

Catholic

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God Stories

IN THE TELLING WE OURSELVES ARE REVEALED



MADYER/SHUTTERSTOCK

JOHN SHEA

We all love to tell stories. No matter our mood—in reverie or expectation, panic or peace—we can be found stringing together incidents and unfolding episodes. We turn our pain into narrative so we can bear it; we turn our ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. We tell our stories to live.

God not only loves to hear our stories, God loves to tell stories. In particular, we are the story God tells. Our very lives are the words that come from God's mouth. This conviction that we are God's story releases primordial impulses, and out of a mixture of belligerence, gratitude, and imitation, we return the compliment. We tell stories about God.

What Are “God Stories”?

The overall Christian strategy can be summed up as:

- Gather the folks.
- Break the bread.
- Tell the stories.

An age-old truth reveals that in the telling, we are told. It could not be otherwise. You may know the whimsical legend:

...And God, angered by inaccurate reporting and editorial guesses about who he is and what he is about, hired the human person as a scribe and began to dictate his story. (It is well known that although God positively fulminates in speech, he has neither the patience nor time to write.) So for forty days and forty nights, God spoke and for forty days and forty nights, the scribe scribed. Finally, the last word having been spoken, the exhausted God sat down (he had paced during the whole time of dictation). The scribe finished the last word and stood up with the outrage of someone who has been plagiarized, “But this is *my* story!”

To say the stories of God are also tales of humankind is not to say they are only our personal and social stories projected skyward. What we say of God is not merely Christian code for talking about ourselves. Rather, the reality of God so suffuses the reality of people that to talk of one is to implicate the other. Our interpenetration by Mystery is so total that the stories of God, no matter how they appear, are never legitimately told in the third person. In this realm, observer status is open to us only as a distortion.

British philosopher Dorothy Emmet (1904–2000) said that when we say the Lord is a shepherd we do not mean the Lord himself is a shepherd but that our relationship to the Lord is something like that of a shepherd to his sheep. The stories of God are not solely about God or about us but about the terrifying distance and incredible closeness between us.

Jesus as the Main Character

There is a peculiar Christian twist to this process of inclusive storytelling. Christians believe that God and humankind have met and mingled in Jesus of Nazareth. And so a shorthand way of talking about both God and the human person is to tell a story about Jesus. The stories of Jesus have a triple focus. They are about God and humankind filtered through Jesus. In philosophic and sacramental theology, the mediatorship of Jesus Christ has been thoroughly explored. But it has not always been recognized that the Gospel portraits of Jesus can also be understood in terms of mediation.

The evangelist tells the story of Jesus so that God’s present activity within the community is focused. The emphasis is on the present revelation, and the story of Jesus is reconfigured to speak to that situation. So for the persecuted yet hopeful community of Mark, Jesus is the suffering Son of Man who will return on the clouds. For the community of Luke—who must learn to live in history—the apocalyptic portrait of Jesus is modified: Jesus becomes the



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exemplar of Christian life. The difference between Jesus and the believer is downplayed. The same Spirit that animated Jesus animates the believer. Like the believer, Jesus prays and attends worship; like Jesus, the believer forgives his enemies (Stephen). In this perspective, Christology does not investigate the psychic makeup of Jesus but uncovers how the story of Jesus symbolizes the historical relationship of God and God’s people.

Therefore, the Christian stories of God create the world by disclosing the foundational contours of the God-humankind relationship. This disclosive nature of the stories is their symbolic power. A mythic story is not a tale that is looked at, but one that is looked through. It is the way we enter into the depths of human experience and the transfiguration of those depths. When a mythic story loses that power to mediate the ultimate makeup of reality, it becomes an heirloom, part of the heritage of the community but not part of its living tradition.

Stories Take Shape and Build Through Analysis

Contemporary Christians have a particularly difficult time in handing themselves over to the community’s stories of God. These stories are recorded in writings, the youngest of which is around 1,900 years old. They reflect the creative imagination of another time and place. We were once certain that the more we knew about the Bible, the more it would speak to us. Now, overwhelmed by biblical research, we are confronted with the possibility that the more we know about the Bible, the less it has to say. One thing is certain. If the Christian stories of God (whose basic shape is given in Scripture) are to create worlds and mediate the sacred, they must go through a process of interpretation.

The reason for interpreting the stories is to release the God who lives there. The community has treasured certain stories, proclaiming them to be formative of its life. Therefore, an interpretation must be accountable to the basic intentionality of these stories. But a story is never told, it is always retold.

The basic shapes of the Christian stories are found in ancient writings, and so they need to be interpreted. Through interpretation, a world is proposed and the stories mediate to us the redemptive power of God.

As we look into the Christian stories of God, we find they are enthralling, provocative, and—as all who have told or heard them know—dangerous. What they are not is “all of one piece.” An ongoing and powerful experience of God generates many stories. A vibrant tradition tells its tales long into the night. Real poverty is having only one story to tell, and the Christian tradition is anything but poor. It suffers from richness. The best Christian stories are unafraid, telling the chaos of what is rather than the order of what should be. They are not what Stephen Crites calls “pseudo stories”—theories clothed in narrative, moral principles in search of examples. The God who bargains with Abraham and Moses will not budge with Jonah. The God who is a small voice with Elijah is a whirlwind to Job. The loving Father of Jesus does not visit the death of his Son. In the Christian stories of God, logic finishes last.

Stories trigger stories. The ending of one inevitably signals the beginning of another. They cluster and interact like pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. In one sense, each tale can stand on its own; in another sense, they depend on each other. None are complete until all are told. Together they form a tradition, a heritage of narratives that explore (in our case) the many facets of the relationship of God and God's people.

