

Telling
the
Bible

To the Gang at Spring Harvest

BOB HARTMAN

Telling
the
Bible

Over 100 stories to read out loud

MONARCH
BOOKS

Oxford UK, and Grand Rapids, USA

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Introduction

A couple of years ago, at a Christian festival, I was asked to read a passage from the Bible before the speaker got up to deliver the evening message. As I sat in my chalet, reading the text, the storyteller in me took over! I saw a line in the passage that made a good chorus – something simple and fun that everyone could repeat. So I reshaped the text with that in mind, and the crowd seemed to really enjoy it.

I was asked to do the same on the following few nights as well, and when I got home, I had a look at some of the other readings and short stories I had written over the years. Many of them were aimed at children or at all-age gatherings, but there were quite a few that had a lot more to say to adults. So I thought, Why not put them together into some kind of collection? Why not drop in a few suggestions for telling them as well – to make them easier to use? Why not see if others could find some use for them – in worship or in teaching or in small groups or even for personal meditation? And that's where *Telling the Bible* came from.

To be fair, *Telling (a bit of) the Bible* would probably be a more accurate title! There are only about 100 readings and stories here, so the book is not exhaustive by any means. As you will see, this volume is New Testament-heavy, with a particular bias for the works of Luke. That is because those were the passages I was dealing with and that's just how it turned out! What I can say is that I have tried to include readings for the major Christian holidays, and that most of them have been 'road-tested' – usually on the congregation at Bethesda Baptist Church in Trowbridge. In fact, many of these readings arose from my attempts to wrestle with the biblical passages, week by week, in a pastoral context.

As you will see, I deal with lots of different issues in the book. It's quite a personal book, in that sense. You might agree with my opinions on some things, and totally disagree with my opinions on others. So feel free to pick and choose. And also feel free to change, adapt and edit the material for your own particular situation. Because shaping and reshaping lies at the heart of all storytelling.

Finally, some of these readings will still seem more child-friendly than others, and you might feel happier using them primarily in Family Services. I do find, however, that when I tell them to the whole church –

and am not specific about which age group they are for – that everyone accepts them just as they are. I also never ask the kids to come to the front. If you make the reading for everybody, then everybody will listen! If you'd like more tips on storytelling techniques, you might like to pick up a copy of my book *Anyone Can Tell a Bible Story*.

This is all a bit of an experiment – an experiment I have really enjoyed! I'm perfectly willing to accept the possibility that some people might not appreciate the kind of playing around with the texts that I have done here. But, I find that crawling into a text, asking questions and then coming out the other side, is the best way to discover what it's all about – to be surprised, challenged, moved and won over by what God has to say there. That has certainly been true for me. And as you use this book, as you 'tell' the Bible, I hope that it will be true for you as well.

Two Stories

With thanks to Yann Martel.

(Genesis 1:1, Matthew 5:3–10, John 15:13, Revelation 21:1–5)

Introduction

This is the first reading in this book, because it is, in many ways, the most important. And because it sets the stage for all that follows. The reading is based on a question asked by the main character in Yann Martel's prize-winning novel *Life of Pi*. The boy, Pi, has just survived a shipwreck and a long ordeal at sea, and he is required to give an account of his experiences to the agents of the company that has insured the boat. This account makes up the bulk of the book and it is, to say the least, incredible. The agents don't believe Pi and ask for a more realistic, sensible and down-to-earth explanation. And so he tells them another, quite ordinary and mundane, story. And that is the one they put in their report. Before their conversation ends, however, Pi asks them a question. THE question. The question that underlies the novel, and this reading as well. Of the two stories, he asks – the unbelievable story and the down-to-earth one – which one do you prefer? The insurance agents consider the question, and as one they answer – the first story, the unbelievable one. Pi's response is simple and profound. 'So it is with God,' he says. 'So it is with God.'

In the first century, in a pre-modern age, Christians told their story to a world that was filled with stories that sought to explain reality. They told their story and they lived their story, and, as unbelievable as it seemed, the world believed their story – preferred their story! – and the world was changed.

In the twenty-first century, in a post-modern age, we in the West find ourselves in a similar situation. Our world, too, is filled with stories – stories that seek to explain reality. None of them can be proved. (Not that anyone in a post-modern context is much interested

in 'proof' anyway!) They are each based – even the most 'scientific' of them – on a set of presuppositions that have to be accepted by some kind of 'faith'. So the first question we need to ask is not 'Which story can you prove?', or even 'Which story do you believe?' The first question I think we need to ask, when it comes to introducing our story to our neighbours and family and workmates and friends, is Pi's question: 'Which story do you prefer?' Unbelievable as it may seem, which do you like better? And, in order to answer that question, they need to have some idea of what our story is about. And that is what this book is about, too. Telling the story. Telling the Bible. So they have the chance to make a choice. To decide, among all the explanations for this world and our lives and where we fit in and what it's all about, which of those stories they prefer.

