



SIEBENQUELL

Take the Stories Seriously I

What the God of Story taught me



In the last few weeks I have undergone a time of grief, fear and despair. The nights left me bereft of sleep and the waking hours left my soul battered and bruised. It was a fearsome time as I prayed and hoped for friends as close to me as family.

During the course of the last twenty-five years I have taught an entire generation of students a central truth about the biblical stories: Take the stories seriously. This basic truth, which I have surely repeated several thousand times, was the very thing I did not do during these past weeks.

What saved me was the instinctive practice of nigh thirty years. I went home to the stories of God and the stories of faith. It was not wisdom, but the oft repeated practice of a lifetime that turned me back to the stories of God and the stories of faith. That is already a lesson worth remembering. In times of crisis, only that will be available to us which we have diligently practiced for a lifetime. A time of crisis is not a good time to start learning new ways.

Thus, I turned to the stories of Jairus (Mk 5, 21-43), the widow of Nain (Lk 7, 11-17), and the Canaanite woman, (Mt 15, 21-28) I did not just read, reflect and pray on these stories. I took my own story of grief, confusion, fear and longing and then

entered into the larger stories of God. At every twist and turn I asked myself the question that is ever the portal into the stories of God: Where and how do I know this story in my own life and experience?

In other words, I began to take the stories of God seriously again. Where do I know this moment, this experience, this doubt or emotion or fear? And so I entered into a story of God only to discover, yet again, that it is also my story. I discovered every fear, every anxiety, every doubt that racked my soul, every moment of timid faith and every moment of painful emotion. If it could be found in my human heart, it could be found in the stories of God.

Most of all, I discovered a central wisdom of God for my life. We are not done yet. Gradually I came to realise what had gradually begun to erode my confidence and strength. I was beginning to speak and pray in the past tense. I was speaking to God as if the story was clearly over, as if we were done, as if we had turned the last page and read the final words.

But it was a premature judgement, like pronouncing a verdict on a story half way through the book. We are not done here: There are more twists and turns in the stories of life, mystery and grace than we can imagine and, more importantly, than we dare to hope for. I was growing more and more convinced that there was only one way for this story to end. I had come to ignore the storyteller God.

I had rushed to the conclusion without counting on the one factor that counts above all: the author: I am a part of his great story. As John Shea so aptly puts it: »We are the story God tells. Our very lives are the words that come from his mouth.« I am active, alive, powerfully present and profoundly important to this story, but I am not the only one involved.

And I found my way home and a renewed path to prayer in those stories. I discovered with Shakespeare that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy. Like C.S. Lewis, I was »Surprised by Joy«. With Peter I re-discovered that for God nothing is impossible. I rediscovered the remarkable, grace filled gorgeous wisdom of the Storyteller: we are not done here.

Like many others, there are times I prefer my stories straightforward. No twists and turns please, just a clear cut, linear and direct path to what I want and need to know. Therein lays the danger, because it reduces the life of the world and the flow of love to an either or proposition. It strips life of its mystery and surprise. And it leaves us with the exhausting proposition that when our possibilities end, all possibilities end.

Every single story I was developing in my battered mind and soul ended in harrowing tragedy. I listened, like Jairus, to the voices in my story that told me not to trouble the master any longer. But I did not show up for the scene where Jesus tells me »Do not fear, only believe« (Mk 5, 36). Like the widow of Nain, I was carrying my heart's desire to the cemetery, but I was not present for encounter in which Jesus lays his hands on the bier, stops the funeral procession and is filled with compassion and understanding for the desire throbbing in my heart. I longed to save a life precious to my soul, but I did not wrestle with God and remind him of his responsibility and place before him my utter lack of indifference, like the Canaanite woman grapples with Christ. Unlike the woman, I was not showing up for the struggle, for the encounter and for the conversation.

In the end, I cannot find the words to tell you of my gratitude to God or even to thank him sufficiently for the tale that is now unfolding before my eyes, rich with promise and healing. In the end, God gave me the one thing my own stories were not even considering: a miracle. And so, I more humbly repeat the line that I myself failed to heed: Take the stories seriously.

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Vallendar, July 12, 2018
