

“In season and out”
II Timothy 4:1-8
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Paul was the well-known Apostle, the one who traveled all around planting churches and preaching the gospel. Timothy was his son in the faith, his protégé, one who would carry on the mission and the ministry. In First and Second Timothy Paul writes words of instruction and encouragement to Timothy. Here is the fourth chapter of the second letter, as things are drawing to a close, right before Paul tells Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith...”, really, just about his final words to his faithful child in the faith, Paul tells Timothy, “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out...” (II Timothy 4:2)

Now that’s easy for Paul to say, that whole business of preaching the word and being prepared in season and out. Paul had a story to tell, and he told it often. Paul’s story that he tells is powerful and unique and it tells of how Jesus appeared to him like a bolt of lightning and blinded him and changed his whole life, both the direction of his life, and the devotion of his life. Paul had a story to tell. Not that others did not have a story to tell, I’m just saying, Paul’s story is pretty tough to beat.

But Paul wasn’t the only one with a story to tell. The fishermen all had a story to tell. “We were so captivated by Jesus, his call was so compelling, we left everything behind to follow him. Everything that meant so much to us, we dropped it on the seashore. We realized it was all nothing but nets. We were the fishermen, but Jesus caught us that day and our lives were never the same.

Levi, a bit of a renegade, if you remember he was a despised tax-collector, he hears the fishermen tell their story and he says, “Well, I left my tax-table. And, when I invited Jesus to hang out at my house and meet all my friends, that’s when Jesus told those darn righteous religious leaders that he came for folks just like us, sinners who needed forgiving.” Levi had a story to tell.

Another guy hears these stories and shouts, “Hey, what about me?” Everyone looks up to see where the sound is coming from. There’s a little tiny, itty bitsy guy leaning out of a tree, and he has a story to tell. “I was just minding my own business, trying to watch the parade, when that guy named Jesus called to me, “Zacchaeus, come down from that tree.” I came down. He came over, and on that day salvation came into my house and into my heart.”

Peter is listening to all these stories people have to tell and he pipes up, “Yeah, but did anyone ever accuse you of being drunk when you told your story?” Peter, he had a story to tell. “It was Pentecost day. The Holy Spirit came like tongues of fire and filled our hearts. We started talking in tongues and the folks watching thought we were crazy. They told everyone not to pay attention, we were just drunk. Drunk...I told them a story that day, about the God who sends his Spirit and fills our hearts and then I did some preaching. I told those thousands of listening ears the good news that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. And guess what? Three thousand people came to Christ that day.” Alright then, Peter had a story to tell.

If you are going to be prepared in season and out, if you are going to be prepared to preach the gospel, we have a treasure trove of testimonies to tell. Fishermen and tax-collectors, tree-climbing sinners and Holy Spirit filled followers of Christ.

What about Lydia, that wealthy woman who dealt in purple cloth. There in Philippi, when Paul crossed from Asia into Europe, Lydia was the first believer in Jesus Christ. A woman was first. That is powerful! Lydia, tell us your story. As Lydia begins you can hear the gospel message growing in strength and intensity as that woman of faith belts out her story.

As I went down to the river to pray
Studying about that good old way
And who shall wear the starry crown
Good Lord show me the way
Oh sisters let’s go down
Let’s go down come on down
Oh sisters let’s go down

Down to the river to pray

In John 4 Jesus meets a woman at the well. Jesus meets a Samaritan woman. By the time she is done listening to Jesus she literally runs back into the town without her water jar...water jars are overrated when you have met the man who gives you living water...oh she ran back into that Samaritan town with a story to tell. "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" That woman at the well had a story to tell that was deep...if you know what I mean...deep not just because the well was deep, but more importantly, deep because she left that well tapped into the greatest reservoir of hope and love and meaning and joy that ever lived. The Samaritan woman met Jesus the Messiah. Tell your story, woman, tell it again and again and again. Tell us the good news about Jesus.

The Samaritan woman boldly raced into her town in broad daylight to tell her story. Luke 7 tells about another woman, one who snuck into the home of a Pharisee. She entered that home because she knew Jesus was there. Despite the judgment of the Pharisee and others who judged her as a sinful woman, this woman bowed down before Jesus. With her tears flowing onto the feet of the Lord, she washed his feet, wiped his feet clean with her hair, kissed those feet, and poured perfume. What she did with that perfume was perfect. Tell us your story dear woman. "He told me my sins were forgiven, that my faith saved me. He sent me away in peace. And what touched me the most is he said that by the way I washed his feet and poured out my tears, he knew how much I loved him. And I do love him. If ever I loved thee, my Jesus 'tis now."

I want to pause for a moment and admit something. I put words into the mouth of the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus. If you read Luke chapter seven, verses 36-50, you will find the story of this woman and her encounter with Jesus. The woman will be doing all the things I just described...except speaking. The woman never speaks in Luke 7. How can you preach the gospel, in season and out, if you don't say a word. One of the most provocative answers to that question is found in a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, who some credit with saying: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." The shortest sermon I ever preached was the sermon I preached in an elevator. If you

have ever heard the phrase, “An elevator speech”, you know a sermon in the elevator has to get right to the point. When those elevator doors open, your opportunity is over. One day I was visiting a huge hospital in Houston, a hospital with some 30-40 floors. I was up on one of the top floors. When I got ready to leave, the elevator door opened, I got in, and I saw leaning against the wall a doctor. He was on the phone. The doors closed and we started going down. I overheard the doctor say into the phone, “We couldn’t save him. We lost him. I’m so sorry.” The doctor hung up the phone and then he hung his head. He was overcome with sorrow. In that moment I reached out my hand for his. He took my hand. We rode the elevator to the bottom without saying a word, just holding hands. The door opened. He left. I didn’t know what else to do, but in a real way, I think I preached the gospel that day. Without using a single word, I preached the gospel.

