

The Forgotten Art of Storytelling: a powerful tool for Muslim Evangelism & Discipleship

By Daoud Sylla*

Over the past year and following my last two trips into North Africa, I have become convinced that there are many opportunities where one can do serious evangelism with little danger to security or to jeopardize one's platform by using storytelling as the main tool.

I. What is storytelling?

Initially, I am **not** referring to a chronicling method where one follows a series through the Old Testament, then the same series a second time with a theological emphasis. It is especially not fiction nor an imaginary story that we are creating to illustrate the truth. This would give equal authority to all stories, which I would never want to happen. **Secondly**, one cannot use exaggerations nor twist the story or event to draw from it an overarching truth; this would be no better than the Koranic errors in relating Old Testament stories and would defeat the evangelistic purpose. **Thirdly**, it must not be a proof-texting, that is, reading into the story what we as believers want to see nor what is not clearly visible. It cannot be a patchwork of events that requires a broad scope of knowledge from the listener, because he could not trust the assumptions, even if totally accurate.

So what is this forgotten lost art? **First**, it is a direct Biblical story, usually from the Old Testament, which we can show to the seeker or believer. **Secondly**, at no point can the story being told betray the overarching truth: this primary truth must be directly present in the event, or the power of the story will be lost. There can be other truths, even if implied, but the primary truth must be totally evident to all who listen. **Thirdly**, the narrative can be only one specific event in the life of the Biblical character, but it must be complete in order to provide a sound foundation for further follow up and growth. It is important to use the story to reveal God's character, the consequences of sin, struggles of human beings with attitude or righteousness or to correct errors, perception and even cultural practices which offend God—this is true for both the host and our own home cultures! Through this approach, we can lead the person to see God's salvific plan and how He reveals Himself and deals with mankind throughout the ages... **Fourthly**, it provides realistic opportunities to deeply plant the truth in a person's life in a fun and healthy way which is culturally acceptable and powerful. If correctly done, they appreciate it, are grateful for the

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spiritual insight and will want more interaction through this type of learning. It helps to build a firm foundation for a relevant relationship based on truth and trust. *Finally*, the story is tailored to address a specific issue or sin that is relevant to them. It reflects our concern to respond to their present situation and shows our openness to address their concerns. It is an expression of compassion and love by helping them better understand God's word and realize their responsibility before Him. It also links the relevance of God's word to their daily life, how it applies and how we can learn, not from traditional practices, but from what God has provided for our instruction: the Holy Book itself.

II. Why is Storytelling a forgotten or lost art?

Foremost, it is a lack of cultural understanding from those of us that originate in the western mindset. We have failed miserably to grasp the power and benefits that storytelling has had through the ages, whether from the Old Testament narrative which recounts to the "new Jewish generation" the events of their past (Numbers 33:1-49), or from the example of our Lord Jesus Himself with parables (Matthew 13:3-23).

Secondly, the western influence on apologetics and Cartesian logic which we value so deeply do not transfer easily into other cultures; our logic is not theirs and we are not talking the same language. From our perspective, Muslims can appear totally inconsistent because we are not on the same wave-

length. It is we who must adapt if we are to reach them.

Thirdly, I have yet to see a Bible school or seminary offer a class that teaches storytelling as a skill and tool. This is a major void and hinders the spread of the Gospel in many parts of the world! We value languages, inductive Bible study methods, preaching, theology, Christian education, administration, and counseling, which I am grateful to have had. But how can we think that we have prepared someone for an effective ministry to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the world without this skill, which can be used with equal effectiveness for evangelism and for discipleship of believers!

Lastly, it is lost because of three related items: time, relationships, and effectiveness. (a) It takes tremendous time and energy to prepare a story correctly. There are no shortcuts that allow God to work through our life with the overarching truth, so we should expect to spend time preparing and living it before we can utilize it. (b) In a fast-paced society, we have not realized that God's concern is still on relationships between people. Our schedules do not allow for extended time to be spent on relationship building. One of the mistakes I made in my ministry in West Africa was to initiate too many relationships and then not have the time to properly follow all of them. It is true that when initiating a new ministry we must plow a lot of terrain to find good soil; however, at some point we must also focus on planting. And that means freeing time to build deeper and more meaningful relationships.

