

# Relational Discipleship<sup>1</sup>

## HOLY CROSS TRIADS: SESSION 1



### PROLOGUE

#### A Convergence of Stories

I love good movies. I love the moment before the movie starts, when the lights go down. It is a wonderful moment of anticipation:

What new places will this movie transport me to? What new characters will it introduce me to?

What new experiences will it invite me into?

And most fundamentally, will it be a good movie? Will it connect me with a deeper sense of life's significance, meaning and purpose?

Not all movies connect us with life's significance, meaning and purpose, of course. Some movies are made just for the fun or the spectacle of it. But, in my estimation, for a movie to be good, not just entertaining, it needs to move me. It needs to help me see the world, and my life in particular, with greater clarity and awareness. A good movie always involves a good story, a story that inspires me by the ways its characters face the joys and sorrows of life with courage and wisdom and tenacity. A good movie makes me want to be a better person.

We were created to live a story that has meaning, significance and purpose. Yet we are not the authors of our own stories!

God himself is the author of this story in human history—a story that involves an amazing plot, colorful characters, and the wonder of all the beauty of our world. And it is a story he is inviting you to participate in.

Over the next few months, we are going to walk with you through two stories and help you discover how they are connected. The first story is God's Story, the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the wonderful story of his work to reconcile and restore everything in creation through his Son, Jesus.

The second story is Your Story. Every one of us is living out a plot line with interesting characters and fascinating locations. Living our personal story does not always feel so exciting compared to the carefully edited and magnified stories we watch in the movies. But Your Story is highly significant, filled with the promise of meaning and significance, because it is a gift from God.

And the more we immerse ourselves in God's story, the more we learn the role we've been assigned to play in his story—the more we learn our own stories.

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<sup>1</sup> This material is adapted with permission from the Rev. Rob Paris, rector of Church of the Advent, Denver, Colorado.

Here's the trick, though. Our culture teaches us that the path to true fulfillment is to "find ourselves" and "follow your heart." This makes for great Disney movies and romantic comedies, but Christianity invites us into a different way of understanding ourselves, our identity, and our stories.

We find ourselves, strangely as Jesus says, not by forever gazing inward, but by losing ourselves, denying ourselves. Jesus invites us not simply on some path of self-discovery, but on a path of discipleship.

*"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:34-35)*

We don't create meaning through self-actualization and maximizing pleasure and happiness; we discover meaning by taking up our cross and following Christ. Knowing our stories is important! But we can only really know our stories by knowing God's story and how the two connect.

The purpose of this relational discipleship process is to have your story intertwined with and enlivened by His story more fully, beautifully, and powerfully.

God has given us the script for his story: the scriptures of the Old and New Testament. It is a story filled with great promises and great perils. And we are right in the middle of it, learning from what has gone before and living in anticipation of its glorious conclusion. Our story takes shape within the overarching realities of God's story.

Our hope is that Triads will be relational contexts where we can together dive deeper into God's story even as we better understand our own.

### **The Path Ahead**

We have broken up this process into various chapters.

In the first session you will pretty much stick to your story. You will explore the places, people, and events that have shaped your life and given it a peculiar, personal plotline.

The second chapter will focus on God's story. You will begin to trace out some of the overarching themes and characters in the Bible.

Chapters three through six will involve an exploration of both your story and God's story and encourage you to interact with some particular images that give tangible expression to the gospel.

Chapters seven through twelve then invite you to look at how the gospel, God's story, comes to life within our story.

Seven through nine consider how God's story gets expressed in us (inward vitality) while ten through twelve investigate the ways God's story gets expressed through us (outward stewardship).

In each lesson, you will be presented with a set of ideas and questions that will invite you to trust and follow Jesus and to have him begin to mesh your story and his story more fully and more beautifully. A great opportunity to grow in the meaning, purpose and significance of your life awaits you. May God enrich you on this wonderful journey of discipleship!

## SESSION 1: MAPPING YOUR STORY

You have a story. It may not seem like a very exciting one. It may be frustrating and bewildering at times. It may be one you wish were different in one way or another. And it may be something you do not think about much. But, whatever it looks like, you have a story.

When we tell stories, whether Goldilocks and the Three Bears or the Iliad, we give the relevant details that demonstrate how the events unfolded in an interesting or significant way. We link events, people, and places in a ‘narrative arc’ that expresses the stories’ meaning and importance.

It can be hard to do this with our own life, but the fact is, that when you look back on life, you can begin to see various themes; you can begin to see patterns in the events that help explain who you are and what the significance of your particular story may be (though the full significance will never be clear until it is completed). And knowing something of where we have been and how we have been formed can give us insight into what may lie ahead, and help us to make decisions in the present.

Our personal stories can be filled with great joy, but they can also be filled with great frustration and heartbreak. If our focus is entirely on our own story, we are in trouble. Our story, the story of humanity, always ends in death.

We need to be rescued from our story to have another story line open up to us: A story of life beyond death.

