

The Power of Story - 26th March 2023

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Date: 26 March 2023

Preacher: Helen Emery

- [0 : 0 0] Once upon a time, once upon a time. I imagine you might be expecting me to tell you a story right now. I know that's what I'd be thinking anyway.
- So those four words, once upon a time, have come to signal the start of a very special experience. Maybe you think of childhood and bedtime reading.
- The concept of story, that imaginary journey, which we enter into simply through the power of words, means that we can be transported, doesn't it?
- We can go to another time, another place. We can go to another mindset. So for those of you who don't know me, I am Helen. And for the majority of my working life, I have been a school librarian.
- So I've heard all of the jokes about shushing and stamping books. But it means that the idea, the experience of, and even the whole industry of story is very close to my heart and to my profession.
- [1 : 0 8] So there is significant evidence to prove the positive impact which engaging in story has for us, especially reading fiction, and not least the impact it has on our mental well-being.
- So research has shown that reading aids development of empathy. It supports creating social connections. A study in the US in 2009 found that 30 minutes, just 30 minutes of reading, lowered blood pressure, it lowered heart rate, and relieved feelings of psychological distress.
- When we engage in reading stories, it improves our memory and our focus. And there's even research to suggest that story and reading for pleasure is the single biggest indicator of a child's future success.
- So we can conclude, we can say that reading is a really, really good thing. But obviously, I'm not stood here today simply because I believe in the power of reading.
- As an aside thing, I do passionately believe that every child in this country should have a quality school library. And did you know that that isn't a statutory requirement, but it isn't a prison?
- [2 : 3 0] So I would preach on reform on that one to anyone who would listen. But anyway, I won't go on that. Beyond the importance of reading, I believe that story can have a key role to play when it comes to exploring our relationship with God.
- Now, I'm aware that might mean very different things to each and every one of you. So wherever you are at in your relationship with God, I hope this idea of story that we're going to explore can be helpful to you.
- So if we start by unpacking what story is, it's more than simply recounting a set of events. It's narrative.
- It's meant to be told or read as a series of connected events. So story's got that arc, hasn't it? You're told to do a beginning, the middle and an end. So story tends to focus on plot and characters.
- It has a point of view, often has a really strong setting and theme and style. So being a bit of a words girl, I do love a good definition to help our thinking.

- [3 : 48] So I use the BBC education website a lot at work. That's the level that we're going for here. And it does say on there that fiction might have some emotional truth.
- So it might be inspired by reality, but the writing takes the reader somewhere else. So it might have some emotional truth and the writing can take the reader somewhere else.
- So this concept of taking us somewhere else, of holding emotional truth prompts me to see that story can teach us a lot about God.
- It can help us to see God in our here and now more clearly. And maybe be a way of getting to know ourselves and our relationship with God more deeply.
- So obvious statement alert. God's ultimate story is in the Bible, isn't it? The big picture of his creation and his interaction with his world.
- [4 : 59] Now, I've often read and studied sections of the Bible in isolation, which I don't think is a bad thing. But maybe in doing that, we miss the story arc as a whole.
- A great resource that we've put on the slide there is the Bible course from the Bible Society. So I found it super helpful when we followed this in a small group in my previous church.
- And it's well worth a look, I think, if you like this idea of seeing how all the key events and all the books and all the characters in the Bible fit together.
- In a nutshell, the overarching beginning, middle and end of the Bible narrative is the relationship between God and his creation, isn't it?
- So in the Old Testament, leading up to Jesus, then he's coming to be with us. And then the response to that in the light of the Holy Spirit.
- [6 : 02] So interestingly, then, if the heart of the Bible story is Jesus and his life, then it could also be said that stories were at the heart of Jesus' life too.
- Jesus was a great storyteller. He told stories known as his parables and used familiar settings and activities and the context of his time to prompt thinking in his listeners.
- So the kind of everyday experiences that he used were absolutely perfect for his audience. So examples in the parables are things like farming and cleaning and family dynamics and shepherding and buying and selling and all those things that were commonplace features of life to open people's eyes to the reality of God's presence.
- Parables are essentially then making a comparison, providing an illustration or an analogy.
- So I know Matt loves a little bit of Greek. So let's have a look at this and excuse my pronunciation. Parable comes from the Greek and it is para being alongside.
- [7 : 33] So it makes me think of like parallel lines. Parable is the bole being throwing. So the stories that Jesus told throw alongside everyday experiences truth about God's love.
- So stories that therefore hold this emotional truth in the deepest, most profoundly spiritual sense. So some examples.
- Jesus throws the idea of the good Samaritan alongside the idea of the pompous priest or the lofty Levite. The emotional truth there being that we're to imitate the generous love of the Levite or the priest.
- Or in the parable of the parable of the parable of the parable of the parable of the lost son. Jesus throws the idea of this unconditionally loving father alongside a jealous, bitter older brother.
- And the emotional truth in the parable of the father. And the emotional truth in that one being that we're to be inspired by the attitude of the father as opposed to the approach of the older brother. This throwing alongside in the parable is everywhere in his story.