TELLING TIPS: This is one to tell on your own. I have, in the past, worked with groups of actors on this one and turned it into a kind of sketch. I still did all the reading, but they mimed out the 'contrast' bits. They collided with each other randomly in the first section (and I think, at the end of that section, one dropped a chain and the other picked it up with an 'Oh, look! The Missing Link!'). In the second section, I think they just mimed creation. In the third section they mimed the 'kill or be killed part' with a pretend Matrix-y fight, and then finished by arguing about who was Number One (which finished off with a final pretend punch). In the fourth section, we continued the fighting metaphor, with one actor jumping in front of another to save him. In the fifth section, everyone just dropped dead to the floor, and in the sixth section, of course, they rose again! It's a little less serious this way, but it still makes the point!

Here are two stories.
Which one do you prefer?

The first story begins like this:

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, there was a series of accidents. Energy and matter and molecules collided and somehow you are here today. Here by coincidence. Here by chance.

The second story starts this way:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And you are here today, not by accident, but because he designed you, and loves you and wants to have a relationship with you.

Here are two stories.

Which one do you prefer?

The first story continues:

The fit live. The weak die. So kill or be killed. Survival is the name of the game. Look out for number one.

And here's how the second story goes:

Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the peacemakers. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

Here are two stories.

Which one do you prefer?

The first story finishes like this:

You die. The end.

And the second story? Actually, the second story has no end at all: *'For Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'"*

Here are two stories.

Two stories to explain the world.

No one can prove which one is true.

No scientist, no philosopher, no politician, no priest.

It's up to you to choose.

So here are two stories.

Which one do you prefer?

Questions

1. I have included only two stories here. Two possible options. I chose to contrast these two in particular because the first story is the secular story which is so prevalent in the West (the context in which I spend most of my time), and the second is obviously the Christian story. What other stories might I have contrasted with the Christian story, if I lived in a different place? And then how would the contrasts differ?

2. When I was younger, I read a lot of books about Christian 'apologetics', which attempted to offer 'proofs' for the Christian faith. Yet, in this reading, I make the claim that the Christian story (along with the rest of the stories) can't be proved. And in the introduction I make the claim that, in a post-modern world, there's not much interest in 'proof' anyway. If it seems right or feels right, then it *is* right! How else do you explain belief in UFOs, Scientology (sorry, Chef!) and *The Da Vinci Code*? So, am I right? Is it all just down to personal preference? Or is there still a place for Christian apologetics and laying a credible foundation for Christian belief? And, if so, what is it?

3. What other contrasts could I have drawn between these two stories? Which story do you prefer? And why?

The Morning of the World

(Genesis 1–2)

Introduction

One of the first things I had published was a series of picture books that asked the question ‘What was it like?’ about six different Bible stories. The idea was to invite the reader into the story and ask some very simple questions: What did that smell like, or feel like, or look like? And then to offer some answers. Those books have been out of print for a few years now, but I think the stories still work really well. And since I’m a great fan of recycling anyway... here’s the first of the lot!

TELLING TIPS: Give your crowd sounds to make for each of the key phrases:

‘It was clean.’ (Make a happy ‘Aah!’ sound.)

‘It was quiet.’ (Make a ‘Shhh’ sound.)

‘Make some noise!’ (Divide the crowd into four groups and have them do the birds, fish, insects and beasts in turn.)

‘Yawn from Adam.’ (Everybody yawns.)

Lead them in these noises early in the story, and then bring the animal noises back in at the end.

What was it like on the morning of the world?

It was clean.

Clean as a baby, fresh from a bath.

Clean as the tires on a brand new bicycle.

Clean as a spring sunrise.

Clean as a mountain snowfall.

What was it like on the morning of the world?

It was clean.

What was it like on the morning of the world?

It was quiet.

Every now and then, a breeze would catch hold of a leaf and send it crashing against its neighbour. Or a stream would bubble and bounce against its banks.

But otherwise it was quiet.

Quiet as a sleeping baby.

Quiet as a coasting bicycle.

Quiet as the rising sun.

Quiet as the falling snow.

What was it like on the morning of the world?

It was quiet.

Maybe too quiet.

What was it like on the morning of the world?

It was time to make some noise!

So God spoke – that was the first noise. And a zoo of noises followed.

Singing birds.

Splashing fish.

Buzzing insects.

Roaring beasts.

And then a yawn from the first man, Adam.

‘I’ve got something noisy for you to do,’ God said to Adam.

And he gave him a job. The best kind of job there is. A job that is more like a game. And the game was called ‘Name the Animals’!

What was it like on the morning of the world?

It was time to make some noise.

Adam looked. Adam listened. Where to start?

And then an animal dropped a nut on his head.

The animal was grey. It had small pointed ears. Its bristly tail was as long as its body. And it sat on a branch and chattered at Adam as if it were scolding him. What did Adam name it? Nobody knows.

But when the people who lived in Greece first saw it and noticed that its tail was as long as its body, they called it ‘squirrel’ – which means ‘shadow tail’.

Again Adam looked. Again Adam listened.

Then Adam spotted another animal, shuffling towards him through the undergrowth.

This animal was half the size of Adam. It was covered with bright orange fur. It walked on its feet, like Adam did. And on its knuckles, like Adam didn't.

But the most remarkable thing about this animal was its face – a face that looked a bit like Adam's face, in fact.

