

# ***Empowering Congregations as Storytelling Communities***

**Biblical storytelling workshop activities  
for adults, youth, and children**

GoTell Communications

[www.gotell.org](http://www.gotell.org)

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## **Basic components of a biblical storytelling workshop include:**

1. **Learning** the story—first its basics (setting, characters, plot), then specific words and phrases
2. **Exploring** the story in its original context—understanding how the story would have been understood by audiences to whom it was first told by learning about keys words and concepts in it
3. **Connecting** the story to contemporary life—relating dynamics of the story to one’s own lived experience
4. **Telling** the story—communicating through voice and gesture

Sometimes also included:

5. **Praying** with the story—allowing the scripture to be a conduit of relationship between God and people

## **Sample Pattern (75-90 min. workshop)**

Leader introduces self and briefly tells why biblical storytelling has been meaningful, names the agenda (written on chart paper or board). If group is small, participants give their names and what they hope to get from session. Add to agenda as needed. Launch into story-teaching within 10 minutes. If people are holding things (like Bibles or notepads) direction them to put items under chair: “Need hands free.”

Repeat-after-Me, with or without Lion Hunt. First sitting, then standing with movement.

Storyboard exercise leading into partner telling.

As a group, do a little narrative analysis (from memory):

- Setting (time and place)
- Characters (on stage and off stage)
- Plot summary

Hand out story script (with Keys score card on back) and describe structure (same number of parts as you used for the storyboard exercise), note any verbal threads. Have people write titles for each part and then share them with the group.

Do the “Pick Three” activity to explore original context—or pick one thing for each part of the story, if that works.

Review the story by telling and leaving out words for group to fill in.

Keys activity if there is time; if not, suggest they use this to practice at home.

Connection Conversation OR if time is short, name the connection and have them share in partners, then bring group together and ask if anyone wants to share with all.

End by telling the story in a meditative way, as a response to the sharing.

## Learn the Story

### □ **Lion Hunt**

The classic opening for a biblical storytelling workshop is the Lion Hunt. It's a variation on the campfire activity, "We're going on a Bear Hunt." For a written script, see *Story Journey* by Thomas E. Boomershine. But it really needs to be experienced to learn. It leads seamlessly into the following Repeat-After-Me activity without the introductory talk: start the biblical story immediately after completing the Lion Hunt.

### □ **Repeat-After-Me**

Say: "Let's tell a story together. We will need to use our mouths, so let's warm up our mouths... (move mouth and make nonsense noises). We will also need to use our hands, so let's warm up our hands... (move hands and make nonsense gestures). Great, everybody can use their mouths and hands. Now you say and do everything I say and do and we'll tell the story together..." Go through the story a phrase at a time and have participants mimic what you say and do. Do it sitting down once and then say, "Great, we told the story. Now let's do it again standing up."

### □ **Storyboard** (see Appendix)

This activity works very well with all ages (above 5) to facilitate careful listening and visualization of the story. It leads into telling to a partner, saying something like: "Use your storyboards to tell the story to each other; don't look at a written version, just tell as much as you can remember at this point in your storylearning."

### □ **One-Liners**

Pick a sentence in the story that is significant or difficult. Help participants learn it by lots of repetition in these five ways.

**Volume:** Say the sentence really, really softly; then just a little louder, increasing the volume each time you say it until everyone is more or less screaming; then work your way back down again.

**Chant:** Repeat the line several times in a rhythmic manner, establishing the rhythm by patting your lap (encourage participants to follow suit).

**Drum:** After establishing the chant, repeat using a drum with participants taking turns being the drummer-leader.

**Sing:** Compose a melody that works with the line and sing it through several times. Simple children's songs often work well and are familiar; sometimes a hymn tune or popular song will come to mind.

**Remove-a-Word:** Write words of the sentence on index cards—one word per card. Put words of the sentence in order in a pocket chart (available at school supply stores). Read through the sentence. Then invite a participant to come up and pick out a word to remove; everyone repeats the sentence. Next person to come up takes two words away; everyone repeats the sentence. Continue until most of the words are gone. Then say the whole sentence together.

