



Practicing Storytelling

The Essential Practices Toolkit for Storytelling

introduction

Imagine yourself at a small group gathering at the home of someone from your church. Your group begins with the typical niceties of “How is everyone doing?” before launching into this week’s Scripture, which focuses on the two creation stories in the book of Genesis. Your group reflects on being a part of God’s creation, but one member poses the question: “Where do you fit within God’s story of creation?”

The question requires more consideration about yourself than general thoughts about creation—it pushes you to engage in the act of telling your story. It forces you to think about your place within your family, your faith community, and the created world. It puts you directly in the narrative of God’s redemptive story. Storytelling is more than simply giving information about yourself or where you came from, it is the sharing of your intimate connection to God’s people. Storytelling is more than verbal proclamation and it’s a sacred practice that taps into the very heart of what it means to be a Sabbath people.

“Storytelling is the practice of telling your story, both individual and communal, in the context of God’s bigger story.”

When Sabbath is understood as an exchange ordinary practices for holy practices, storytelling become essential to our identity in Christ. Our lives are full of information—reading data, offering updates and receiving reports. But, how often do we share about ourselves and what it means to be a child of God? Storytelling can be a cathartic and kenotic (emptying) act in which we share ourselves with others and open ourselves to receiving from others.

why storytelling matters

When we participate in storytelling, we share the act of telling God’s story found in Scripture. When we engage in this practice, we continue telling the story of God living and working among us, and we identify God’s presence in this act.

In storytelling, we practice what the New Testament calls “testimony.” Testimony is often characterized by the sharing of your faith and your experience as a person in relationship with God. Testimony serves as an opportunity to not only speak of your faith, but to speak of the ways in which you have experienced God in all facets of life. When we participate in storytelling, we encourage others in their faith journey, and we encourage one another through our interconnected stories, creating space for vulnerability and authenticity.

Through storytelling, we help to establish ourselves within the long history of God’s Sabbath community. We do this by intentionally slowing ourselves down and participating in the act of recalling our own story and the hearing of others. And, in doing so, we imitate Christ. Christ used storytelling to teach, encourage, and invite people to participate in the Kingdom of God. In sum, storytelling is essential to our identity as followers of God and it ought to be a regular part of our participation in our faith communities.

storytelling in scripture

Consider these passages as you prepare to lead others in this practice:

The Lord's Steadfast Love—Psalm 107: 1-3

O Give Thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South.

In this text the Psalmist commands that we practice storytelling. In our contemporary world we can continue to “say so” by telling of the ways in which God has redeemed us and called us to participate in God’s creation and the beloved community.

Sharing God's Commandments—Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This Deuteronomy text has a beginning, middle, and end that encompass storytelling. We are first commanded to listen, then commanded to recite these words we heard, and finally to store these words in our memory. Storytelling in this sense is not simply telling your own story but listening to the story God has to share with you, then reciting that story, and ultimately making it a part of your being.

Establishing an Ebenezer—1 Samuel 7:12

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah and names it Ebenezer; for he said, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

Here Samuel takes an object, a stone, and uses it as a symbol to tell about God’s faithfulness and help. In this instance, the story of God’s faithfulness is not only being passed down through its telling but represented and preserved by a material object. In this same way we can tell our own story and God’s story through more than spoken word, but with objects that carry meaning and significance.

Jesus Commands to Go and Tell—Luke 7:22

Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.

In this Luke text we have Jesus telling those who had been cured to go and tell John the things people have seen and heard. Jesus is telling people to tell the story of God, and their place within that story - the things they have seen and heard in the actions and movement of God.

Women at the Tomb—Matthew 28

But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and

tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

The story of Christ's resurrection in Matthew 28 would look much different if it weren't for Mary and Mary Magdalene telling of the event of the empty tomb and the angel appearing. Here, storytelling bears witness to a world changing event and the telling of this particular story continues to bear significance today. The practice of storytelling not only communicates events and truths, but it also has staying power as seen in this text.

storytelling in action

There are lots of ways to participate in storytelling and by experimenting with different means, we open the imagination of our faith communities to this important practice. Consider some of these ideas to help you get your congregation to embrace their own story and the narrative of God's redemptive history.

