you said

that this was my story. I’m no hero!” And that’s probably true if we think about heroes as our culture does. In our culture heroes have super strength or special powers. They don’t just conquer evil; they destroy it, which is why heroes have no room for weakness. But in the coming months we’re going to discover that that isn’t what it means to be heroic in the Kingdom of God. We’re going to discover a new definition of heroism, one that we can all live into, one that honors God, changes us and has the power to change this world.

Today, we’re going to meet our first hero, so let me invite you to open your bible to Genesis 22:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-9.

As you may know our bible includes two stories of creation. They were written by different authors at different periods of history. The first creation story focuses on God creating all things with a word and declaring it all “good”. The second creation story, which we just read, is probably the older of the two, and it focuses more on the relationship between God and humanity. Did you notice how intimate the relationship is between God and Adam and Eve? In the ancient world in which this story was written the relationship between the gods and humanity was distant. The gods were powerful and to be feared. They didn’t love humanity; they ruled over humanity with an iron fist. But this creation story describes a very different God. More specifically it describes a very different relationship between God and humanity.

In this story God creates humanity in God’s own image. God lovingly and abundantly provides everything that humanity needs to thrive – food, beauty, companionship, meaningful work and appropriate boundaries. This God sounds a lot like a loving parent. And what I find most interesting about the way this story describes God is that God gives humanity freedom – freedom to choose, freedom to succeed AND freedom to fail. This God lets humanity experience the consequences of bad choices, without allowing those consequences to destroy them.

Let me put that another way. The God described in this creation story is vulnerable. This God loves us enough to give us the freedom to fall and fail and learn and grow, and in the process becomes open to experiencing the pain of love. Isn’t that what good parents do? Anyone who has experienced the privilege and the challenges of raising children knows that one of the most difficult tasks of parenting is to give our kids the freedom to fail. We want to protect them from pain and hardship, but at the same time we know that pain and hardship shape them and grow them. And when our kids fail and fall and hurt, we hurt right along with them.

I recently had a conversation with a woman whose son is going through an ugly divorce. Her heart aches for him. But she’s also struggling because, as she put it, “I wasn’t sure about the relationship from the start, but they were in love. It was a choice he had to make for himself. He never asked for my opinion, and I’m not entirely sure it would have mattered even he did. He just would have resented me. Now I’m just trying to love him through the grief.”

Can you feel her pain? Love forces a parent to let go, to be vulnerable, to risk their children failing and then feeling their pain and loving them through it.

And that's what God does. God gives Adam and Eve the freedom to fail, and when they did fail God didn't destroy them. God pursued them with love. But you'll also notice that when they failed, Adam and Eve hid from God. Why? Because they were filled with guilt and fear of God's punishment. But God didn't meet them with wrath and punishment. God didn't smite them. God gave them the freedom to fail, and then pursued them with love.

Which is why God is the first hero of this epic story that we're going to read together over the course of the next nine months. God is heroic not because God is powerful but because God is loving and even vulnerable, giving us the freedom to fail, feeling the pain of our failure, and meeting us with grace and forgiveness. Heroic strength in the Kingdom of God is the strength of love and the risk of vulnerability. What an amazing God we have!

So let me leave you with a question today. It's God's question actually, a question found in Genesis 3:9, "But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" What a great question! Where are you? Are you hiding from God because you're afraid that God will punish you for your failures? The question isn't whether you've failed. You have. We all do! The question is really what you believe to be true about God. If you believe in an angry, punishing God, you'll run and hide and from God in the face of your failures, just as Adam and Eve did. But that isn't the God revealed throughout this great story. The God revealed in this great story is heroic, not because God has the power to punish and destroy but because God chooses to be vulnerable, to feel our pain, to pursue us, love us and heal us in our failures. That's good news indeed!

So, let me give you a little time today to reflect on that question. Where are you?