

Once upon a Time: The Importance of Story

By Brad Peters

May I tell you a story?

I often pose that question to our congregation at the start of many of my sermons. Of course, I never wait for an answer, in case the church responds with a resounding 'No!' I quickly dive into the story, one that is usually humorous (at least to me), but one that is always tied to the Biblical narrative or main point for the message of the day.

I do realize that this approach is not unique, it is certainly affective. During my early formation as a Christ-follower, I was fortunate enough to have a few amazing pastors. One such pastor would often begin his messages with that same question. I have unabashedly borrowed that opening ... or perhaps it's more accurate to say that I have unabashedly stolen that opening, but that's a story for another column.

While it may not be unique, it certainly can be revolutionary. As I journeyed deeper into the with-God life, I realized that the aforementioned pastor had borrowed/stolen that technique as well. He borrowed it if from our Great Teacher, of course.

As we all know, Jesus utilized the power of story so very effectively. His mastery of the parable continues to educate, inspire and amaze. Incorporating the day-to-day rhythms and realities from the lives of his first listeners was an incredibly effective, impactful, way of sharing the truths of God with those listeners.

Like many of you, due to the Covid-19 restrictions, I've been contemplating the current, and the future, state of the church. We are all aware of the downward attendance trends, the rise of the 'Nones' and the dire projections for the post-Covid church.

With the decrease in church and faith interest waning long before the virus changed everything, we must ask the question, 'Why?'

Why has this trend not only developed but gained momentum so quickly, with such devastating results? I believe that the answer is found in the concept of story ... or, in this case, the lack of story. Jesus taught so often, and so effectively, through story because he was intimately aware of the power that story has, not only to highlight the truth he intended to convey in a digestible manner, but because at the very heart, the core of who we are as believers, and as the church, is defined, framed and lived, we are a people of story, of the Word spoken.

Our faith is often referred to as the Greatest Story Ever Told. Psalm 33 tells us that “as soon as he spoke the world was created; at his command, the earth was formed.” (CEV). John cements the importance of the word in his beautiful prologue to the gospel bearing his name. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God the Word was God.” (John 1:1, NIV) Clearly, the word, and the Word, matters.

But so many have lost touch with that story, but also with the concept of spoken storytelling. Yes, we have great films and movies; we have impactful, serialized television tales; even audio books with sound effects to heighten the experience of the author’s work. There is nothing wrong with any of these forms of media, I enjoy all of them. However, they just aren’t the same as hearing one person conveying the subtle nuance and the personal implication of a story to another person. Coupled with a disturbingly high level of Biblical illiteracy, the need to get back to the basics - to start, or re-start, telling the stories of Scripture has never been greater. However, restoring the importance and prominence of God’s story in our lives and in our culture, won’t happen overnight. As Eugene Peterson wrote in *Travelling Light*:

“The person ... who looks for quick results in the seed planting of well-doing will be disappointed. If I want potatoes for dinner tomorrow, it will do me little good to go out and plant potatoes in my garden tonight. There are long stretches of darkness and invisibility and silence that separate planting and reaping. During the stretches of waiting there is cultivating and weeding and nurturing and planting still others seeds.” (Peterson, 13)

Peterson's potato-planting story was originally commenting on the realities of spiritual development, but his intent is easily adaptable for our story-telling needs. Like every other part of our spiritual development, we must take the time to foster the right conditions for growth to occur. For the purposes of story-telling and story-sharing, we must understand both the importance of the biblical story, and the culture around us, so that we can develop our own parables of God's truth and the certainty of the in-breaking Kingdom of God.

But it is not just the development of new parables based on, and in, old truths. The need to share the old truths, the old stories is a pressing need for the church, and for Christ-followers, in this day, in this time. As N.T. Wright suggests:

“... it is within the world of biblical stories in particular that many have found a special impetus toward acquiring the habits that together make up the virtuous life.” (Wright, 265)

The with-God life is rife with so much more than just the struggles of day-to-day existence. Let's reframe our conversations and experiences with stories: Stories of great courage (Noah), tales of great faith (Abraham), epics of hope and perseverance (Joseph), and, of course, the greatest of these stories, is the story of love: The love that is found in the deep, abiding presence of Christ, his life, his teachings and his story.

WORKS CITED

Peterson, Eugene. Travelling Light. Colorado Springs, CO. Helmers and Howard, 1988

Wright. N.T. After You Believer. New York, N.Y. HarperOne, 2010