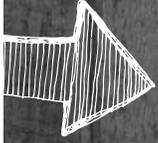


PART ONE

my storying journey





PROGRAMS & PEP RALLIES

My first memory of the Bible is from Mrs. Mary's preschool class in the Methodist church basement in our small town. Mrs. Mary had short black hair and wore pointy thick-rimmed glasses. She beamed with kindness. Hugs and back-rubs abounded and she called us all "sweetie." With a patient rhythm she moved about our class, kneeling down to our level to look in our eyes, encourage us, and give a gentle nudge if we needed redirecting.

My twin brother Mark and I enjoyed almost every minute of learning and playing in Mrs. Mary's sunshine class. Midmorning, after juice and graham crackers, Mrs. Mary corralled us to sit quietly on an old frayed area rug. She opened a big trunk full of all kinds of hats, shirts, and props for us to bring the day's Bible story to life. My brother and I called them "plays," and they were quite memorable.

The most vivid story I remember us enacting was Jesus healing people with leprosy. Mark and I (along with a few other students) were selected to play sick people in the story, while my friend Jeff was picked to play Jesus. I wondered why Jeff often got to play Jesus, and thought it must be because he was the tallest in the class. When I asked him, Jeff said, "I get to play Jesus because I live down the street." Hum. Jeff must have had a special connection because he could walk to class. Maybe he came early and rehearsed his role as Jesus!

Mrs. Mary asked us to put "leprosy spots" (made from purple clay) on our arms. Some of the kids were excited, but my brother and I wanted no part of this. In fact, we were terrified, fearing these spots would somehow make us sick and never come off. So when Mrs. Mary began narrating story, we both hid under a table, well out of the teacher's reach. After some negotiating, we came out from under the table. We brokered a deal that promised that no "sores"

would be applied to our arms, but we still had to let Jesus heal us. A fair trade-off, I thought.

As a child, Bible stories seemed scary to me—storms, wars, sickness, spitting in people’s eyes, blood, demons. No thanks. We preferred Mom’s stories about talking animals and magical forests over Mrs. Mary’s Bible stories any day.

While I was growing up, the Bible seemed like an ancient history book to me, full of weird stories that I had no interest in reading. I remember spending one long Sunday afternoon watching *Family Classics* presentation of *The Ten Commandments*. I was probably seven years old, and even then I could tell Charlton Heston’s beard was a fake. And when he broke the two big “stone” tablets on the ground, I could see they were obviously Styrofoam. How lame! I thought. “Come on, Mom. Can we turn on *Battlestar Galactica*?”

I did like the part when Moses parted the sea and got electrocuted on the mountain. Oh, wait a minute, the lightning actually missed him. He still seemed pretty dumb for carrying around a big stick on a mountain in a lightning storm.

My journey of faith was a path left mostly unexplored until I reached high school. Some friends invited my brother and me to a church youth group during my sophomore year. I had a growing interest in spiritual things, but little understanding. It was the first time I had ever attended a church service outside of a wedding or funeral, and the first time I had ever read the Bible. Youth group was a place where I quickly built friendships (and was a good place to meet girls).

The youth leader from the church, Dan, told me that in order to grow spiritually I needed to have “devotions.” This seemed odd to

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me: "Why do I need to read the Bible on my own if we're going to read it together?" Still, I began flipping around in the Bible aimlessly, like throwing darts at a board. After sifting through some of the books, I often landed in the books of Proverbs and James. These seemed the best places to find a quotation that would help me be a better person and live virtuously. At the time, I thought that religion was just about living morally.

One night after youth group, Dan pulled me aside and started firing questions at me about why I came to church and why I read the Bible. I'd just begun dating a girl from the youth group, and Dan said, "We don't let Christians date non-Christians." I wasn't sure what he was talking about. Was he talking about the girls I was friends with at school? I never thought of myself as a "non-Christian," and I'd never considered that there was an "us and them" thing going on. (Even now, I don't think this way of thinking is helpful.)

