

## **LIVING INTO GOD'S STORY**

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The Bible is basically and overall a narrative, an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative. Stories hold pride of place in revealing God and God's way to us. It follows that storytellers in our Christian community carry a major responsibility for keeping us alert to these stories and the way they work. Our best storytellers learn their craft from Jesus, famous for using story to involve his listeners in recognizing and dealing with God in their lives.

In both the Old and New Testaments of our Christian Scriptures, story is the primary means of bringing God's Word to us. For that we can be most grateful, for story is our most accessible form of speech. Young and old love stories. Literate and illiterate alike tell and listen to stories. Neither stupidity nor sophistication puts us outside the magnetic field of story. The only serious rival to story in terms of accessibility and attraction is song, and there are plenty of those in the Bible too.

But there is another reason for the appropriateness of story as a major means of bringing us God's Word. Story doesn't just tell us something and leave it there; story invites our participation. A good storyteller gathers us into the story. We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, identify with the characters, see into nooks and crannies of life that we had overlooked, realize there is more to this business of being human than we had yet explored. If the storyteller is good, doors and windows open. Our biblical storytellers were good, in both the moral and aesthetic sense of them.

Of course, not all stories are good; some lack honesty. There are sentimentalizing stories that seduce us into escaping from life; there are propagandistic stories that attempt to enlist us in a cause or bully us into stereotyping responses; there are trivializing stories that represent life as merely cute or diverting.

The Bible's honest stories respect our freedom; they don't manipulate us, don't force us, don't distract us from life. They show us a spacious world in which God creates and saves and blesses. First through our imaginations and then through our faith - imagination and faith are close kin here - they offer us a place in the story, invite us into this large story that takes place under the broad skies of God's purposes in contrast to the gossipy anecdotes that we cook up in the stuffy closets of the self. They invite us in as participants in something larger than our sin-defined needs, in something truer than our culture-stunted ambitions. We enter these stories and recognize ourselves as participants, whether willing or unwilling, in the life of God.

This need saying because we live in an age when story has been pushed from its biblical front-line prominence to a bench on the sidelines, condescended to as "illustration" or "testimony" or "inspiration." Both inside and outside the church, we prefer information over story. We typically

gather impersonal (pretentiously called "scientific" or theological") information, whether doctrinal or philosophical or historical, in order to take things into our own hands and take charge of how we will live our lives. And we commonly consult outside experts to interpret the information for us.

But we don't live our lives by information. We live them in relationships in the context of a community of men and women - each person an intricate bundle of experience and motive and desire, and of personal God, who cannot be reduced to formula or definition, who has designs on us for justice and salvation. Information-gathering and consultation of experts leave out nearly everything that is uniquely us - our personal histories and relationship, our sins and guilt, our moral character and believing obedience to God.

Telling a story is the primary verbal way of accounting for life the way we live it in actual day-by-day reality. There are no (of few) abstractions in a story - story is immediate, concrete, plotted, relational, personal. And so when we lose touch with our lives, our souls - our moral and spiritual, our God-personal lives - story is the best way of getting us back in touch again. Which is why God's Word is given for the most part in the form of story. And it is a vast, over-reaching, all-encompassing story - a meta-story.

The form in which language comes to us is as important as its content. If we mistake its form, we will almost certainly respond wrongly to its content. If we mistake a recipe for vegetable stew for a set of clues for finding buried treasure, no matter how carefully we read it, we will end up as poor as ever and hungry besides. If we misread a highway road sign, "60 miles per hour," as a randomly posted piece of information rather than as stern imperative, we will eventually find ourselves pulled over on the side of the road with a police officer correcting our grammar. Ordinarily, we learn these discriminations early and well and give form and content equal weight in determining meaning.

But when it comes to Scripture we don't do nearly as well. Maybe it is because Scripture comes to us so authoritatively, "God's Word," that we think all we can do is submit and obey. Submission and obedience are part of it, but first we have to listen. And listening requires hearing the way it is said (form) as well as what is said (content).

Stories suffer misinterpretation when we don't submit to them simply as stories. We are caught off-guard when divine revelation arrives in such ordinary garb, and we think it's our job to dress it up in the latest Paris silk gown of theology or outfit it in a three-piece suit of ethics before we can deal with it. The simple, or not so simple, story is soon, like David under Saul's armor, so encumbered with moral admonitions, theological constructs, and scholarly debates that it can hardly move. There are always moral, theological, historical elements in these stories which need to be studied and ascertained, but never in despite of or in defiance of the story which is being told.

Spiritual theology, using Scripture as text, does not so much present us with a moral code and tell us, "Live up to this," nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say, "Think like this." The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us, "Live into this - this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being." We don't have to fit into prefabricated moral and mental or religious boxes before we are admitted into the company of God. We are taken seriously just as we are and given place in his story - for it is, after all, God's story. None of us is the leading character in the story of our lives. God is the larger context and plot in which all our stories find themselves.