

“My Faith Story-Part 1”  
Matthews 14:22-23

Pastor Mark McDaniel  
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In the near future, as a part of the transitional process which I have been called to guide you through, we are going to be starting a congregation wide study – called Engage. At the beginning of the study, you may get the sense that I am pushing evangelism, and in a sense, I am - just not the kind of evangelism that you are probably used to. In my own spiritual journey, I have found that the most effective form of evangelism for me was hearing the faith journey of others. Praying for me, blessing me, and reciting Scripture to me did little good, but seeing and hearing what Jesus has done in your life – that was what I needed to convince me that this Jesus thing required a bit more research on my part.

This morning I am going to share with you my Faith Story. Now, when I talk about a Faith Story, or a Faith Journey, I am talking about those moments in your life when you began to think seriously about things of religion or belief or eternity or the afterlife or service to God. It may have been an experience of feeling a divine presence. It may have been a song that moved your soul. It may have been the words or actions of someone else. It may have been during a crisis when you felt an unexpected calmness as you responded to the needs of others when you fully expected that you would fall apart. These can all be God moments, and each one of them are important to your own spiritual formation.

You may have already heard some of the stories of my faith journey. I hope you don't mind if I repeat some of them. Of course, there is not time to share everything with you this morning, so you will have to wait until next week to hear the rest of the story. I will be sharing with you the experiences that I believe were most significant in my journey.

My father was raised in a Holiness church in Detroit, and apparently was very devout as a teen until something happened that caused him to turn away from the church and away from God. I never did find out what it was, but it soured his attitude towards all things religious for the rest of his life. My mother was raised in West Germany as a devout Catholic. My father, stationed in Germany during the late 50's, met my mother, and then became Catholic so that they could be married in the Catholic Church, where my mother's uncle was the priest.

I was baptized in the Catholic Church in Detroit as an infant, and my mother took me to mass every week. When I was old enough, I started going through my First Communion catechism classes. I learned a lot about the Catholic Church, the Sacrament of Communion, and the importance of Confession, but I never learned very much about the Bible or Jesus. After my First Communion, I was on track to begin confirmation class when my family moved from Detroit to the suburbs.

While living in Detroit, I noticed that my father never went to Mass with us, but he didn't seem to mind my mom and I going. After moving to the suburbs, he began to give her a hard time about going to church. He would cruelly tease her and make fun of the church and religion. At that time, she wasn't one to stand up to my father, although that did change later, but at the time she stopped attending Mass. And I stopped attending Mass.

I felt a void, so I tried to attend Mass on my own, but it was a new church, I didn't know anybody, and the people were not very friendly. I tried going to youth group a few times, but they were even less welcoming and less friendly than the people at Mass, so I stopped going to church altogether.

It was just as hard to make friends at school, so I started hanging out with the wrong crowd, and doing things of which I am not particularly proud. Drinking, smoking - even some minor illegal activities - I just never got caught. My life was on a downward spiral, and I was only 13 years old!

The thing that saved me was probably baseball. Even though I was rebelling against all the other things that good boys did, I still loved playing baseball. It didn't even discourage me when my tough guy buddies teased me about it. In the spring, the city recreation league was having summer baseball signups in the park. I rode my bike up to the park to register, and I noticed that there was a group of kids around my age cleaning up the shores of the small creek that ran along the north edge of the park. I knew a few of the kids from school, but I didn't recognize the rest. I asked what they were doing, and they said that their church youth group was doing a service project. They then invited me to join them. I didn't have any other plans, so I decided to help out. When we were done cleaning, they told me that they were having an overnight retreat at the home of the youth leader, and that I was welcome to join them. I did, and that was the beginning of my personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The church which that particular youth group attended also had a very unique summer youth program. It was singing group called The Spokesmen. It was made up of about 50 kids—representing many churches and denominations—in ages from 14 through 18. We would meet for Bible Study one night of the week, rehearsal one night of the week, and physical fitness one night of the week. "Why physical fitness?" you ask; because on the weekends we would ride bicycles to churches around the state and sing at revivals, worship services, Christian youth camps, beach parties, and anywhere else that we might be invited. Some days we would ride up 100 miles, take a shower, put on our dress clothes, and give a two-hour concert. I grew so much over that first summer - spiritually and emotionally.