[8 : 56] So old wineskins alongside new ones or a wise builder alongside a foolish builder. Seeds scattered on good soil versus bad soil and so on.

Now interestingly, Jesus counsels us quite clearly against comparing ourselves to others. Do not judge.

He says, take the plank out of your own eye before removing the speck from someone else's. Why? Because comparing ourselves to others either leads to a false sense of superiority or a false sense of inferiority.

Instead, I think Jesus' parables encourage us to compare living God's way alongside not living God's way. Not to make us feel bad, but to encourage us that a better, more loving way is possible.

So, how might we learn to involve God's story in our own lives to see and encourage and identify how God is at work in us and in other people?

[10 : 14] Well, one example here at St John's is book club, which uses stories to open up our own stories. It's a way of bringing people together.

We meet every month, don't we? We eat cheese and drink wine and chat. And I've absolutely loved how every time we meet and have a discussion on the book, it's led back to how it helps us to consider our own experiences.

And very often, our experiences of God. So, when I started, I had envisaged, I have to admit, a church book club would read Christian books, theology, theology, non-fiction, that sort of thing.

Not story, but someone very wise did say to me and challenge my fixed mindset on that one. We've covered lots of different stories and we've had some really great discussions.

So, talking about our responses to stories has helped me anyway to reflect on my opinions, my beliefs, my attitudes, in a way that I don't think we ever would have done without the book as a prompt.

[11 : 31] Now, I'm aware at this point, you might be thinking, oh, I'm not a big reader, I don't do that, which is completely fine. I don't pick up books for weeks sometimes. There are lots of other ways that you can engage in story.

So, God, I love a good film, haven't you, for a brilliant story. There's maybe plays at theatre, TV series. I have to say, I've been loving The Chosen.

I don't know whether you've seen that. That's a fictionalisation of Jesus' life. Highly recommend that one. But then, ultimately, potentially, a very, very powerful way of engaging in story is recounting your experiences.

So, sharing the story of God in your life. So, Psalm 107 says, let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.

Now, the good news here is that even if, and maybe especially if, our own story has got more than its fair share of trouble and mistakes, God is in the business of using and redeeming our stories for the benefit of others.

[12 : 48] Think how, for example, Jesus did that for the woman at the well. When he shows her that he knows her story, he knows how many husbands she's had, but then it's to her that he reveals himself to be the Messiah.

So, yes, our faith is ideally about being changed from glory into glory, but the way that God does that isn't by ignoring or covering up or being ashamed of our past.

Rather, God longs to use the whole of our story in order that we might tell of his redeeming love through our lives, warts and all.

So, I would say we've all got a fantastically rich and varied narrative of how God has interacted with us, where we've seen him at work, how the ups and downs of our life can be connected together to tell a story which is utterly unique to each and every one of us.

So, however you see your past, it can be shaped into a story to share with other people, including what you've learnt and how God has been there in all of it, even maybe if you didn't see it at the time.

[14 : 18] So, tell the tale of God in your life. Be encouraged to share your story of your encounters with Jesus, whatever they look like, however small.

Last week, Claire did that amazingly well, and I believe that through sharing our stories, we can deepen our relationships with each other and be more effectively Jesus to each other.

So, listen to each other's stories as Jesus would listen. I, for one, have never been one to do the small talk and talk about the weather, so I would absolutely love to hear your story over coffee or whenever.

It might be that your story is so painful, though, that retelling it isn't helpful. I would say focus on the times that God's presence with you felt the most tangible and tell that bit of the story.

If that completely freaks you out, then you might want to write your story so other people can read it. Journaling is quite a big thing at the minute, isn't it? So, that might be helpful for some people.

[15 : 35] A book recommendation that was made to me when I was thinking about all this was Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. Now, this book chronicles Miller's rare opportunity to edit his life into a story when film producers fiction live his life for a film.

So, it prompted me to think, if you had your life turned into a film, where would God feature most prominently? Whilst you might wish that some of the scenes didn't exist or they'd make quite uncomfortable watching, how would God appear in those scenes?

How did you see him working? Who were the other characters that you'd include? If there was maybe a time that you didn't know Jesus, what was that bit of the story?

