



Getting the Story: Gospel in the Telling

I planned to speak on storytelling today. I thought to deal with the importance of the story in communicating the gospel. I decided that if story is an important tool in communication, I should use it today. Anything else would detract from the point I would hope to make. I will therefore tell my story as relates to the telling of The Story.

I look back fondly to my seminary days. I learned and studied many things, was exposed to many ideas, and was enlarged in my understanding of the Bible, faith, and the practice of ministry. While my seminary education was invaluable, it was never and could never be complete. Often, my preparation was more about text, words, and academic nuance than focusing on the heart of the message. Often it was about grades, assignments, and papers than learning to cast theology from Biblical study into a form that others could grasp and apply to the issues of daily living.

After graduation, Karen and I went to Mexico, where I was exposed to the concept of a narrative Bible. It made a lot more sense when I came across many who were technically literate, but could not process the words they pronounced from the written page. I was often frustrated in Sunday school with Lucy, who would seemingly digress from the lesson to tell a story. Her stories felt like a great waste of time. Karen helped me see that Lucy was actually taking the kernel of my lesson and recasting it in a form the class could both understand and remember. It did not fit with my training and background.

I was taught to process and expound in outlines, points, sub-points, logical arguments, hypotheses, and conclusions. Lucy thought in terms of story—what I called irrelevant or needless illustrations. Slowly, I began to see that story was just a different way of organizing information, theology, and life itself.

In Mexico, I began crafting monologues to tell the story of various individual characters. I would take them through the described events in the Biblical text. I would have them discuss their emotional responses, their sensory interaction with the story, and otherwise engage the listeners with the living reality behind the Biblical text. While that went well, I often found myself running up against those who did not understand that I was portraying a character. I did not know how to transition into and out of character in a way that communicated clearly. Karen simultaneously argued that I should tell the story from third person.

That is where my journey with story began. It became the impetus for a course I developed in narrative preaching with the seminary extension program in Rio Grande do Sul. In the scope of one semester, I taught church members to study a narrative for its theological content, choose a sermon objective, and retell the Biblical story with a focus on their selected objective.

The first attempt my students made to retell a narrative was always a disaster. The second was serviceable for leading in Bible study, small groups, or worship. One church had 15 members take my course. In four months time, the church had leaders for a dozen new evangelistic small groups and folks to rotate leadership in weekly services. They did not have a seminary education, but they

knew how to tell stories. By allowing them permission to tell the story of faith, they embarked on the mission Christ left the church.

Story as Medium:

It is no accident that the Bible is written mainly in narrative format. Genesis 1:1-2:4a is a creation narrative. Its storied account contains and communicates theology, but it is a story, nonetheless. Genesis 2:4b-3:24 is another theological story. The rest of the Pentateuch is in large part story. At times it digresses to listing principles or laws, yet even these are couched in a framework of story. The narrative communicates theology as surely as the listing of laws communicates principles of God’s will for humanity. Even the genealogies are story in a condensed form. Yet as stories, they are much more than narrated history. They are vehicles to communicate the identity, character, and will of God—theology narrated.

In developing a course in narrative preaching, I began with the first order narratives in Genesis. We looked at the individual narratives in Genesis 1-11 and dealt with the customary hermeneutics, Old Testament background, and the classic commentary discussion. Then we stopped and read each narrative as a whole unit. Having read the story, we began asking three questions. Who is God? Who is mankind? What is our responsibility before God?

My students were appalled that I was asking them to do theology. They began spouting answers from rote that had nothing to do with the narrative at hand. We stopped. I told them to put everything else on hold for the moment. What does this narrative have to say about the identity and character of God? Forget about Jesus. Forget about Paul. Forget what you have heard in sermons, Sunday school, and the radio. From the text we have just read, what does it teach me about God?

You could have heard a pin drop.

We started over. We reread the narrative together. They began a list of attributes of God found in Genesis 1:1-2:4a:¹

God Acts;	God Controls;	God Idealizes;
God Attends to Detail;	God Creates;	God Innovates;
God Authors Life;	God Does the Impossible;	God is Attentive;
God Blesses;	God Dominates;	God is Authority;
God Brings into Life;	God Foresees;	God is Beyond Definition;
God Causes to Grow;	God Gives Life;	God is Creative;
God Communicates;	God Gives;	God Is Decisive;

¹ http://www.theotrek.org/resources/th/2007_Narratological_Theology_and_Homiletics.pdf , p. 26-27.

