

## BEGINNINGS

Let me tell you a story about a story journey. During a retreat at the Jesuit Renewal Center in Cincinnati, I went down to the Little Miami River, which runs past the center. It was a wonderfully warm sixth of March. I decided to hike up the riverbank. It looked easy enough. A broad area of sand and rocks lay ahead. But around the first bend, there was a steep bank covered with brambles. It looked overwhelming; and for me, frightening and risky. I remember saying to myself: "My knees are wrecked from the accident. (I was hit by a car thirteen years ago.) This is an isolated spot. If I fell, I might really get hurt and not be found for a day or so." It was discouraging and I almost quit.

I stood there looking at this embankment, the latest in a long series of insuperable obstacles in my life. Because I had been steadily praying, I asked something like, "What is there in this that you want me to know?" And my memories went back to the people of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai, to Elijah on his journey to the mountain, and to Jesus in the wilderness of Judea. The memory of those stories gave me a new perspective from which to look at this obstacle. Instead of being overwhelming, the bank looked more like an adventure, an invitation to a kind of pilgrimage. The memory steadied me. After several minutes I saw a possible path, some roots for handholds, and slowly, I clambered up and over!

It was exhilarating! And it was the beginning of a journey almost two miles up the river and back. It was by far the longest hike I had taken in the thirteen years since the accident. And at a number of places along the way, the same thing happened. At another steep bank, I was suddenly afraid. This time the story of David and Goliath flashed into my mind, and the memories of David gave me courage. At another place I had to inch my way down a bank and across a trunk that lay over a four-foot section of rushing water. This time I remembered Jesus walking on the water and Peter walking to him on the water. The trunk looked pretty insignificant in that context.

As I walked back along a bank high above the river, I could see my whole life's journey before me. It was connected with other journeys: Israel, Jesus, my faith community, my family. Our lives are story journeys. The events of our lives connect with many other stories. But at the deepest and most profound level, the stories of our lives are empowered and given meaning by being connected with God's story. I was overwhelmed with gratitude at the gift of the stories of the Scriptures. They had literally enabled me to make this journey.

At that moment, the idea for this book occurred to me. The idea was to offer the stories as a gift to anyone who faces obstacles and embankments in their way. This book is an invitation to a story journey, to learn the stories of the Gospels as a resource for your life journey.

The gospel was originally a storytelling tradition. This storytelling character of the gospel is reflected in the history of the word. "Gospel" is a shortened form of an Old English word, "godspell." It means: "god" = good, "spell" = tale – "good tale." The original definition of "spell" also reflects this storytelling character of the "godspell." A spell was a spoken word or set of words believed to have magic power. In Old English, therefore, the word that was the best equivalent for the Latin word, *evangelium*, was a tale whose telling had power.

This Latin word, *evangelium*, was in turn a transliteration of the Greek *euangelion*. This word also had two parts, *eu*, meaning "good," and *angelion*, which was related to "angel," a messenger. It meant "good news." The word *euangelion* could refer to both the message and the messenger. Thus in Greek tradition a *euangelion* could also be a messenger who delivered the good news of victories in battle.

Only later did the gospel become associated with books. In the liturgical tradition of the Church, the gospel has been the weekly reading from the Gospels. The association with the book has often been symbolized by the elevation of or procession with the Gospel book as a part of this reading during worship. Still later, the gospel has come to refer to a set of ideas that are a summation of the basic beliefs of the Christian religion. In fact, the Church now tends to think of the gospel as a set of abstract ideas based on the study of the canonical documents but divorced from story. The gospel has lost its original character as a living storytelling tradition of messengers who told the good news of the victory of Jesus.

The purpose of this book is to recover the gospel as storytelling. The problem is that telling biblical stories is foreign to contemporary experience. We continue to read Bible stories to children. But the assumption is that once you grow up and learn to think, you will stop telling stories and start telling the truth. Telling the truth means that you will speak in conceptual abstractions.

The only way to start an exploration of the gospel as storytelling is to learn to tell the stories. Until you have experienced the stories as stories, all arguments about the meaningfulness of "telling" the stories will be more or less meaningless abstractions. This book is, therefore, a guide to a journey into the gospel tradition in its original medium, oral narrative. It does not provide an overall theory or relate the topic to the movements in biblical exegesis and theology out of which it grows. It includes suggestions about how the gospel as storytelling can be a resource for ministry: in preaching and worship, pastoral care, Christian education, social action, and prayer. And there is an extensive bibliography that can provide resources for further exploration. But the assumption of this book is that no one, not even the most learned scholar, can understand the gospel as storytelling without first learning to tell the stories.

This book is organized as a gradual introduction to the processes of biblical storytelling through learning and telling a series of stories from the Gospels. It is a guide for women and men who want to enter more deeply into a relationship with Jesus' journey from his birth, through the events of his ministry of teaching and healing, to the victory of his passion, death, and resurrection. To enter into this tradition is to begin a story journey.

But why story and why storytelling? Story is a primary language of experience. Telling and listening to a story has the same structure as our experience. To paraphrase Stephen Crites, experience has a narrative quality. The episodes of our lives take place one after another just like a story. One of the ways we know each other is by telling our stories. We live in stories.