In my second summer with The Spokesmen, at the age of 15, we had a two-week tour of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan scheduled. It was on that trip that I had my first significant experience of the presence of God in my life.

It was about halfway through our tour. It was a hot, humid day—unusual for the UP of Michigan—even in the summer. We were all pretty worn out. Our trip that day was only about 40-50 miles. I don't know how familiar you are with highway hypnosis, but that is when you are driving almost in a trance. You are narrow-focused and on autopilot. You aren't really asleep but you also aren't very alert. Well, that can happen to bicyclists as well.

We travelled in groups of about six to eight riders. Someone in the front of the group stopped or slowed down or swerved – creating a chain reaction of bike crashes. I was the last one in that group, so I saw what was happening. I swerved onto the shoulder, down a slope, and into a weed and water-filled ditch. I didn't think I was hurt, but I did feel a little woozy.

I climbed out of the ditch to see if anyone was hurt. As I got close to the highway, I either stumbled or passed out, falling into the roadway, hitting my head on the pavement, knocking myself unconscious.

I am not really sure what happened next. I remember being lifted up, but I don't recall feeling hands grabbing me. I remember hearing gentle voices, expressing concern for me. I then heard a

voice, that seemed to be in me and all around me, say, “Fear not. It is not your time.” With that voice came a warmth and a calmness, as I continued to feel like I was floating. I don’t know if I was dreaming or hallucinating or hovering somewhere between heaven and earth.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the grass under a tree in front of the church we were going to be singing at later that evening. I was told that when I fell into the road, I was almost hit by one of our support vehicles—which swerved just in time. I had a terrible headache and probably a concussion. The group leaders wanted me to sit out that evening’s performance, but I felt strongly that I was meant to sing. As we were performing, I felt that same sense of warmth and calmness that I had experienced earlier. It was then that I knew God was with me.

I stayed in The Spokesmen group until I was 18, and left for college.

I did not have a happy home life. My time away with The Spokesmen singing group became the high point in my life, with most of the rest being pretty gloomy. Getting away from home, and going off to college, seemed a perfect way to put the gloom behind me. I was given a pretty good faith foundation from the time I spent in The Spokesmen, and I was hoping to carry that faith life into my college experience. Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way.

One of the first organizations I joined in college was the Chapel Affairs Committee. We were responsible for organizing weekly Bible Studies and Worship Services for the campus. I was sure that with my background, I would have much to contribute. Then I found out that one particular fraternity controlled the committee, and if you didn't pledge their fraternity, or if you were a freshman, you wouldn't have a role in the planning or the facilitating. Also, the campus chaplain was near retirement, and was very uninvolved in the work of the committee, so the frat boys and their girlfriends pretty much ran things their way. I quit the committee after three weeks. I spent several weeks visiting churches in the community, but never found one that was very welcoming or seemed like home.

I felt like God had deserted me. I was looking for the feeling I had experienced when I was with The Spokesmen. I realize now that was probably unrealistic, but it was the only meaningful Christian experience with which I had to compare. I became the typical college student; drinking too much, partying too much, hanging out with friends too much, going through a variety of girlfriends, and not studying enough. I just chalked up my religious high during my teen years to a once-in-a-lifetime experience that would never be repeated.

My faith wasn't doing much to curb the depression, but, unfortunately, alcohol did. I found myself in a downward spiral, and knew that I needed help. I saw a college counselor, who referred me to the local mental health clinic, but I wasn't ready to deal with the label "DEPRESSED" so I stopped going. I learned to live with the depression without the use of alcohol, so I thought I was doing better. I was wrong.

That is probably a good place to stop this week. Next week, I will share with you the rest of my story. AMEN