

Notes for a Workshop on Biblical Storytelling

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Aim

- To enable participants to experience the power of biblical storytelling
- To introduce some methodologies for internalising the biblical text
- To explore some practical applications of biblical storytelling in Christian ministry



Rationale

What we now call the Bible was originally, for the most part, a collection of oral material that was told, remembered, and handed down (tradition-ed) within the community of the people of God. Much of it takes the form of stories of God's actions in the life of that community. In the course of the time - sometimes centuries - during which the stories were handed down in this way, they reached a certain form that was considered the 'perfect' form for telling and remembering. This form tended to have an economy and precision which is very different from the wordiness of much paraphrase or 'telling in one's own words'.

The importance of stories and storytelling cannot be underestimated in the life of pre- or non-literate communities. It was stories that enshrined the history of the community, preserved and taught essential values, gave meaning. The invention of writing was one of those technological wonders which was simultaneously a blessing and a curse (see Plato's *Phaedrus*, 274f)

In contemporary culture, the book, particularly when read aloud, can easily be an obstacle in the way of understanding. Even when the reader isn't standing behind a dirty great wall shaped like a bird, as in a lot of churches! This is even the case with highly literate audiences; how much more so with the post-literate and post-modern, for whom sound and image have become more immediate conveyors of meaning than the written or spoken word.

By telling the biblical stories, we can set God's word free from the captivity of the book, and help to incarnate it again, both in the life of the community of believers, and in outreach to those who have not yet believed.

The particular style of biblical storytelling advocated here is also called 'text telling', meaning that the teller seeks to remain as faithful as possible to the written text. Obviously this is going to be somewhat flexible, as we will not be using the original Greek or Hebrew, but a translation of one kind or another. As a rule of thumb, the Network of Biblical Storytellers (NOBS) encourages a standard of 75% verbal accuracy, and 90% content accuracy. Many British tellers feel this is unnecessarily lax, and we would want to aim for more!

Objections

Some people object: Where is the creativity in this? Where is the art, in simply reciting the biblical words, rather than telling in my own words?

Interestingly, you don't hear that objection in the case of a music recital. "Where's the creativity in that? The pianist played only Bach's notes, she didn't play any of her own!" The musical analogy is helpful in several ways: it reminds us that a recital is not just a slavish and mechanical rendering of another person's creative work, but that the personality of the performer (teller) plays a vital role in the way that the work is interpreted. The original artist's idea is first thoroughly learned, absorbed, understood by the performer, and then is given present form by the whole body, artistry and talent of the performer.

The art of biblical storytelling is very similar. We must first internalise the biblical text in such a way that it becomes part of ourselves, a story that we 'own'. The telling is then a true giving breath or utterance to the word of God, which is then communicated to the listeners with no obstacle in between, except for the air, the medium of the breath or *ruach*. When God's people are present for a telling and hearing of this word, there is a true incarnation, a Real Presence of Christ.

How do I begin?

Choose a Story

If you are having to learn a particular story, to tell at next Sunday's service, your choice may be limited. But if you do have freedom to choose, choose a story which is one of your favourites, or which particularly speaks to you: it will be much easier to internalise, and to retain.

Understand how learning and memory work

Most people who say: I can't learn things, my memory isn't any good, simply aren't going about it the right way. The two keys to learning and memory are:

- Identify and work with your preferred learning style, and
- Repetition, repetition, repetition.

The following suggestions are based on these two keys.

Read the story

Read it aloud. Read it again and again. At least three times, preferably more. This is already beginning to 'fix' it in your mind.

Prepare a script

Write or type the story as a script for learning. Each line should be one block of sense, no longer than you can say in a breath. Leave a space between each 'episode' of the story.

As you do this, say it aloud. Yes, again.

The script should be based on the version or translation you like best, are most familiar with, or is usually used in the setting where you will be telling. If however there are words or phrases in this version which don't seem to 'fit', you can borrow alternatives from other versions, as long as you remain faithful to the original.

Analyse the story

Break it down into the episodes that make up the story. Notice and mark the structures, the recurrent words and phrases that link the episodes. These all form hooks to hang the learning of the story on.

Find out as much as you can about the context and background of the story by reading around it, reference to commentaries, etc.

Make Connections

Make connections between the biblical story and your own story. An excellent way to do this is by using the story for a Ignatian-style prayer meditation. What character or characters do you identify with? What events or aspects of this story are like things that have happened to you? What are the feelings in the story that resonate with you? Where in this story does the Lord speak to you, and what is he saying?

Learning the Story

By now the process of internalising the story will be well advanced without even trying. But there are certain techniques that can help, depending on what kind of learner you are: visual, auditory or physical (kinaesthetic).

- **Visual Learners**

If you learn by seeing, look at the text a lot, the position of the print on the page. Prepare a 'story board' as if you were making a film, with pictures for each of the major episodes of the story.

- **Auditory Learners**

Read the story aloud a lot, listen to your own voice. Get someone else to read it aloud. Make a recording and play it back to yourself when driving, washing up etc.

- **Physical Learners**

Use a lot of movement when reading, listening to or practising the story. Act out the movements of the story, let your whole body be part of the learning process.

- **Learn with a partner**

Read the story to each other, talk about it, then take turns telling it to each other.

- **Learn with a group**

This can be done in different ways: with a leader telling the story line by line and the whole group repeating it back (this was how preliterate cultures learned the sacred texts), or in teamworking all the above suggestions.

Practising

Practise at every opportunity, anywhere and everywhere, in the bath, driving to work, walking down the road, in any quiet corner. The longer you live with the story and practise it, the more you will make it a part of yourself.

Telling the Story

Remember that every telling of the story is a giving-of-breath to the word of God. So begin with a moment of focusing on God, offering this telling to God and praying that it may be the Holy Spirit who breathes in and through this telling.

Tell the story to yourself; tell it to God.

Tell it to another person: a child or your nearest and dearest, or anyone you can get to listen.

Tell it to a congregation. Even if they weren't a congregation before, but just a group of people, the telling of God's word will make them a congregation.

Get Others Involved

Biblical storytelling is too good to keep to yourself, or to become the preserve of 'just the expert'. Share it with others, by encouraging them to learn and tell biblical stories. Start a biblical storytelling group (there are suggestions about how on the NOBS website). Join NOBS or get on the Telling Place's mailing list. And, above all:

Trust the Story!

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Some Resources for Biblical Storytelling

Books

Thomas E. Boomershine. *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988

This is the key text for biblical storytelling.

Doug Lipman. *Improving Your Storytelling*. Little Rock: August House 1999

These and a number of other excellent books on storytelling can be ordered from Amazon via my web page:

<http://www.godspell.org.uk/pages/orderbooks.html>

The Network of Biblical Storytellers

www.nobs.org

Founded by Tom Boomershine and friends, this is the American 'mother-group' of The Telling Place. The web site has links to lots of helpful information and resources. Best of all, if you have the opportunity, go to the Annual Festival Gathering. It's an expensive treat, but you won't regret it.

Society for Storytelling

Join the national organisation, and/or get involved in a local storytelling group. You can find one from the Society:

www.sfs.org.uk/

Dennis Dewey's Provisional Definition of Biblical Storytelling

Biblical Storytelling is a spiritual discipline that entails the lively interpretation, expression and animation of a narrative text of the Old or New Testament that has first been deeply internalised and is then remembranced, embodied, breathed and voiced by a teller / performer as a sacred event in community with an audience / congregation.