I told Dan, "I'm new to church. But I think people are at different levels with all of this." He immediately showed me several verses about sin and separation from God, asking me if I understood that I was a sinner. "We all mess up," I replied.

Then he showed me a verse about how I needed to confess with my mouth and believe in my heart that Jesus is Lord. He asked me, "Who do you believe Jesus is?"

"God's Son?"

"Do you really believe that in your heart?" he interrupted.

I paused; he stared at me. "Yeah," I gulped. I was sweating, and I felt as though he was cross-examining me. I wanted Dan to like me. He was a good guy, fun to hang out with, and so genuine with us in the youth group. I was afraid I'd get kicked out if I doubted or had any questions. Yet I wasn't sure what it meant for Jesus to be "Lord."

Then Dan said, "You don't have to have all the answers to your questions; you have to have faith. If you really believe that, then say it out loud."

"Say what?" I asked.

“Jesus is Lord,” he said.

I parroted, “(gulp) Jesus is Lord?”

Then he prayed for me. When we opened our eyes, he asked me, “Do you feel different?”

“I’m not sure, what should I be feeling?” I answered.

“Well, you’re changed now,” Dan replied.

We talked some more. Dan told me the Bible is really about Jesus, and he encouraged me to read the Gospel of John. I went home and began reading that night. I was riveted by this story, and I read the Gospel all the way through in one sitting. Jesus was such a fascinating person and said and did such powerful things. In the next few weeks, I read and reread John. Then I read the other Gospels. This was good stuff! It was one of the best stories I’d ever read—one I wanted others to know too.

I told Dan what I’d been reading, and I asked him how I could help other people know about this story. He taught me to draw a bridge diagram with Bible verses and simple steps to explain how to get to heaven. I asked, “Why not just have them read the story about Jesus?” One of the other youth leaders told me, “People need more than the story; they need to know how to be saved.”

This answer didn’t satisfy me, but I wasn’t sure why. It got me wondering why we needed the other parts of the Bible. We rarely talked about them in church, and I didn’t see how they had much to do with Jesus. But my church insisted that the whole Bible is God’s words. I was confused. The Old Testament was sometimes described in church as a “law book” that shows people how they can’t live up to God’s standards. That sounded depressing—why would I want to read that?

Thankfully, my doubts and questions didn’t prevent me from wanting to learn more. The story of Jesus was so powerful that I couldn’t stop thinking about it. The love that Jesus showed for people seemed so different—it made my heart leap and stirred me toward wanting to help others know about this remarkable person.

So after high school, I attended a small Bible college to study theology and ministry as a vocation.

One of my pivotal classes was hermeneutics—how to interpret the Bible. This course taught us how to “exegete” passages of Scripture using a set of historical-critical skills. I was told that if I used these

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skills correctly—in tandem with the study of a passage in its original language—then I could arrive at the “true meaning” of the text. It was emphasized to me that there are “many applications to Scripture, but only one interpretation.”

Then came a course in homiletics—how to prepare and preach a sermon. I was primarily taught the expository preaching method—a systematic way to teach a continuous segment of Scripture. This approach taught

me to select a passage of Scripture, study it carefully, and try to uncover the key points—usually three or four of them. Then I was to support each one of these points with related stories and Bible verses. To conclude, I was to tell my audience how to live out these concepts in their daily lives. This was the ministry one-two punch—historical-critical exegesis followed by expository preaching.

During college I began leading a middle school ministry called Discovery. At the time, I was only twenty years old and new to Christianity. Those are years of ministry that I wish I could do over. Despite my mistakes, students from that youth ministry still tell me it was a positive and important group in their lives.

At first I tried expository preaching with these middle schoolers, but I gave up on it pretty quickly. They didn’t seem interested in learning from the Bible—they looked like they were going to fall asleep. Meanwhile, down the hall we could hear pounding music, cheers, and laughter from the burgeoning high school ministry. The rock-star high school pastor didn’t teach with exposition, and his topical style of teaching seemed to have his students in a frenzy for Jesus. So I started modeling my approach to teaching after his.

