



Dennis Dewey *Storyteller Extraordinaire!*

An interview with Dennis Dewey, pastor, composer, storyteller and former Executive Director of NBS.

Q. You are a Presbyterian pastor, a composer, and a storyteller. What drew you to biblical storytelling?

I came to biblical storytelling without knowing that I had arrived there at first. Coming from a theater background, I thought I was doing “dramatic monologue.” That’s what I called it until I met Tom Boomershine at a continuing education event at the Hidden Valley Dude Ranch in the Adirondack Mountains in the summer of 1981. Just a few months earlier I had performed Mark’s passion narrative on Palm/Passion Sunday. Folks met me at the door after worship, choked up with emotion and fairly pumping my hand off with enthusiasm, saying, “That was incredibly powerful and moving! I’ve been going to church all my life, but I’ve never heard anything like this until now. Where did you get that script!?” They didn’t know that it was the biblical text because they had grown accustomed to hearing the text read in such a flat, monotonous, boring, dead way. When it suddenly sprang to life and grabbed them by the ribcage,

they thought they were hearing a “script,” an adaptation. It was in that first continuing education experience with Boomershine that I came to understand some things about biblical storytelling—that, for example, it is storytelling, not theater. The aesthetic of storytelling is direct and immediate. There is no “shared suspension of disbelief,” no aesthetic of illusion. It happens face to face and eyeball to eyeball. Its power to engage, move, tease, entice, tickle, agitate, frustrate, amuse and inspire awe is something that happens in the energy between teller and audience in the act of telling/hearing. So I suppose that the short answer is that I was drawn to biblical storytelling by the power of biblical storytelling—a power that seems capable of enabling listeners to “hear the story again for the first time.”

Q. You’ve traveled the United States and the world as a biblical storyteller and served as the Executive Director of the Network of Biblical Storytellers for a time. What response have you seen from congregations across the country to your biblical storytelling? Are they accepting or is it controversial?

I suppose my audiences have somewhat self-selecting. It’s not

likely that I’d have been invited to a venue where people were resistant to the idea of storytelling! You know, I once tried to sit down and quantify my experiences over the past nearly 30 years—how many workshops I have led, how many stories I have told in how many churches, in which denominations. I gave up short of achieving anything like final statistics. Suffice it to say that I have told and taught from Toronto to Sydney to London to Cape Town in just about every kind of church setting imaginable, and the result has always been the same: These stories blow people away! But perhaps the greatest thrill of my years as a teacher/performer came in the workshops when I could see the proverbial light bulbs going off as people “got it”—that the Bible is largely a record of memories of oral performances. From the oracles of the prophets to parables of Jesus to the dictation of Paul to the churches of the Mediterranean: It was all oral; it was all storytelling.

Q. What have you discerned from biblical storytelling that you might not have discovered otherwise?

Papias, Bishop of Heiropolis, around 130 AD sought out those who had known Jesus and his disciples and was reputed to have said, “I did not suppose that what I got from books would help me as much as the living, surviving voice.” I guess I would have to say that biblical storytelling changes the teller’s relationship to the story, to the tradition, to the text, to the community that preserved it and the community that hears it as audience. When you take the story into yourself as sacred, shared memory of the heart, you find yourself paradoxically in the story. You can wander around in it. Ask questions. Poke it. Ask of it questions that cannot be but must be answered if one is to tell it with any kind of integrity: How did it sound? With what attitude was this question asked, what tone of voice used in that exclamation? The experience of living with the story is a depth experience. It is not just about what the story means—although one need not be a biblical storyteller for long without wondering how one could ever have thought to arrived at any story’s “meaning” without having learned it to tell as a first step! Again, my greatest joy has come in sharing this experience with others. After spending 14 years as a full time biblical storytelling, I returned to parish ministry in 2007 and set about building a troupe of tellers at my church. The “Stone Storytellers” of Stone Presbyterian Church (www.stonepres.org) regularly tell in worship. In fact, our congregation almost feel “cheated” if there is not some storytelling in every worship service! One of my greatest thrills is to sit up in the chancel and watch the faces of the

congregation as one of our tellers presents one of the lectionary narratives for the day!

Q. How do you use biblical storytelling in your pastoral ministry now?

I suppose the last answer addresses that in part. We have integrated storytelling with our worship at Stone Presbyterian Church to such an extent that not to have at least one of the lessons told is a rarity. I started at Stone just a month before Palm/Passion Sunday in 2007. On the evening of that Sunday before Easter, I gave a performance of the Gospel of Mark to a standing-room-only crowd. When the church leaders asked me if I would do it again the following year, I said, “Only if some others will join me.” That was the genesis of our troupe. On Palm/Passion Sunday 2008 we did “Stories from the Gospel of Luke,” a performance of all the material that is found only in Luke’s Gospel. I did most of the telling, but more than a dozen novice storytellers each took part by telling a story as well. This past Palm/Passion Sunday we did “Stories from the Gospel of Matthew,” and I did a much smaller piece with the other troupe members picking up larger sections. It was gratifying, edifying, inspiring and amazing!

Q. Your musical compositions often speak of story. What is the relationship, for you, between storytelling and musical composing?

As an artist, I have always thought it important to follow my bliss—what’s that saying about going “where your heart’s desire meets the world’s deepest need” or something like that? That’s what I do when I write hymns

and songs about storytelling or make up songs that complement or supplement stories. I remember, in fact, that Tom told Mark beginning to end back at that Dude ranch 28 years ago. It was one of his first solo experiences. He must have heard some of the music that threw together for our Presbytery worship, because he asked me if I could come up with a half-dozen or so interludes to mark the transitions in Mark’s narrative. I remember that he called me at home a year or two later to ask, “Do you still have those pieces?” Of course, I didn’t; they were occasional, spontaneous, from the heart!

Q. What advice or encouragement would you give to pastors who are new to using biblical storytelling in their churches?

The Nike slogan: JUST DO IT! But don’t do it alone. If you can get old Aunt Emma and little Bobby to tell a story, you’ll have no resistance to overcome in the congregation! Remind folks again and again that Jesus never wrote a book, that the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” as the Letter to the Hebrews calls him, was The Great Storyteller! In this post-modern, post-literate new world of emerging church, there is no practice that is more authentic, more spiritually alive, more historically grounded, more theologically sound, more powerfully evocative than biblical storytelling! The advice with which I conclude nearly every workshop I lead is the advice I would give to pastors who would be storytellers: 1) Know the story. 2) Love the story. 3) Trust the story. Amen! Tell it!