(c) We have confused busyness with effectiveness. I like to keep a full schedule, but I am learning that certain items or projects must be relinquished, no matter how great they are, to devote more of my time, energy and resources to people. I will be the first to observe that some workers can be "low energy" people, unorganized, or unfocused. I will be the first to admit that computers and emails are keeping workers away from ministry—because it is indirect and less threatening. But we must continuously ask ourselves, have we lived Christ, shared Christ, introduced Him to people? That is the bottom line! Effectiveness is not, and can never be, measured by a full and busy schedule. We must believe that, even if we cannot see the immediate benefit or impact of storytelling, the "Living God" has and is still in the business of seeking sincere hearts to call to Himself (Exodus 6:1-5; I Samuel 16:7; II Chronicles 7:14; Psalms 119:1-16, 33-39; Jeremiah 31:31-33; Lamentations 3:21-23). The greatest effectiveness is having the ability to free ourselves to participate in that exciting adventure with God, allowing Him to work in our lives so that we may be used to reach those around us.

III. Why is Storytelling a Real Art?

It shocks some people to hear me refer to storytelling as an art. I said to a friend recently that she had been storytelling for years, but had only been using the tool on children. She is already an expert storyteller and is now prepared to transfer this skill to working with adults, literate as well as illiterate.

Storytelling is a tool for both seeker and believer. I have encouraged believers who are facing difficult situations to remember the truth clearly presented in the David and Goliath story (I Samuel 17). David was a young boy (vss. 12, 14) who knew precisely which God he was serving (vs. 26). Based on that fact and the past faithfulness of God (vss. 34-37), he was fearless to stand firm (vs. 45) before the giant man of war (vss. 4-7, 33, 42, 43)! After victory (vss. 45, 46), he gave God the glory (vss. 46, 51). And all Israel was strengthened in their faith in God (vss. 47, 52). This powerful story expresses the greatness of God and His ability to bring victory (vs. 53), no matter the size of the enemy that we seem to be facing. A truth also implied is that we have yet to defeat certain Goliaths in our own life!

It is an art to draw the overarching truth out of a story. Many believers, especially former Muslims, need foundational teaching. Storytelling provides an opportunity for them to study God's word and learn specific truths which they can share in turn with seekers. It is a skill to build the story, using the elements to bring out the overarching truth. It is essential that this truth emerge in the story and that the listener be able to identify it. By focusing on the greatest truth, the story is more relevant. Items that are not transferable to a local culture can be omitted or explained as long as this does not handicap the story.

Furthermore, the listener is able to retain the truth much longer. We have presented a truth that he or she was

able to identify and remember because linked to a story. Like an artist, we must carefully weave from memory each strand and color to create the designer carpet that contains the picture in the end. It takes practice, patience and sensitivity to His leading. Our first few attempts will probably not feel comfortable, but God is gracious to mature us. He has equipped us with the Holy Spirit to empower us to great things (Matthew 19:26; Mark 9:23; John 14:12-15; 16:23,24; Acts 1:8)!

Especially in countries where security is a daily concern, storytelling avoids direct confrontation between the seeker and the source of the story, the Bible. I have found that Old Testament stories lead the seeker to the Bible in many cases where it would have been impossible or unsafe to begin directly with the Bible. I have never been refused the opportunity to tell a story. Except in rare cases of a person trying to save face before others, the overarching truth has never been challenged. God's word has power to draw people to Himself, but we need to step out of our comfort zones and develop this much needed skill for the Kingdom.

IV. Some Helpful Guidelines

A. Offer to tell the story, don't impose it. The offer can be refused, but generally is not! This creates ownership in the listener and captivates his or her attention. Then continue to pray for an open heart...