I would find a topic that seemed current or relevant and develop a message around it with a biblical perspective. I made it as entertaining as I could using props and humor. But as time went on, I began to feel as though our youth groups were just pep rallies for Jesus. Even though this was never articulated, our focus seemed to be to charge students toward a state of continual emotional high that would catapult them to live for God.

I felt out of place there. I could not be the hype-guy. It just isn't the way I am wired. I desired to help my students explore a faith that went deeper than emotion and positive stimulus.

I spent the next few years volunteering in a megachurch's high school group. I had experience in running events and in creative arts, so I helped brainstorm and put together some of the weekly programs for the youth ministry. Excellence, cultural relevance, applicability, and authenticity were high values for our team. It was a fun group to serve with—they loved students and really desired to help them connect with God.

Our programs were mostly topical, focusing on Christian living. I felt as though the content had depth to it, but it rarely focused on learning from the Bible. Instead, it emphasized ideas that we felt were supported by the Bible. So we spent lots of time trying to determine what topics we should teach, usually picking the ideas we thought were the most relevant to students.

As I continued to serve this large group of students, I began to notice some interesting things. The big stage, professional lights and sound, and well-crafted programs and messages all created a different kind of youth ministry than I'd ever seen before. It seemed as though the majority of the students came to observe or evaluate rather than participate. They were audience members instead of members of a community.

Our creative team invested countless hours and creativity to put together programs that were engaging and interactive, but it was difficult to tell if what we planned made a difference. Week after week, droves of students sat back in our theater-style chairs with their arms folded and offered little reaction.

Ironically, I also noticed that some of the students had a deep desire to be on the stage. Those teenagers in the band, drama, dance team, and especially those who helped with the teaching were revered as insiders—celebrities. I became concerned that we were feeding a culture that was already enamored with entertainment.

I sensed that significant changes were needed in our ministry. But how? How could we help students connect with the Bible if our primary means of communicating with them was through a presentation on a stage?



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- › *What parts of this story do you relate to?*
- › *What Bible stories have most captivated you?*
- › *What have you been taught about why we read the Hebrew (Old) Testament?*
- › *How do you read the Bible? In what ways have you changed the way you read it?*
- › *What kind of teaching do you best connect with?*
- › *How do you teach the Bible? How do you determine what you will teach?*

A TRUE STORY ABOUT STORYING

About four years ago I was at a crossroads. I had been in working with youth for about 16 years at this point and was starting to really question my impact on their lives. As I talked with friends also working with students, they were seeing some of the same things. It seemed like much of what I ended up teaching turned into behavior modification lessons, “If you want to follow Jesus, you have to do this, but don’t do that”.

I struggled with this since the motivation for students seemed to land with pleasing parents or myself, not following God. That is when I was introduced to the work Michael Novelli was doing. After reaching out to him and having him come and share chronological Bible storying with our youth and children’s ministry staff, I decided to make a change in our approach to teaching the scriptures. Now as a youth group we are on our third time through the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation discovering the story for God.

Even when we are not following the overarching story of Scripture, we have taken a chronological storying approach. We have taken large sections of time and looked at only the Judges of Israel and also a semester looking at only the life of Jesus. The greatest part of this is that students have the background knowledge to create context for what we are dialoguing over. We have amazing discussion about the scriptures and students are sharing profound truths they are learning.

This has a great learner-centered focus, and I have the chance to talk to students about their relationship with God. They are making decisions based on what the Bible teaches and really wrestling with what God desires for their lives. We have even taken this year as a church and are going through the entire story together chronologically. Adults are making connections that they have never seen before, and the story is coming alive for them. Together as a church we are experiencing the story of God and discovering how to live that out together in our life context.

—STEVE CORNELIUS, YOUTH PASTOR FROM POPLAR, WISCONSIN