What did Adam name it? Nobody knows.

But when the people who lived in Malaysia first saw this animal, walking through the forest with its sad man face, they called it 'orangutan' – which means 'man of the woods'.

Once more Adam looked. Once more Adam listened.

And he heard a munching, crunching sound.

Adam turned round, and behind him there stood a creature twice his height, chewing the bark off a tree. It was shaggy and brown. It had four long, knobbly legs. And sticking out of its head were two branches like a pair of open hands.

What did Adam name it? Nobody knows.

But when the people who lived in North America first saw this huge, shaggy animal, they called it 'moose', which means 'he strips off bark'.

So Adam named the animals.

Nobody knows what he called them.

Nobody knows how long it took.

But when he was finished, Adam looked at the world.

It was no longer clean. Birds' nests filled the trees. Rabbit holes dotted the ground. Fish littered the streams. And there was hardly a leaf anywhere that hadn't been chewed or chomped or nibbled on.

Then Adam listened to the world.

It was no longer quiet.

The air was full of cawing and squawking and singing. The ground was crawling with snorting and grunting and squeaking. The streams were rushing with jumping and splashing and diving. And the jungle rustled and snapped and shook.

What was it like on the morning of the world?

The world was no longer quiet. The world was no longer clean.

It was noisy. And it was messy.

So God gave Adam a name for it.
And the name God gave it was 'Good'.

Questions

1. What do you think it was like on the morning of the world?
2. What names would you have given to the three animals that appear in the story? Why not make a list of other animals and come up with your own names for them. What do you suppose is the significance of God giving Adam that job?
3. How can 'noisy' and 'messy' be 'good'? You might want to come up with some examples from your own experience!

Death and Regret

(Genesis 3)

Introduction

In a recently published survey that sought to explore the attitudes of non-Christians towards the church, the notion of 'dealing with one's sin' came very low on the list of reasons the respondents gave for considering the merits of Christianity. They did, however, recognise that people often hurt and abuse one another and that something needs to be done about that! Sin by another name is still sin. It's just a question of finding terms that people actually understand and to which they can relate. And that's why, in this reading, I chose to frame the fall and talk about sin in the context of regret. Because I think everyone understands the missed opportunity – to either do something good, or avoid hurting someone else.

That's why I like to use it in an evangelistic, or pre-evangelistic, context – to get the audience thinking about the nature, the reality and the consequences of sin. You might also find it useful during the Lenten season.

TELLING TIPS: There's no appropriate place for audience participation here, because this is a pretty serious reading and depends heavily on the intensity that the reader/storyteller brings to it. When I tell it, I always emphasise the more physical aspects of the text – the hacking, the looking at the hands, the shut eyes, the pounding of the fists against the temples. The key is that Adam and his struggle should be real to the audience – just as their own regret is real.

He hacked at the ground with his rough stone axe. He hacked at the weeds and at the bushes. He hacked till the sweat poured off his forehead and the calluses rose on his palms. He hacked until he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. But still the slithering thing slipped and

squirmed away. So he sank down onto a stump and waited for his breath to return and his heart to stop racing. He wiped the sweat from his brow and stared at his hands. And that's when it all came back – the crushing memory of 'before', the pain of the paradise he'd lost.

It was like a bad bruise. It hurt to touch it, but touching it reminded him that it was there. Sometimes a smell would trigger it. Sometimes it would wake him in the night. Today, it was simply the sight of his hands.

Knuckles gnarled and cracked. Palms rough and swollen. Veins running down the backs like tree limbs.

Were these the hands, he wondered, that once tended the Garden? The hands that stroked the lion's mane and traced the zebra's stripes and danced across the rhino's wrinkled hide as he gave each one its name? Were these really the hands of Adam?

Sometimes it seemed impossible. Sometimes it seemed too good to have been true. And sometimes he wondered, How had it happened? How had he let it all slip between those rough and dirty fingers?

As if to answer the question, a voice called from across the rocky field.

Yes, he had blamed her once. Blamed her more than once. But he knew now that the fault was his, as well as hers.

Eve called again, and then walked slowly towards him. It was almost impossible to see her as she had once been. The years, and the children, and the endless toil it took just to survive had erased for ever the woman who had danced happily in the Garden.

He shut his eyes. He shut them tight. He shoved his fists into the sockets and for a second, just a second, there she was again. Flesh of his flesh. Bone of his bone. Lying beside him on the soft wet grass, at the dawn of their life together. He remembered touching her hair. And her lips. And tracing the shape of her face with his fingertips. And he remembered the prayer he had prayed. 'Thank you, Creator,' he had said, 'for this face and for this morning, and for all the mornings to come.'

'Adam!' the voice called again. 'Adam, why are you sitting there? Get back to work! We have a family to feed!'

Adam winced. There was still a trace of that other Eve in her voice. The same voice that had called out so many years ago – called out across the Garden, 'Adam, come quickly! There is someone I want you to meet!'

That voice was so sweet. The face so innocent and gentle. She skipped towards him, excited like a foal or a fawn. She took his hand (he could feel those fingers, still). And she led him, laughing, to the Knowledge Tree.