B. Prepare the story carefully, with knowledge of the details and a focus on the primary truth.

C. Weave the story progressively to a climax in which the primary truth will appear as clearly as a pattern on a checkered shirt.

D. Narrate it with feeling, passion and suspense.

E. Omit certain details which are extraneous to the plot of the story; however, it is important to provide enough detail to tightly weave the image.

F. Include details on which you can build in the future or that can be of particular interest to the listener (or pique his or her curiosity). This can be a cultural, spiritual or emotional element to undergird the story.

G. Once the story is told, always summarize the primary truth (reemphasizing it): this is crucial to solidify this truth. It is possible, depending on availability of time or the listener's openness, to present some of the other truths present or implied in the narrative. Be careful, however, that this does not distract from the primary truth, and that it does not lead to a debate over minors when this newly planted seed needs to be fertilized and watered first!

H. Give opportunity to the listener to ask questions, share what he or she thinks of the story and has learned from it. This will enable you to evaluate your storytelling skills and see if you scored the "home run" with the primary truth.

V. Illustrations

In learning a new skill, it is important to observe it practiced. It is difficult to tell a story in writing, so I thought that it would be helpful to provide two short illustrations. My comments for story-building are in italics.

A. For encouraging a believer

For encouraging a believer undergoing persecution for his or her faith, I propose the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, found in Daniel 3:1-30.

The first step is to outline the passage.

Vss. 1-6: Nebuchadnezzar has a golden image made and dedicated.

Vs. 7: The king's decree is that all peoples must worship this golden image.

Vss. 8-15: Plot and last chance given to Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to bow to the golden image or face Nebuchadnezzar's wrath and furnace.

Vss. 16-18 [*statement of faith*]

v. 16: no need to reconsider [*They choose to burn rather than worship an idol*].

v. 17: God is able to deliver them from the furnace.

v. 18: If He does not save them, still they will never serve another god.

Vss. 19-24: The 3 are thrown into 'blazing fire' [*the consequence of their stand for God*]

Vss. 25-27: Nebuchadnezzar witnesses God's miraculous intervention. [*They are unharmed with angel's presence in the furnace*]

Vs. 28: Nebuchadnezzar blesses God for their deliverance. [*He recognizes their obedience and total devotion to God*]

Vs. 29: Nebuchadnezzar's new decree: no other god but theirs. [*God's glory and power impacts an entire nation by their deliverance*]

Vs. 30: Nebuchadnezzar blesses them. [*He grants them prosperity as a result of obedience and faithfulness*]

The *second step* is to use these elements to build a narrative with drama and suspense. It is like a 5mn. video clip in which the listener can experience the story firsthand ... Here are some of the ideas that should be included:

1. The 3 boys' horror at the king's demand (Exodus 20:3-5).
2. The king's pride and his rage against the 3 boys.
3. The drama of the events and the danger of death in the furnace.
4. The grandeur of God's deliverance and the beauty of His miracle.
5. The king's amazement at God's power, His person and the boys' faith.
6. The blessing that the boys received as an outcome of their stand for God.

The *third step* is to reemphasize the primary truth, which is found in vss. 17 & 18: God can save us, but if He does not, we will still only serve Him!

There are other truths present in this passage:

- At some point, each of us has to take a stand for God.
- They were thrown into the furnace. [*a readiness to pay the price*]

- God's deliverance varies in form and method.
- They were ready to die for God rather than commit idolatry.
- By their faithfulness, a whole nation was touched by God.
- In this case, they were blessed materially because of their faithfulness.

NOTE: This story is not exclusively for believers. It can be used to help a seeker (i) to realize the cost of becoming a disciple and (ii) to prepare for the reality that we must all take a stand for God, no matter the outcome...

B. To challenge a seeker

To challenge a seeker to think about his sin, the consequences, and the need for forgiveness, I have used the story of Moses at Kadesh found in Numbers 20:1-12.

The **first step** is to outline the passage.