If you feel you don't know him now, then the fact that you're here today means he's already part of your story. So, what's that narrative? Look out for opportunities when sharing your story could show Jesus to others.

It really does, though, have to involve choosing the right time and the right place and the right person. And I would say relationship is really key there.

[17 : 00] Sharing testimony, so that formal presentation of your story, like at baptism, it has an important place. But I think that one-to-one sharing of even the tiny stories of Jesus in your life can be so powerful.

So, what are my stories? There are the funny ones that I could recount to you at pub club and we could have a laugh about. So, like the story of when I once got into a lift in a hotel with half of the cast of *Strictly Come Dancing*, I didn't know who they were and my friends were absolutely beside themselves laughing because I haven't got a clue.

Or there's the story when I rode pillion on a motorbike with Ron Haslam around Donington Racetrack at a top speed of 180 miles an hour.

And there's the proof. You can barely see it on the picture. That was a scary story. So, I do think that God is in all those little moments of joy and laughter and sharing those stories, I think, can create real bonds with each other.

Yet, he's also with us in our stories of pain and of sadness. So, another of my stories is about my dad.

[18 : 27] There he is. I'm a man who died very suddenly in a Morrison's foyer one Saturday morning, 12 years ago.

That story includes me doubting a lot of what I'd previously been taught about, how the whole God life death thing works.

mainly about what happens to people who don't believe in the God that I believe in, which my dad didn't. It made me question a lot of things, a lot of aspects of the joy and the hope that I knew I had in God.

And yet, and yet, God did not let me go. I've got to say, it would have been his birthday today, so I love that I mention that. There is another story that I could tell you of when I started dating my now husband, Neil.

And the church that I was attending at the time told me to stop seeing him or leave their church. They had very strict views about who I should go out with.

[19 : 46] So, but I just didn't feel that God was asking me to give up on a relationship with Neil. I just didn't feel that because, just because he didn't know Jesus like me.

It was really upsetting and really confusing. And it's quite a miracle really that Jesus stayed with Neil and he hasn't just ignored everything about church, isn't it?

He's got his own story anyway, which you might have heard when he gave his baptism testimony a few months ago, and that's on YouTube. So, we have now been married for 19 years.

So, it's proof really that God has stayed with us all that time. And I would say God feels very real to both of us. And then another really little story, a very simple one, is when it all feels a little bit much and my thoughts all get a little bit muddled and the questions reel in my head and I'm really confused about life and faith and all that.

I have a little walk in that park over there and God feels more close and real to me there than any big worship event ever has.

[21 : 04] So, what about you? What is your story? Maybe you don't think you've got one. Well, here's a little quote from a book club book that we did. God resides in the stuff of everyday life, just waiting to be seen.

So, look out for those everyday experiences. Your story might be really short or really long. It might feature dark or sad moments or it might be full of joy and laughter.

It might feature lots of different characters or just a few key players. It might have unexpected plot twists or be very straightforward.

But sharing your story of your experience with God does take courage. It requires vulnerability and sensitivity to the who and the when.

But it might just help someone feel less alone, less isolated. It might encourage them to know that they can make it through.

[22 : 17] your story could be the catalyst for someone experiencing the love of God for themselves for the very first time.

So, whatever your story looks like, it is yours and God is in it. And when told to others, it might just help them to think about and recognise how God has been present with them all along in their story.

Wow, did I get to the end already? Yes. We're going to wrap up. Our stories might have all sorts of twists and turns and ups and downs, but as Jesus says, through it all, surely I am with you always.

I am with you always. God invites us therefore to let him write his story on our hearts and I pinched that line from a song that I quite liked so I thought maybe we could have a listen to that song and as we listen ask him to be part of your story.

Thank you. They say you're the king of everything the one who taught the wind to sing the source of the rhythm my heart keeps beating and they say you can give the blind their sight and you can bring the dead to life you can be the hope my soul's been seeking I want to tell you now that I believe it I want to tell you now that I believe it I do that you can make me new oh I'm an empty page I'm an open book write your story on my heart come on and make your mark author of my hope maker of the stars let me be your work of art won't you write your story on my heart write your story write your story come on and write your story write your story write your story on my heart my life

[24 : 51] I know it's never really been mine so do with it whatever you like I don't know what your plan is but I know it's good yeah I want to tell you now that I'm believing I want to tell you now that I'm believing in you so do what you do I'm an empty page I'm an open book write your story on my heart come on and make you mine author of my hope maker of the stars let me be your work of art won't you write your story on my heart write your story write your story come on and write your story write your story write your story on my heart I want my history to be your legacy go ahead and show this world what you've done and need and when the music fades

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