God Is Greater than the universe;
God Is Harmonious;
God Is Holy;
God Is Imaginative;
God Is Intelligent;
God Is Lord;
God Is Merciful;
God Is Orderly;
God Is Patient;
God Is Perfectionist;
God Is Powerful;

God Is Present;
God Is Provider;
God Is Purposeful;
God Is Singular;
God Is Sovereign;
God Is Uncontrollable;
God Is Visionary;
God Is Wise;
God Is Worthy of Praise;
God Knows;
God Lives;
God Loves;

God Multiplies;
God Observes;
God Organizes;
God Owns the World;
God Participates;
God Perceives;
God Plans;
God Realizes;
God Sustains;
God Uses Resources;
God Warns;
God Works.

These were not master's degree students. Some had no more than a 4th grade education. They all had experience with stories. They needed permission to do theology. Sure, they needed some guidance. They learned much about principles of interpretation. In one semester, however, they were able to take any Biblical narrative and find its theological principles. They could then retell the same narrative to emphasize one of its points of theology.

Because the story communicated to them, they had something to share with others. If I had given them outlines, points, and sub-points, these would have mostly been forgotten. In teaching them to read the stories they already "knew," however, they could do the task of theology and share their gleanings with others. My interference became less necessary.

Gospel as Story:

One group of students asked about Jesus' use of parables. One text tells us that Jesus spoke in parables in order that the crowds might not understand. That did not sit well with my students. It does not sit well with this whole idea of story—at least not at first glance.

It is obvious to see that the gospels are narrative accounts of Jesus' teaching and ministry. It is less obvious why Jesus might not want the crowds to understand his teaching. If stories communicate, why would parables mean less clarity? Perhaps it is because story contains teaching, but its message is not clear until we have sought it out.

I did not have to teach my students to understand the theological message of the Biblical narratives. In fact, they came up with many more aspects of God's character, will, and identity than I would have on my own. I did not tell them what to find. I did not tell them what to seek. I simply told them to seek answers to some very basic questions. Who is God? Who am I? What does God want with me?

The gospel was already in the story. Jesus' message was in the parables. One only needed to look for it—to shoulder personal responsibility for the message. The gospel narrative is good news, yet it

is for those who seek. It is not good news for those who will not accept the burden of responsibility before the story.

I routinely told my students that the gospels and other books of the Bible were written as whole units to be read the same way. One Sunday morning, I took the opportunity to do just that as my sermon. I took the gospel of Mark and began reading. I abbreviated a couple of chapters, but shared the story as Mark had intended it to be shared. Some were very upset that I was wasting time in the service. Others told me they wished that I would have read every word. They had never experienced the whole story before. Mark had never been more than an erratic collection of stories. As I read it as a unit, it became gospel before them. They could appreciate the message.

Sermon as Story:

I haven't had the courage to do that more than once. On that occasion, I should have done a better job of preparing the church for what I was planning. I will yet need to do it again. I talked about the need to read the context of Scripture, but our practice of Scripture in our services does not back up what we say.

The next best thing, then, may be to recapture the story as the means of proclamation. Jensen wrote several years back about our becoming a post-literate society. We know that reading is a dying art among our youth and children. Our young adults read for escape or read for necessity. We have lost the practice of reading for good news.

When I tell stories at home, my children's ears perk up. It does not matter what the content of the story is. The story engages. The story is remembered. The story may even be corrected by little ears that have heard it before.

I am charged with going back to story in my sermons.² Stories were good enough for Jesus. Stories were good enough for the gospel writers. They used stories to capture Jesus' Sermon on the Mount teaching in the practice of his ministry. Like Genesis, stories in the New Testament frame theology in the example of living. Sometimes the examples are to be followed. Sometimes they are to be avoided. They are all to be learned from.

The next time I preach, I will be telling a story. The next time I tell a story, I will be preaching the gospel. If they get the story, they should hear the gospel in its telling. What they do with it will be up to them.

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² For examples of narrative preaching, see http://www.theotrek.org/resources/th/2007_Narratological_Theology_and_Homiletics.pdf, p. 135-176.