- ✦ **Encourage people to share their stories in worship.** Stories can be told in your "moments for mission" and other episodic opportunities that come after mission trips and other formative events like VBS and all church retreats.
- ✦ **Consider how small groups lend themselves to sharing.** Start a series on telling your faith story within your small group. This can be done meeting to meeting or can be done over a longer period of time.
- ✦ **Journaling is a great way to help people process their stories.** Journaling can help people reflect upon their own journey and faith identity and see in a personal way how they fit within God's larger story.
- ✦ **Confirmation is an ideal place to explore the faith journeys of young people.** Writing out their faith stories are a great way for teenagers to practice storytelling. This is also a great practice to invite confirmation mentors or sponsors to join in.
- ✦ **Consider asking your Session or church leaders to share their faith stories.** Shouldn't the leaders of our church know how to tell their faith stories? If you're looking for a place to start, church elders are a great place to initiate storytelling in your community.
- ✦ **Don't forget the power of music, drama, and art as storytelling.** Offering opportunities for people to engage the practice of storytelling through music, dramatizations, and art is a great way to integrate storytelling in the life of your congregation. This can be done in worship, drama programs, and event-based opportunities to display and create artistic expressions.
- ✦ **Consider that listening is an important part of storytelling.** Find opportunities for your entire community to listen to stories of those that are not part of your community, who may be at the margins and who may offer different perspectives. Help your community to learn how to listen to a story before they react.

notes

storytelling resources

Books

The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity, 25th Anniversary Edition by Julia Cameron. TarcherPerigee, 2016.

Saying is Believing: The Necessity in Adolescent Spiritual Development by Amanda Hontz Drury. IVP Academic, 2015.

Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again by Rachel Held Evans. Nelson Books, 2018.

Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith by Anne Lamott. Anchor, 2000.

Shaped by the Story: Discover the Art of Bible Storytelling by Michael Novelli. Sparkhouse Press, 2013.

Curriculum

[Dixit](#). Libellud.

[Bridging the Generation Gap through Storytelling](#) by Nancy Ferguson. The Thoughtful Christian, 2010.

[Remembering Your Story, Revised Edition: Creating Your Own Spiritual Autobiography, Revised Edition](#) and [Leader's Guide](#) by Richard Morgan. Upper Room, 2002.

[Rememory](#). Storymatic Studios.

[Rory's Story Cubes](#). Zygomatic.

[Table Topics: Questions to Start Great Conversations](#). Ultra Pro International, LLC.

[Word Teasers: Faith Edition](#). Big Ideas in Youth Ministry.

Online Resources

["Storytelling"](#) by Dennis Dewey. PC(USA) Leader Reader. The Thoughtful Christian, 2010.

["Faith Storytelling Toolkit."](#) Christian Reformed Church.

[Humans of New York](#).

["Lectionary Mission Stories."](#) World Mission, Presbyterian Mission Agency.

["Listening Is an Act of Love."](#) StoryCorps.

[National Storytelling Network](#).

["Something to Say."](#) Rob Bell.

[Six-Word Memoirs: One Life, Six Words, What's Yours?](#) Smith Magazine.

[StoryCenter: Listen Deeply...Tell Stories.](#)

[StoryCorps.](#)

[STORY Gatherings: An Uncommon Creative Community.](#)

[Storypath: Connecting Children's Literature With Our Faith Story.](#) Union Presbyterian Seminary.

["Storytelling and Story Acting."](#) Boston Public Schools, Department of Early Childhood.

[The Network of Biblical Storytellers International.](#)

["Video Stories."](#) 1001 Worshipping Communities, Presbyterian Mission Agency.

["Writing Memoir: Three Things to Learn from Anne Lamott."](#) Now Novel.