- **Read-Around**  
Create a script for the story with each sentence on a separate line. Clip this on a clipboard and attach a pen to the clipboard with some string or yarn. Explain: “We will read through the story one sentence at a time. The story is on this clipboard. Each of us will have one sentence to read. After reading your sentence, put a check mark by it and then pass the clipboard to the person next to you. That way the person will know where to start.
- **Read-Around Variations**  
Hand out a paper to each person with the story formatted as above.  
Go around the circle multiple times, each time giving a different instruction as to how the sentences should be read; for example (pick 4-6, depending on size of group):
  1. Straight; tell participants to read the sentence (no special instructions)
  2. Volume: loud/soft
  3. Pitch: high/low
  4. Tempo: slow/fast
  5. Angrily
  6. Crying
  7. Laughing
- **Keys Game** (see Appendix)
- **Activities to do with a hand-out of the story “script”**
  - **Talk about developing a script:** Get story out of paragraph form into episodes and sense lines (sentences/phrases)
  - **Structure:** Note how many parts there are and the relationships between them
  - **Titles:** Instruct people to create titles for each section of the story; review them orally or write them on paper if group is small (the way people name the sections is always interesting and diverse)
  - **Verbal Threads:** Identify repeated words and phrases, both within the story and from the story to other places in the Bible.
- **Fill in the Blank**  
Tell the story with pauses for individual words and have group “fill in the blanks” you create with your pauses.

## Understand the Story

- **Pick Three: Explore Original Context**  
Identify three things people today need to know about the original context of the story to understand what it meant for people who first heard it. Tell about these three things. Possibilities include: any word you think they won't understand; geographical and historical facts; political, social, and religious practices; social norms and expectations; cultural and scriptural background. This will require some research on your part. Consult reliable sources.
- **Find and Read: Explore Canonical Context**  
Locate the story in a Bible. Look at what happens before and after the story and summarize or read. Help participants understand where the story fits in to the Gospel/biblical narrative.
- **Screenplay: Explore Setting, Characters, Plot and Dialogue**  
Using chart paper or a whiteboard print the text reference to the story. Under that print title, setting, characters, action, dialogue, props. As a group, fill in the story elements: time and place; names/identities of characters; plot movements; conversation, which might include a discussion of feelings to identify tone of voice and gestures; plants, animals or things significant to the story. Then decide on a title. The resulting "screenplay" can stand as an exercise on its own or be used as the basis for dramatizing the story or to create an "on-the-spot" news show interview about the story event.
- **Signs**  
Identify one or two key words in the story that have a corresponding sign from American Sign Language. Talk about their meaning in the context of the story. Teach the ASL sign for the word and use it when reviewing the story.
- **Quiz Game** (see Appendix)

## Connect with the Story

- **Connection Conversation** (see Appendix, p.11)
- **I Wonder**

Write an open-ended question in the form of “I wonder...?” in the center of chart paper or white board in a distinctive color. Invite participants to “wonder” about the question and when they have a thought, to share it. Do not judge or comment on their response; write their response in a different color around the question. Circle it and draw a line to the question.
- **Artistic Response: Drawing, Painting, Collage, Modeling**

Invite participants to respond to the story through an artistic medium. You may give them a specific project idea or sample, but also encourage them to pursue their own ideas. Encourage realistic imagery as well as abstract designs (which can cover anything from a “scribble” to a collage of shapes). The goal is that it has something to do with the story; you could ask, “What part of the story inspired this art work?”
- **Music and Movement**

Teach a song that has to do with the story. Note the aspects of the story the song highlights. Add gestures or other movements. Some songs have standardized movements; some you will choreograph yourself; signs (ASL) are a source of movement as well as dance moves; given some free expression, people will often come up with good movements on their own.
- ***The Storykeepers***

Many good stories for children from the Gospels are integrated into *The Storykeepers* video series in a way that shows connections between our lives and the biblical story. Watching these animated versions will give participants another experience of the story.
- **Video Production**

Videotape participants doing various storylearning and storytelling activities and edit short takes into a 3-5 minute production. Use music they sing if possible, and/or someone telling the story for audio.

## Tell the Story

- **Tell the Story**  
Ask if anyone would like to tell the story to the group. Usually there's some strong extrovert who will and others will follow. Whatever they do is to cause for congratulations. Don't correct or help unless the teller looks for it or seems to be floundering. Model/encourage supportive and appreciative audience participation.
- **Figure Telling** (see Appendix)
- **Story-Weaving**  
Sit in a circle. Hold a ball of yarn and tell the beginning sentence or episode of the story. While holding the end of the yarn, toss the ball to someone across the circle from you. That person tells the next part of the story and then tosses the ball to another person while holding onto the yarn. Continue until the end of the story.
- **Freeze Frame** (see Appendix)
- **Drama Bag**  
Make or purchase a drama bag. One person moves inside the bag while another tells the story. For info on drama bags visit <http://www.liturgycreations.com>
- **Sequence Pictures**  
On cardstock, draw pictures to represent each episode in the story. Tell the story with the pictures. Place the pictures face down on the floor and mix them up. Invite participants to turn them over and put them in the correct sequence. Have someone tell the story using the cards.
- **Circle Telling**  
Sit in a circle. Present a "talking piece" –ideally related in some way to the story (like a net for the call of Simon and Andrew, James and John). Explain that you will start the story and then pass the talking piece to person next to you who will tell a little more of the story and then pass it on OR just pass it without telling. Continue until the story is told. Start again if the talking piece hasn't made it all the way around the circle.
- **Meditative Telling**  
Light a candle and place in the center of the group. Invite participants to listen to the story in light of the things they have learned about it and the connections they have made to it. Take a few deep breaths, get yourself centered, tell the story quietly.