And storytelling is the primal medium of story. I remember reading an advertisement for a novel by William Faulkner. "The greatest American storyteller of our time," the ad said. I knew about Faulkner as a person from my studies as an English major. He was a shy person, a man of few words, who rarely told stories. Faulkner wrote some of the greatest novels of this century. But he didn't tell many stories. He wrote books that were intended to be read by persons who would sit in an armchair and read in silence.

Telling a story to another person or to a group, face to face, is different from reading a book. It has its own unique dynamics. Storytelling is fun, engaging, spontaneous, and playful. To say "Let me tell you a story" is like saying "Let's go play." Everyone loves a good story.

Storytelling creates community. Persons who tell each other stories become friends. And men and women who know the same stories deeply are bound together in special ways. Furthermore, good stories get retold and form an ever-expanding storytelling network. There is something about a good story that virtually demands retelling. New connections are established between persons who have heard and identified with the same stories. And the

deeper the meaning of the story, the deeper are the relationships that are formed by the sharing.

Storytelling is also highly emotional. To laugh and to cry, to be deeply moved and to get so involved that you have to know how the story came out in the end—that is storytelling. You get to know other people and you get to know yourself. And the stories you remember and tell to others become the best gifts you have to give. They become yours in a special way. People become the stories they love to tell.

And why the stories of the Gospels? There are lots of stories in the world. Every human community has its stories. But the stories of the Bible have a special meaning that makes them distinctive. The stories of Israel – the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis, Moses and the Exodus, the judges such as Deborah and Gideon, the kings David and Saul, and the prophets Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel – have formed a unique storytelling tradition. In these stories, the people of Israel throughout the ages have experienced the actions and presence of God. These stories have been remembered as the stories of the God of Israel. By remembering and telling them, Israel experiences those events again. God becomes present and active in the storytelling event. Retelling these particular stories has enabled the physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah to know God.

The stories of Jesus of Nazareth were formed by persons who were a part of Israel's storytelling tradition. The stories of Jesus, both those by him and those about him, were told by his followers as the fulfillment of Israel's hope for a Messiah. They were also stories that uniquely revealed the very character of God. The stories of Jesus' birth, his ministry of healing and reconciliation, his teachings, and his death and resurrection became for them stories about the decisive and central action of God in all of human history. In telling and listening to the stories of Jesus, early Christians made connections with their own lives that made clear to them how God was present. And the uniquely revelatory character of these stories has been confirmed in the experience of millions of people over the ages. The witness of these men and women of faith is that these stories are somehow distinctively true.

When the stories were recorded in the Gospels, they were written down so that they could be read aloud and relearned. By writing them, the evangelists preserved their original forms so that they could be reheard and retold. To learn and tell the stories to ourselves and to others is to go back to the source. It is a return to the spring from which the early church drank. This is the root meaning of "authority." The heart of the word is "author." The authority of the Scriptures is based on their role as the source of our knowledge of God. Thus, entering into the story journey of the gospel tradition is a pilgrimage to a primary source of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The surprises of this story journey are the constant intersections. The route of a journey consists of a series of intersections where roads come together. The experience of the story journey is surprising because of the ways that the Jesus stories intersect with others and shed new light on them. Three kinds of intersections come to mind: my story, our story, and Jesus' story.

Thus, the events of my trip up the river were enlightened by the connections that emerged with the stories of Israel and Jesus. There was an entirely different meaning to that walk because of the biblical stories with which it was associated. But the enlightenment was reciprocal. The biblical stories were also given new meaning by being connected with my experience. And in turn both my story and the biblical stories are given new meaning by their intersection with the stories of other persons who face obstacles as a result of the accidents of history.

The same is true of the stories of our various communities. Every community – family, local congregation, town and city, nation and denomination – has its own stories. When these communal narratives are connected with God's story in a deep and appropriate manner, authentic revelation takes place.

The mark of authentic revelation is an appropriate connection to the sacred story. This is the reason historical study of the Gospel narratives is an essential aspect of the story journey. In the absence of historical study, the connections that people make with the stories are sometimes inappropriate. The most typical problem is reading our experience back into the story in ways that are incongruent with the biblical story. Appropriate connections grow out of experiencing the meaning of the story in its original historical context. To be authentic, the connection must mutually relate to the meaning and life context of both. The story journey requires, therefore, that we listen closely to these ancient tales.

But when our/my story is connected appropriately with the story of God, there is revelation. It is a sacramental moment when ordinary human reality discloses the presence of God. Through the words of the story, the Word of God becomes present. In that moment, it becomes a sacred story through which God speaks.

Through the stories, Jesus Christ becomes present. There is a sense in which Jesus tells his own story, first to and through the evangelists and then to and through us. And when these moments of authentic connection take place, Jesus is really there. Thus, telling the stories of the Gospels is one of the forms of the real presence of Christ.

If you want to take this kind of journey, you are invited to come along. None of us knows where the journey will ultimately lead. But this story journey will be a resource for the life of the Spirit and for the ministry of the community of faith. As your guide, I promise that. It will be a source of renewal and new life.