While each story has its own integrity, they are not idiosyncratic. Since they all belong to a single tradition, they can be gathered into “megastories”—patterns that seem fascinating tell stories of hope and justice, trust and freedom, and invitation and decision. Let the stories begin....

A Story of Hope and Justice

The story of hope and justice begins with Yahweh hearing the groaning of enslaved Israel and remembering the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Out of this seeing and remembering, the power of God flows and the divine values are disclosed. It was not because of Israel's merits that she was rescued. She was delivered precisely because she was oppressed and exploitation is abhorrent to God. Yahweh reminds her that this was the reason.

You must not molest the stranger or oppress him, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt. You must not be harsh with the widow or with the orphan; if you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me, and be sure I shall hear their cry (Exodus 22:22–23).

The second reason for rescue goes beyond God's unalterable opposition to exploitation to a positive understanding of justice. Yahweh is faithful to promises, loyal to the claims that communal living impose. God understands Abraham and his descendants as partners, and so the divine is responsive to the demands this relationship entails. God's values are nonexploitation and fidelity.

The story of Cain and Abel stresses the relational and merciful moments of justice. When God confronts Cain with his murderous deed, it is not because the law has been broken. He goes after Cain because “your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.” And although justice would seem to demand punishment, Cain is pardoned and protected. Justice is about the relations among God, self, and neighbor, and often that means more than measure for measure.

A Story of Trust and Freedom

The cross of Christ can be interpreted as a response to the question, “How do we trust in a world distorted by our own betrayals and filled with deliberate sin and arbitrary suffering?” The cross is a symbol of deliberate sin and arbitrary suffering, and on it is not just another hapless victim but the Son of God. The centurion in Mark's Gospel pronounces the deepest meaning of the cross: “Surely this was the Son of God.” The cross revolutionizes our understanding of God and presents to us new possibilities for life. God is not a heavenly ruler, and the question is not how does God reward good and punish evil. God is a passionate presence to all human life, never deserting it. The cross is the symbol of the fellow suffering of God. Elie Wiesel's story in *Night* is about this God:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly, but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer, “Here he is—he is hanging here on this gallows.”

The cross uncovers the deepest truth about the relationship of God and

What's Your Story?

An old man sits by the sea and knows that the waves he watches will crash on those shores long after he is gone. He is triggered into an awareness of the Mystery within which both he and the waves dwell.

What activity leads you to an awareness of God?

What does it also say about you?

humankind. God is redemptively present to every moment of human life, and therefore, even in our sin and suffering, we are not abandoned. God is intimately present to us and knows all we are. And knowing all we are, God accepts us.

This story of God disarms us. We were ready with conditions built on dishonesty, cover stories that hide our fear. But our doctored accounts are not needed before the crucified God. The viciousness with which we protect ourselves turns to calm before the graciousness of God. God's acceptance of even the worst in us has freed us from fear, and without fear we do not need to lie. We can trust the long journey into ourselves and the Mystery of which we are a part.

God's total acceptance and our response of trust do not encourage complacency but are the indispensable base of action. Without this grounding, our energies are spent on stratagems of justification and protection. When the acceptance symbolized in the cross suffuses our lives, we are freed to be for the other, to love in the same way we have been loved. This is the paradoxical message of Christianity.

The cross also symbolizes the realism that must characterize Christian life. If God's freeing presence to us involved entering into our sin and suffering, our freeing presence to each other will involve no less. To pursue a life of trust, friendship, and justice is to follow the discipleship of the cross. In the concrete world in which we live, the trusted creature is often the suffering creature; the one who is responsible is the one who risks his or her life.

The Christian Eucharist reflects this understanding. The bread and wine are symbols of all God's gifts. The meal is the expression of sacred friendship and community. Yet the bread is a body broken, the wine a blood outpoured, and the meal a sacrifice. The way of community entails suffering love, love willing to give itself. Fyodor Dostoevsky's remark that love in reality is a "harsh and dreadful thing" might be too strong. But love does demand sacrifice. The Christian community that is sustained by the God on the cross is not tempted to love in dreams.



ROMAN SAMBORSKI/SHUTTERSTOCK

We gather together and tell stories of God to calm our terror and hold our hope on high.

A Story of Invitation and Decision

The concern of the story of invitation and decision is neither people nor God but the movement of God in people and the movement of people in God. Too often theology isolates God and becomes old and tame and talks about a distant being. But poetry, the poetry of the sayings and parables of Jesus, is not about something over there but is the experience of the quickening touch of what is present. The dynamic

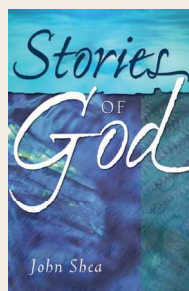
interpenetration of God and person is crucial.

In the parables of Jesus, God is the plot. God is what the people within the parables are undergoing or what the people hearing the parables are undergoing. These stories of invitation and decision both presuppose and witness to divine activity. The activity is not a separate and discernible element of human life or storytelling.

In a way, the stories of hope and justice, trust and freedom are the content of God, and the story of invitation and decision is the form. On the other hand, the world of invitation and decision can appear unyielding. There is a purging aspect to the redemptive process that the parables do not shy away from. The halting, never-ending movement from sin to redemption would paralyze and debilitate us if we did not tell the other stories. From these stories, we know that the mystery is love and that the

conversion process, no matter how painful, is the way of our well-being. All three of these tales, therefore, merge into a single story of God. And, of course, God's story is ours.

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