# Appendix

## Storyboard

This exercise takes advantage of spatial intelligence and is especially helpful for visual learners, but everyone benefits from it. It works with all ages from seven up. [Under age seven participants can illustrate one aspect of the story.] Along with helping to embed the story in the minds' eye, it introduces the story's sequence of episodes while at the same time enabling participants to become comfortable with the flow of the whole story. It also serves as a way to get participants paired up for storylearning work, starting with telling the story to each other in a fun, easy way.

### Materials

- White paper (cardstock is especially nice to use)
- Markers, pen or pencil
- A chime, bell, or spoon and glass for indicating when it's time to open eyes

### Preparation

- Decide how many parts there are in the story. Be able to tell the story with those parts in mind (that is, knowing where they start and stop).

### Procedure

1. Instruct participants to divide their paper into however many sections as there are parts to the story. Have them number the squares. Print the number small in a corner of each square.
2. Explain that you are going to tell the first part of the story. Instruct participants to close their eyes and see what's happening in their mind's eye as you tell the story. You might want them to put their heads down or their hands over their faces. You can explain that it will help them see images in their mind's eye if they don't see anything in the room.
3. Read or tell part one of the story. Speak slowly, so participants have time to visualize.
4. Then ding the chime and say, "Okay, now open your eyes, and in square number one draw a picture of what you saw as you listened to the first part of the story." Help participants feel comfortable with fast, simple drawings. They can draw symbols or print words, too.
5. Repeat this process for all parts of the story.
6. When the storyboard is complete, encourage participants to find a partner and tell each other the story using their storyboard pictures to help remember.
7. Give three cheers for telling the story!

### NOTE WHEN WORKING WITH CHILDREN:

Sometimes children don't listen well, especially the first time, before they understand what they are going to do. They often need you to summarize the story or just do it again after they have opened their eyes. They usually get the hang of it pretty fast. With young children, you might just have them draw one scene or aspect of the story.

# "Keys to the Story"

This is a partnership (2 person) activity.

## Materials Needed

- Score card with copy of story in episodes on the back: 1/partnership
- Pencil, pen, or marker

## Instructions

1. This is a chart of key words and phrases from the story in chronological order. On the back is our story.
2. To begin: Hide score card so neither of you can see either side and neither of you is tempted to peek (sit on it, put it behind your back, place your hands over it, put it under the chair, in your briefcase...)
3. Partner A: Tell whatever you can remember of the story.
4. Get out the score card and together decide which keys were included in the telling. Check them off and add them up at the bottom of column 1. Review the story.
5. Hide score card again and Partner B tell the story.
6. Get out the score card and together decide which keys were included in the telling. Check them off and add them up at the bottom of column 2. Review the story.
7. Repeat the process so both partners tell the story twice.
8. Bonus stars are awarded for remembering the scripture reference (chapter/verse).

## Sample Score Card for "*Pentecost*" Acts 2:1-4

<b>Key</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
day of Pentecost				
all together in one place				
heaven				
sound like the rush of a mighty wind				
divided tongues, as of fire				
rested on each of them				
filled with the Holy Spirit				
speak in other languages				
power				
<b>How many did you get?</b>				
<b>Bonus: Scripture Reference</b>				

# Quiz Game

A Quiz Game is a fun way of reviewing details of the story and its original context. It has the appeal of "Trivial Pursuit" and TV game shows.

## **Preparation:**

You will need to create a list of multiple choice questions related to the story and the elements of its original and canonical context which you have taught. These are "closed questions" with one right answer, so be sure that is appropriate for what you ask. Also make sure you balance this activity with another that encourages wondering and "open questions."

## **Getting Ready to Play:**

1. Divide the class into 2-4 teams.
2. A team captain is appointed or selected by team members to hold up the cards for the team. Give the team captain a badge or some way to identify their role.
3. Give each team four cards: A, B, C, and D. Make these with 4x6 index cards or on colored card stock.
4. Each team also has a container large enough to hold a dozen balls, preferably different colors. Things that work are plastic crates, tubs, laundry baskets, waste baskets.
5. Game leader has a container of 2½ inch, air-filled, soft flex balls (available in toy depts).

## **Game Directions:**

1. Game leader reads the questions and gives the four possible answers. Do this twice and no more after the first couple of questions (they will learn to listen).
2. The teams are given 15-30 seconds to come up with an answer.
3. Game leader calls, "Time's up! Hold up your answer."
4. The team captains hold up cards with A, B, C, and/or D.
5. Game leader throws a ball to each team that gets a correct answer and they put the ball in their container.