Sometimes when you tell your story, you won’t have to use even a single word. Sometimes you will use words. If you are worried about how many words you have to use when you preach the gospel, I want to tell you about something I ran across many years ago. I saw a clip on the internet about some churches that put together a program called Cardboard Testimonies. The church gave everyone a piece of cardboard and a big marker. Then they asked everyone to tell their story as simply as they could. Using both sides of the piece of cardboard, they were instructed to tell on one side of cardboard what their life was before Christ. Then they flipped the cardboard to show the other side, and the other side told how their life was changed by meeting Christ. It was amazing to see how folks could give such wonderful testimonies in literally a sentence or two.

- Addicted to meth...addicted to his love
- Abused...set free
- Desperately sought approval...found all I need in him
- Christian men seemed weak...now I am one!
- Fighting cancer...by his stripes I am healed
- Lived in fear of cancer...now I am a survivor trusting in him
- Brain surgery 15 times...trusting him always

- Abused, raped, suicidal... healed, cherished, princess
- Pregnant, alone, homeless, broken...a family made whole in Christ
- Special needs child...told he would die at two. Hope, strength, and peace...pointing to the child...He'll be three next month
- Sideline Christian...now I'm going to be a missionary
- No kids of our own...and then pointing to the youth and children of the church ...all these kids are ours

When I see those cardboard testimonies telling beautiful stories in just a few words, I can't help but think of the blind man in John chapter nine. He was healed by Jesus. The religious kept bugging him, asking him to tell them how the miracle happened. They wanted the blind man to tell his story. Finally, he got so fed up, he took a piece of cardboard. He wrote on one side. "I was blind!" Then he flipped the cardboard over to the blank side and wrote. "Now I see!" If you want to be prepared in season and out, if you always want to be ready to tell your story if the situation should ever arise, why not take a try at your own cardboard testimony. I have a cardboard story I borrowed from the hymn "Amazing Grace."

- I once was lost...But now I'm found

The story you tell can be short, and often those short stories are very sweet. Sometimes the story we tell is longer. When Julie and I were in a youth choir some forty years ago, our choir sang an old gospel hymn called, "Man of Sorrows." I fell in love with the hymn. The hymn told a story.

Man of sorrows what a name for the Son of God, who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim: Hallelujah, What a Savior.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he
stood,

Sealed my pardon with his blood: Hallelujah, What a Savior.

Guilty, vile, and sinners we; spotless Lamb of God was he
Full atonement, can it be? Hallelujah, What a Savior.

It wasn't until several years later that I discovered that the phrase "Man of Sorrows" comes from a beautiful passage of scripture found in Isaiah 53. In that chapter the prophet tells of a servant whom the Lord will send, a servant who will suffer. This servant, "Was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of sorrows, and familiar with pain." (Isaiah 53:3) The New Testament writers knew Isaiah 53 well. They discovered a profound connection between the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and the servant named Jesus, whose suffering was used by God to win our salvation. When telling of the many healings Jesus did, Matthew quotes Isaiah 53, "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases." (Matthew 8:17) When telling us how Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross, Peter adds the words of Isaiah 53 as he tells us, "By his wounds we are healed." And in a story that serves as a clarion call to be prepared in season and out, a disciple named Philip gets dumped out in the middle of the desert, where he meets an Ethiopian eunuch who just so happens to be reading the bible, in particular the book of Isaiah, even more specifically, Isaiah 53. The Ethiopian read the words to Philip, "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Right there, in the middle of the desert, the Ethiopian asks Philip to tell him who the writer is talking about. Philip was prepared. In season or out, Philip was prepared. Using those verses of Scripture, verses about the Man of Sorrows, Philip told the Ethiopian eunuch the good news about Jesus. Read Isaiah 53. Read the gospel stories. Read about Jesus and the love he has for us. You might well find yourself singing an old hymn that says, "I love to tell the story...I love to tell the story...I love to tell the story...of Jesus and his love."

Mary Magdalene had a story to tell. Lydia went down to the river to pray. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb to grieve. Jesus was in that tomb. Mary went to the garden where Jesus was buried. Her heart was broken. Her beloved Lord had suffered and died. Friends, the gospel story cuts to the heart. It strips us and lays us bare. Jesus was rejected and betrayed. He truly was the Man of Sorrows. Bearing sin and scoffing rude, it was for our sins that, "Condemned he stood." Our pardon was sealed in his blood. Mary went

to that garden where Jesus was buried. Her heart was broken. She was weeping buckets of tears. Mary, tell us your story. Tell us your story from that day in the garden. “I was in the garden. I thought I was all alone. Then I saw someone. I was in the garden, and I thought it was the gardener. He asked me why I was crying. Then he spoke to me. Then he called me by name. He said, ‘Mary.’ And I knew it was him. I knew it was Jesus. He was alive. He is alive.”

Mary could make a cardboard testimony. What a story she could tell.

- Jesus was dead.
- Now he is alive.
- My heart was broken.
- My tears flowed like rain.
- He called my name.
- My heart was healed.
- Now my life is filled with joy.

As with all these stories, the stories belong to people, to the people who tell the story, to the people of the bible. But they are not theirs alone. Their stories belong to us. Their stories are our stories. None more so than the story of that woman named Mary Magdalene. Her story can be your story. Her story can be our story. Her story is our story. Jesus was dead. Now he is alive. Jesus is alive and he is calling your name. When he calls your name, when he comes to you and wraps you in his love, his story becomes your story. Let his story be your story. Tell his story of love. Preach the gospel. Be prepared. In season and out, tell the story of Jesus and his love.