

Storytelling

Dennis Dewey, Biblical Storyteller

“God made [humanity],” Elie Wiesel observes in *The Gates of the Forest*, “because [God loves stories.]” We humans are storytelling beings, *homo narrans*. We not only *have* stories, we *are* stories. The stories that we share help shape our very identity and the identities of the communities and institutions with which we interact. Made in God’s image, we are “hardwired” for story, designed to delight in God’s delight in telling and listening to stories. The mutual sharing of our stories creates and builds community. And each story that we tell begins with our drawing breath, reminding us of our very creation—the God-breathing that animated us.

Most of us are storied into faith. Very few of us experience God in a burning bush. Even the Apostle Paul, who came to faith in a blinding flash, was prepared for that experience by the story in which he had been steeped since childhood. Most translations of Galatians 1:18 hear Paul say, “After three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Peter.” But such translations hide the fact that the word rendered “to visit” is a form of the verb *historeo* (from which we get our words “story” and “history”)—i.e., “to visit for the purpose of getting the story.” We come to faith because someone tells us stories. The stories that we share with one another in the church lead us deeper into the story of our particular community of faith. That community’s story is told in the context of the church’s history (again, from the Greek *historia*, “story”), and that history unfolds in the context of the Jesus story—God’s very own story that we find in Scriptures.

Much of our Bible is narrative, and much of the Bible’s non-narrative material is found in

the context of narrative. We might say that God so loved the world that God gave us the gift of story—not a rule book nor a “how-to” manual nor a systematic theology, but *storybook*. We all know the experience of getting lost in a good story, and then emerging from it somehow “found.” The ancients knew that they could pack a lot of information into a narrative, that complex issues could be expressed in plot or in the nuances of a character’s speech or in storytelling patterns that would become familiar as the stories were told and retold.

We live in an exciting time as a radical shift is taking place in biblical scholarship in relation to our understanding of the oral cultures from which our Bible sprang. Tom Boomershine, founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers (www.nobs.org) and author of *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Abingdon 1988), observes that this change in our understanding of these ancient texts has implications for the way in which post-literate culture appropriates, experiences and studies them. Boomershine and other contemporary scholars point out that although lip-service has been paid oral tradition, the academic study of the scriptures since the time of the Enlightenment has remained high-literate in its methods and assumptions, focused on documents, and pretty much discounting the realities of oral culture as essentially “unknowable.”

Recent scholarship, however, has begun to reveal that much of what we assumed about oral tradition was not only wrong, but 180 degrees from right. “Keep all these words that I am commanding you today in your heart (Deuteronomy 6:6) is not merely a quaint notion expressed in a figure of speech, but serious prescription for a spirituality in which the Word lives and breaths within us as a voice, as text heard and remembered, as memory of feeling and thinking evoked by a story. Keeping God’s words in the memory of the heart was centerpiece of Hebrew spirituality and of the early church, cultures that considered the written text as back-up to the

memory of the community.

This is especially important for us who call ourselves “Reformed,” a tradition that was mid-wifed by the print technology culture of the 16th Century, as we seek to understand what it means to be the church, the “community of memory,” in a post-literate, digital communications age. Some have observed that this new communications culture resembles the oral culture of Jesus. Both oral and post-literate cultures think in story, communicate in images that are evoked by narrative and in turn evoke narrative, and communicate with a carrier signal of a beat. Post-literate culture is “secondarily oral” to use the terminology of Walter Ong (*Literacy and Orality*, Methuen 1988). When we hear contemporary culture described as “biblically illiterate,” we should remember that Jesus taught orally, telling stories in a culture that was largely non-literate, and that much of his audience would have experienced the technology of literacy as an instrument of oppression (see Mark 12:38-40).

Storytelling, then, is foundational to our tradition—older than the Bible itself. We might even think of the Bible as kind scripted record of that ancient, lively storytelling tradition which reaches back into the mists of pre-history and culminates in the narrative teaching of a storyteller from Nazareth and of the community of memory that his life, death and resurrection inspired. As the church, we will be well-served to see ourselves as ourselves intentionally as a community of storytellers and story listeners in that tradition, bearing witness to one another’s stories in the context of *The Story*—a story which we rehearse in reading the scriptures, that we tell by heart and that we enact in the sacraments.

Dennis Dewey is a full time biblical storyteller, a ministry which he describes as “helping

hearing people hear the stories again for the first time. He travels around the world giving workshops and performances. He is an Honorably Retired Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), member of the NBS Seminar for Scholarship and Storytelling, and a Mentor in the Academy for Biblical Storytelling.