Your Story Must Be Told

When my friend Doug told me that the pattern of death and rebirth is the central metaphor of the Christian life, he was giving me the currency that he earned through his own brokenness. He was telling me something that God had written on his life as a part of his story. The reason I didn’t understand it at that point was because I didn’t need to, but then several years later, I did.

You tell what you know, what you’ve earned, what you’ve learned the hard way. You watch it fall on what seem to be deaf ears, and you mutter something under your breath, something about pearls before swine. But then ten years later you realize that one fragment of your story has now been woven into someone else’s, a very necessary thing, a bridge to a new way of understanding and living. I didn’t need proof from a theologian or a tip from a church practitioner. I needed a piece of a story, something real and full of life and blood and breath and heartache, something way more than an idea, something that someone had lived through, a piece of wisdom earned the hard way. That’s why telling our stories is so important.

There are two myths that we tend to believe about our stories: the first is that they’re about us, and the second is that because they’re about us, they don’t matter. But they’re not only about us, and they matter more than ever right now. When we, any of us who have been transformed by Christ, tell our own stories, we’re telling the story of who God is. I bet God has done something in your life that would make our hair stand on end if you told us about it.

I bet the story God has written in your life and your home gives voice and breath and arms and legs to the gospel every bit as much as a church sermon ever did. Preaching is important, certainly. But it can’t be the only way we allow God’s story to be told in our midst.

I’m less and less interested in the ruminations of a scholar and more and more compelled by stories with grit and texture and blood and guts and humanity. I’m compelled by stories from everyday people whose stories sound a lot more like mine than the stories of superstars and high achievers. I’m compelled by stories that are ugly at the beginning and then oddly beautiful, stories from around the world, stories that laugh in the faces of gender and racial and socioeconomic boundaries.

I’m not interested in talking heads discussing war and poverty from behind a desk or from behind a pulpit. I want someone to look me in the eye and tell me they’re scared, too, sometimes, about the mess we’ve made around the world and the violence both around us and within us. And then I want that person to invite me down on my knees right next to them, shoulders brushing, listening to one another breathing in and breathing out.

The biggest, most beautiful story in the world deserves better than to be told by the same voices over and over again. I think it’s time for each of us to do what we can to speak the extraordinary story of God into life in our own ways, whoever we are—not defined by degree, gender, race, format.

The big story really is actually being told through our little stories, and by sharing our lives, not just our sermons, we’re telling God’s story in as reverent and divine ways as it has ever been told. God’s story was told in Hebrew and Greek, and I believe that it’s also being told in whispers and paintings and blogs and around dinner tables all over the world.

When I worked at a church a few years ago, it was my job to help people tell their stories on Sunday mornings at our gatherings. And a funny thing happened. When we were at the coffee shop, when it was just me and them and their story, their story came out in fits and starts, unvarnished and raw. We cried and laughed and every time I was amazed at what God had done in this person’s life.

And then almost every time, when they arrived on Sunday, they looked a little less like themselves. They were kind of a distant, polished, fancy version of themselves, and more remarkably, when they walked up on that stage, they sounded a lot less like themselves. They stopped believing that their story was enough, and they started saying all the phrases and quoting all the verses we’ve all heard
a thousand times, turning them from sacred songs into platitudes and clichés. They did it because we as a community have trained them and have been trained ourselves to believe that a story isn’t enough.

I could not disagree more. Let’s resist the temptation to hide behind theology the way a bad professor hides behind theorems and formulas. We dilute the beauty of the gospel story when we divorce it from our lives, our worlds, the words and images that God is writing right now on our souls.

And let’s stop acting as if religious professionals are the only ones who have a right and a responsibility to tell God’s story. If you are a person of faith, it is your responsibility to tell God’s story, in every way you can, every form, every medium, every moment. Tell the stories of love and redemption and forgiveness every time you experience them. Tell the stories of reconciliation and surprise and new life everywhere you find them.

In one of my favorite Tyler James songs, he says “my life’s not a story about me.” My life is not a story about me. And your life’s not a story about you. My life is a story about who God is and what he does in a human heart. My story is about the people on my street, the things I read, the way we raise our child, the things I’ve done and the things that have been done to me. A story is never about one person. It has a full cast of characters, connected by blood or love or jealousy.

There’s nothing small or inconsequential about our stories. There is, in fact, nothing bigger. And when we tell the truth about our lives—the broken parts, the secret parts, the beautiful parts—then the gospel comes to life, an actual story about redemption, instead of abstraction and theory and things you learn in Sunday school.

If I could ask you to do just one thing, it’s this: consider that your own silence may be a part of the problem. If you’ve been sitting quietly, year after year, hoping that someone will finally start speaking a language that makes sense to you, may I suggest that you are that person? If you’ve been longing to hear a new language for faith, one that rises and falls like a song, may I suggest that you start singing? If you want your community to be marked by radical honesty, by risky, terrifying, ultimately redemptive truth-telling, you must start telling your truth first.

I’ve spent my life surrounded by deeply gifted pastors, great leaders, and brilliant preachers. I understand the temptation to simply let them continue telling God’s story. I settled myself into the back row, certain that a girl like me had nothing to contribute, and that everything in the world that needed to be said was being said by people like them—extremely talented, polished people who never seem scared, who know the systems and the forms and the formulas like the backs of their hands.

But there is one thing that those pastors and preachers and leaders cannot do, one thing they can never do. They cannot tell my story. Only I can tell my story. And only you can tell your story.

This is what I want you to do: tell your story. Don’t allow the story of God, the sacred, transforming story of what God does in a human heart to become flat and lifeless. If we choose silence, if we allow the gospel to be told only on Sundays, only in sanctuaries, only by approved and educated professionals, that life-changing story will lose its ability to change lives.

It always goes back to the beginning, no matter how far we’ve wandered off course. When Christ walked among us, he entrusted the gospel to plain old regular people who were absolutely not religious professionals. If you have been transformed by the grace of God, then you have within you all you need to write your manifesto, your poem, your song, your battle cry, your love letter to a beautiful and broken world.

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