

My Experience with Biblical Storytelling

An Interview with Tom Boomershine

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What got you interested in memorizing scripture?

During my first year at Union Theological Seminary I heard James Muilenburg tell Old Testament stories in my "Intro to Old Testament" course. This was during the fall of 1962. I learned that biblical stories in the ancient world were often told from memory. Seven years later, when I began my research for my PhD dissertation on Mark's passion and resurrection narrative I memorized Mark's story in Greek and began telling it. That turned out to be a revelatory experience. There were a whole lot of things I became aware of when I learned it by heart that I hadn't noticed otherwise. At first I was mainly telling it to myself because few people would understand the Greek, so I also memorized it in English. In my senior year I took a class on the parables of Jesus with Prof. Lou Martyn and as part of that course I learned several of Jesus' parables and told them. I was interested in experiencing Jesus' parables in their original context. I wanted to find out how they sounded and what it was like for Jesus' disciples to learn the stories Jesus was telling them. After all, Jesus didn't *read* parables to his disciples, he *told* them.

When did you start telling?

I told individual stories in the mid-60's when I was a pastor in inner-city Chicago at First Congregational Church. I told them to kids in Sunday School and in camp. The first extended story that I ever told was Mark's passion narrative which I told in 1970 to a class of Prof. Walter Wink. The first time I ever told a story in worship was also at Union, around 1969, when I told the story of Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus.

Do you use a certain method or mnemonic device to assist you?

Here's how I learn a story: I read it out loud; I study the structure and write it out in episodes and sense lines; I underline verbal threads. I get up and move around and try to get it into my body. I say it out loud to myself. I try to think the story—to identify its beginning and endings—so those become links for remembering. I learn the sounds of the story. Then I practice telling it.

What are some of the challenges you face as a biblical storyteller?

A major challenge for years was that biblical storytelling is regarded by most pastors and scholars as something for children. It has not been respected or valued in the communities with which I have worked. Another challenge has been to learn a body of stories from throughout the whole Bible so that I have a basis of comparison. From knowing a broad range of stories comes all the learning about how they were structured and how biblical storytellers thought. A third challenge has been to figure out how to enable other people to learn the stories and to tell them well. A fourth one is to figure out how to write about storytelling, which is an oral experience, for people who are going to

read about it in a book. And a fifth challenge (lots of challenges!) is to develop methods for discerning how biblical stories had meaning and impact in their original historical context.

What are some of the positive (and negative!) responses you've received from congregations/audiences?

There's been a huge range: from people telling me it was "a life-transforming experience" to others who were totally alienated, turned off, getting up and walking out of the room in rage. Somebody once told me, "I was infuriated!" Response has also ranged from people who find it utterly fascinating—"something I couldn't get enough of"—to people who were totally bored and fell asleep. But, overall, the majority response has been positive. People have been surprised at how meaningful the stories are. Probably the most frequent response I've gotten has been something like, "I didn't know that Bible stories could be so compelling."

What keeps you motivated to continue this work?

Of all the things I've done in my life, this work has been the most generative. From beginning to end it's been a constant source of surprise, discovery and delight. Part of it is that I feel like I'm learning more and more about God, and about other people. Through this work I learn what's true about life. I'm a scholar, so the pursuit of truth is motivating. Another motivation is that through biblical storytelling I've met so many interesting people. Many of the most creative people I've ever met have been part of the communities of biblical storytellers.

7. Are you currently working on adding a new biblical story/book to your repertoire?

I'm currently writing a book on Mark's passion and resurrection story. It's a commentary on the story as it was performed for audiences in the first century. As part of that work I am re-learning Mark 14-16 in Greek. My next story-learning project will be to learn a chronology of stories from the beginning to the end of the Bible.