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a scholarly musing

from the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l.
Scholars' Seminar

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Power in Tentative Narration

by NBS Seminar Coordinator, Philip Ruge-Jones

Early in my practice I approached biblical storytelling with the assumption that only a confident voice-in control and ever-moving forward in its narration-is truly fitting for the authoritative Word we announce. But more and more, I am calling this into question. Many of the moments that have swayed me have taken place in the company of my beloved raconteurs of the Network.

Almost every year one experienced storyteller gets up confidently to tell a story told dozens and dozens of times only to suddenly realize that she has lost the thread. Flustered, she tries to find a way forward as silent seconds feel like hours. Eventually she finds her place or simply begins again. Always, the teller is utterly chagrined by this lapse; however, just as often the stumbling leads to conversations about how empowering and comforting that moment was for the novices among us. "That happens to even her? Then I won't worry so much that it happened to me!" Comfort and empowerment arise out of frailty; and novices are freed to tell less self-consciously.

A couple of years ago in the NBS Seminar (a meeting of scholars and storytellers that happens before the Festival Gathering) Cynthia Park intentionally entered into a narrative mode of tentativeness. She was Daniel seeing very odd visions, and rather than reciting what Daniel saw as though he had rehearsed his speech for days flipping through notecards, she told it as though the vision was unfolding before Daniel's eyes as she spoke to us. What came across was a Daniel who was busy trying to make sense of all the bizarre images as he narrated what, in his perplexity, he saw kaleidoscoping before him. The result of this tentativeness was a different kind of connection with the audience. Authority was established not by standing over us with a definitive Word, but by gathering us along side of the prophet who struggled with us to figure out what God was communicating. I find I trust this narration more than that of a perfectly prepared pontificator. (Let me be clear: Cynthia was very well prepared for her telling, but her preparation was geared toward performing for us as a perplexed prophet).

I have embraced this tentative narrating in much of my own telling. This means that my

blind see, or when the Syrophenician woman challenges Jesus, or when the anointed one takes a stroll on the sea. In concrete terms, it means my narrator is scratching his head more often, dropping his jaw on a regular basis, and groping for words just beyond reach. He is confused at times, but always much closer to the situation of those listening than a confident declaration would be. This narrator has authority, but it is based in frailty rather than strength, and in some confusion rather than complete certainty.

This authority is birthed by what Jan Patočka called "the solidarity of the shaken." Like the stumbling of our best storytellers, this approach so moved my audiences that I found this narrative strategy making its way into Jesus' own discourse. My portrayal of Jesus lately has a shaken (not stern) quality. **No longer is Jesus speaking sermons that he has rehearsed for an eternity, rather he is in the moment, feeling his way forward like the rest of us, only always with more brilliant and faithful improvisation than we manage to pull off.** This Jesus pauses to catch his breath, is occasionally at a loss for words, and gropes for an image that will convey best what he saying, "It would be better for him ... if... (eyes searching upward) if ... (eye brows raise in discovery) a large millstone were tied around his neck (nodding) and he were thrown into the sea."

For now at least, I am drawn to this way of embodying biblical authority. The stuttering Jesus has authority-y-y-yes, but not like the silver-tongued sermonators. Rather he is like the wise brother by our side, ready in the moment to respond to things that boggle our minds. He has not panicked ahead of time about what he would say, but says what the spirit gives him in the moment. I find this clay-vessel kind of authority worth treasuring (2 Corinthians 4:7).

About the Scholar

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He has served as the convener of the NBS SEMINAR for the past several years. He is a storyteller and scholar who has taught courses to university students in the area of Performance Criticism. His books include *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media* which he co-edited with Holly Hearon. He earned his B.A. from Lawrence University, his M.Div. from Luther Seminary and his Ph.D. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in the area of systematic theology. [Email Phil.](#)



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