## **Alternative Process:**

Team captain holds up a hand when their team has the answer. When all teams are ready they are invited to hold up their cards.

## **Optional Bonus Round**

The final bonus round of the game is the storytelling round. The question is: "Can someone tell the story of \_\_\_\_\_?" Each team nominates one person to tell the story for the team. If someone gets most of the story, the team gets four balls; OR a story judge decides how many balls they get (hold up a number card); use the Keys Game as an aid; also consider telling skill (gestures, expressiveness).

At the end of the game, the balls each team won are counted out and celebrated. There is no need to make this a win/lose game, with the implicit downer for the losers, since everybody wins with the story being learned. The number of balls/wins of each team can simply be celebrated. Go all out and award prizes if you want.

# Connection Conversation

For each topic (or only one, depending on time)...

1. Note something about the biblical story
2. Name the connection: "Let's talk about..." and start by giving an example from your own life (you could decide on this ahead of time)
3. Invite participants to make the connection to their lives
4. Another option is to list the topics as you name them and write brief notes about what participants say. Having your words written down in an accepting atmosphere is very affirming because you know someone has listened to you.

This should be a non-judgmental, affirming time for everybody.

Use a talking piece for responding—ideally related in some way to the story (like a net for the call of Simon and Andrew, James and John). Explain that you will tell your connection story and then pass the talking piece to the person next to you for their response. Only the person holding the talking piece can talk; others listen. If a person doesn't want to tell a connection story, they can simply say "pass" and pass the talking piece to the next person. The talking piece can go around a second time if time allows.

## Example for the story in Mark 2:1-12

Topic	Bible Story Note	Connection	Your Example
Crowded house	Many people came to Jesus' house to hear him speak; it was so crowded there wasn't even room to stand by the door.	Tell about a time when a lot of people came to your house.	
Paralytic	Someone who could not walk—a paralytic— was brought to Jesus, carried on a mat by four people.	Tell about someone you know or have seen who cannot walk. How does the person get around?	

# Figure Telling

You can tell biblical stories with wooden figures, cloth and other simple materials.

You will need some wooden blocks. An inexpensive way to get them is from a 1"x2"x8' furring strip. Ask a friendly person at a place that sells lumber to cut these for you in several lengths: approximately 2, 4, 6, and 8 inches.

Instead of blocks you could use wooden doll pins. Purchase a bag of doll pins and a bag of doll pin stands from a craft store.

A more expensive option are figures designed for Godly Play presentations available online from Worship Woodworks.

You could also make figures out of modeling material.

Use the figures to tell the story. Then invite participants to tell the story with the figures to a partner or to the group.

Materials also are very helpful in discussion about setting, characters, and plot.

## Options for Children

Have child pick out blocks for characters in the story and write names on them with a marker.

Slowly tell the story while child "plays it out" with the blocks.

You can also write names of geographical locations on colored paper to designate different settings in the story: road, city, house, country, sea, etc.

Other things your children could do:

- Sand the blocks to make them smoother.
- Draw, paint, or decorate the blocks with things that suggest the various characters: fabric for clothes, yarn for hair, "eyes" from a craft store, etc.
- Make figures out of modeling material.

# Freeze Frame Telling

## **Credit:**

This idea originated with Rina Wintour of Mountjoy Enterprises who called it “Liquid Pictures” in a series of books with creative ideas for presenting scripture. Visit her website at <http://www.liturgycreations.com>

## **Preparation:**

Either as a group, or as the leader, compose a title or summary statement of the story; also compose a descriptive phrase for 3-5 plot movements in the story. These could be words from the story; it could also be one word or a brief paraphrase. Print the phrase on index cards and assign one/person to learn by heart. These are the “tellers.”

## **Process:**

Tellers line up in front of the audience with their backs to the audience. Follow the pattern below, which is designed for a four-episode story.

Teller #1 at beginning of line, stage right, starts:

1. Turn around, take two steps forward
2. Say the title or summary statement

Teller #2 in line goes next:

1. Turn around, take two steps forward
2. Say phrase #1 three times
3. Do a brief movement inspired by the words, strike a pose and freeze

Teller #3 in line goes next:

1. Turn around, take two steps forward
2. Say phrase #2 three times
3. Do a brief movement inspired by the words, strike a pose and freeze

Teller #4 in line goes next:

1. Turn around, take two steps forward
2. Say phrase #3 three times
3. Do a brief movement inspired by the words, strike a pose and freeze

Teller #5 in line goes next:

1. Take two steps forward
2. Say phrase #4 three times
3. Do a brief movement inspired by the words, strike a pose and freeze

Teller #1 repeats the title or summary statement and everyone bows.