Vs. 1: Death of Miriam [*This can be used to give a little historical background*]

Vss. 2-5: The people complain and criticize Moses' leadership and their conditions. [*forgetting how terrible it was in Egypt as slaves and that they are in the desert as a result of disobedience and to learn dependence on God*]

Vss. 6,7: Moses and Aaron plead with God for help to find water [*God must be our first avenue to solve our problems*]

Vs. 8: God's specific instructions: "assemble people & talk to rock" [*God gives simple and clear instructions to follow*]

Vss. 9, 10a: Moses follows God's instructions [*He starts well*]

Vs. 10b: Moses becomes angry and commits the first sin [*He takes part of the credit for the miracle; 'shall we bring forth water'*]

Vs 11: He strikes the rock twice and commits the second sin. [*His anger causes disobedience to God's specific instructions*]

Vs. 12: God punishes Moses for his unbelief and lack of respect for His holiness [*Moses' mission failed and he will not enter the promised land!*]

[*Joshua chosen to replace him (Numbers 27:18) because of faithfulness*]

The **second step** is to gather the elements required to build the narrative and captivate the listener.

- The leadership's difficulty to keep the people satisfied.
- It is easy to criticize; criticism brings discouragement.
- The gravity of the lack of water in the desert, both for people & animals.
- The wonder of the proposed miracle: can water actually come from a rock?
- The disappointment of such a great prophet's sin!
- The fact that God grants the miracle of water despite Moses' sin.
- God is just and punishes everyone for sin, even this great prophet.

The **third step** is to reemphasize the primary truth: God punishes everyone without exception, even such a great prophet as Moses, for his sin (20:12)! The consequence of his sin was permanent, unavoidable and unredeemable; Moses never entered the promised land (Deuteronomy 34:1-6). It did not matter what he had accomplished for

God in the past (Deuteronomy 34:10-12), he is punished because he sinned. There are other truths present in this passage:

- Not following God's instructions or Word 'to the letter' can cause us to sin against Him.
- God's justice requires that He punish every sin.
- On a daily basis, are we careful to give God the glory for His mighty works and not to take His credit when He grants us 'water' in our desert?
- All mankind (including prophets) have sinned and will be punished by God Himself. Jesus is the ONLY exception and therefore is the only one able to bring complete reconciliation with God and forgiveness of sin.

NOTE: This story is not exclusively for seekers. It can be used to help a believer realize (i) that it is easy to criticize leadership, (ii) that it is a constant choice to obey God who expects perfect obedience to His word, (iii) that there are consequences for every sin and (iv) that God determines the punishment with justice.

There are many stories to pick from the Old Testament that can be used both for Muslim evangelism and discipleship of believers. I could have used the example of Ruth, showing that God is calling all nations to Himself and that a faithful heart brings forth His blessing. She chose to forsake family, friends and country (Ruth 1:16,17) to follow Naomi and

adopt her God, who blessed the seeker by granting a messianic descendant (Ruth 4:14-22) because He looks at the heart, not one's ethnic origin (Ruth 1:4-6)! The story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the 'original sin' in the garden by disobedience to God's command can certainly be used to lay a solid foundation prior to this story of Moses: it only took one sin to get kicked out of the garden and despite their efforts to do good, they were never able to return! However, for Muslims it is crucial to build on this by relating it to the prophets as well (a common but untrue belief that prophets did not sin). There are a number of examples to use, such as David's adultery and murder (II Samuel 11:24) or Jonah's disobedience (Jonah 1). But Abraham and Moses are the pinnacle of Old Testament prophets (even in the Bible) and therefore give a stronger example on which to build a case for Jesus, and against Mohamed, at a later point in the relationship.

VI. Conclusion

Storytelling is a skill that one can build up over time: it isn't perfect for everyone nor the solution in every case. If used with discernment and practiced with some frequency, it is a powerful tool that 'the people of the Book' should be using for the Kingdom. May He draw many to Himself through the examples given to us in His Holy Book!