The good news is another story has been written for us. It is the story of the Gospel.

In the Old and New Testaments we are presented with the most important details of God’s interactions with humanity, the story of God and humanity. This is the good news of Jesus Christ, which the Old Testament points towards and which the New Testament reflects back upon and explains. It is the story of God’s victory over sin and death. It is the story God has invited us to enter into by faith in Jesus so that we can live beyond ourselves, in the wonders of his grace and goodness. God’s story transforms our story.

We will engage God’s story more fully in the weeks ahead. The goal of this curriculum is to help you see how God’s story radically opens up and transforms your story, how to live in a manner that is rooted in the faith that Jesus has made all things new, including everything about us and our story.

But, we begin by simply taking the time to explore your story, in its many dimensions, both the joys and sorrows, moments of beauty and of ugliness.

Every good story has three major elements: setting, characters, and plot/events. We will begin by inviting you to brainstorm, recognizing in random order who and what have been some of the more significant people, places, and events of your life. Although it is random at this point, the more thought and prayer you put into trying to answer the questions below the richer your experience will be.

Take 10-15 minutes to brainstorm a little. Survey your life. After 30 seconds of reflection, begin writing down every memory that comes to mind in a word or phrase. People who have been important, turning points in your life, and places that have left an impression on you are all legitimate things to write down. Don't censor yourself. Just write it all down, whether good or bad, joyful or sorrowful, trivial or substantial. Use more paper if you need it. (Don't worry, you won't ever have to share anything you don't want to.)

Hopefully, you have put together quite a list of important people, places, and events in your life. Now we want to help you put some order to this hodge-podge.

Look back over your brainstorm section. ***What key settings of your life jump out at you?*** In other words, where have you spent significant time in your life? This should not only include the physical geography of places you have lived, but also places you have worked and worshipped. Please identify at least five significant settings in your life and write them in the box below.

***Settings***

Look back at your brainstorm page again. Who have been the central characters in your life? In other words, who are the people that have had the greatest impact on you, for good or ill, in your life? Please identify at least one person per setting you wrote down above and write them in the box below.

### **People**

Look back over your brainstorm page one more time. What have been some key events in your life? In other words, what are experiences or situations that have had the greatest impact, for good or ill, upon your life? Please identify at least two events per setting you wrote down above and write them in the box below.

### **Events**

Now things begin to get fun...you get to take these various elements of your life and plot them out as a storyline. This storyline is meant to help you reflect on the big event of your life—tragedies and triumphs, good times and difficult times, success and failures, spiritual highs and lows, etc. This will help you summarize your story at your next Triad meeting.

Using the next page, begin to plot out your life with the information you wrote in the boxes on the previous pages. One inch could be a year, or it could be more or less, depending on how much story you have to tell! Just “visualize” the length of your life along the line in more or less even spaces. Feel free to be creative. For example, for each setting you have identified, place it along the graph and ‘color’ in the length of time you were in that place. Then fill in the people and events as appropriate.

SETTINGS

PEOPLE

EVENTS



- Have you gained any new insights into your story? Do you see trends that you never noticed before?
- How difficult was this process for you? Were there any parts of your timeline that provoked strong emotional responses?
- Now that you've finished your time line, think about how you could summarize your story in 15 minutes or less. At your first Triad meeting, you will be invited to share your story.
- Why is it important to understand our story?
- What's the danger of focusing too much on our stories?

## TRIAD DISCUSSION

- For your first Triad sessions have each person share his/her story. Take as long as you need. You can take a week for each person. Don't feel like you have to rush this process.
- A good way to tell your story is to focus on big life events.
- Ask questions, encourage, and pray for the one who shares.

### Diving Deeper

John Calvin, one of the great reformers from the 16th Century, opened his monumental work on theology by summing up wisdom: knowing God and knowing ourselves and how the two relate. For Calvin, self-reflection naturally leads to reflecting on God. Consider the following passage from Calvin:

*Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone. In the second place, those blessings which unceasingly distill to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain. Here, again, the infinitude of good which resides in God becomes more apparent from our poverty. In particular, the miserable ruin into which the revolt of the first man has plunged us, compels us to turn our eyes upwards; not only that while hungry and famishing we may thence ask what we want, but being aroused by fear may learn humility. For as there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stripped of the divine attire our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties every man, being stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness, in this way necessarily obtains at least some knowledge of God. Thus, our feeling of ignorance, vanity, want, weakness, in short, depravity and corruption, reminds us (see Calvin on John 4:10), that in the Lord, and none but He, dwell the true light of wisdom, solid virtue, exuberant goodness. We are accordingly urged by our own evil things to consider the good things of God; and, indeed, we cannot aspire to Him in earnest until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves. For what man is not disposed to rest in himself? Who, in fact, does not thus rest, so long as he is unknown to himself; that is, so long as he is contented with his own endowments, and unconscious or unmindful of his misery? Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him.*

*On the other hand, it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.*