

A WORD ABOUT NARRATIVE

*Stephen Johnson, 2011 Missional Church Think Tank
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I. A Story in the Mission of God

“I know a man who lives in a bus.”

These were the words that sent us into the world in the mission of God. We had heard other words sending God’s people into the world: “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh” and those words spoken by Jesus to disciples, “Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.” We knew those words and because we knew them we were able to recognize the voice of God in our own time and place and to us God’s sending came in the words, “I know a man who lives in a bus.”

A friend we might through Community Cookout, Billy Wilson, spoke them and transformed our cookout into a journey out into the lives and homes of people in Buffalo Gap – the small West Texas town thirteen miles south of Abilene I have served the last six and a half years.

Those words sent us out Ranch Road 1235 to discover the old, faded, light blue school bus where Don lives. The windows are covered with curtains or they are boarded up. There are a few broken down vehicles on the property. Don has built a small covering that connects to the backside of the bus. There’s an outdoor wood burning stove made of concrete blocks and a grate. There are two old lawn chairs in the shade of the covering. One for Don and whomever happens by.

Don lives alone and completely off the grid. Toward the front is a gate and just inside the gate is a water tank – his water source. What electricity he needs he generates from solar panels connected to car batteries he has strung together.

When I first met Don he was suspicious. When two people from our church pulled up in front of his place in a pickup, he stayed at a distance and asked “Who’s there?” Soon he made his way over to the gate and chatted briefly. It was several months before he ever opened the gate, but eventually he did. Now, when I stop by he invites me around back and makes coffee on his wood-burning stove for us to share together. He extends a cup to me and I receive it from him. He is my host and I am his guest.

I return to the lawn chair behind the bus to sit with Don regularly. Over time, he begins to share his story, one there is not time to tell here. But it involves Don’s struggle to live with chronic pain and in the midst of that pain to discover God’s presence and purpose. We were sitting in the lawn chairs out behind the bus one morning when Don told me he’s not entirely sure what that purpose is. “But once I figure it out,” he said, “I’m going to give it everything I’ve got.”

I suppose one way of looking at it is that I have something to offer Don. It would be easy to think of myself as his teacher. That would only be natural. I am the preacher from the church. I bring words of God. I teach at the Christian University up the road. It would only be natural.

But as I take the cup of piping hot coffee Don hands me another possibility comes clear. The wind blows gently and we sit for a moment in the sound of the wind chimes. Voices from the radio spill out the doorway of the bus, obnoxious people on talk radio. I look at Don and say:

“Well, I’ll tell you what I think, for what it’s worth. I think that somehow you’ve come into relationship with me, with people from our church. We’ve come to know you and you’ve come to know us. And I think it’s because you have something to teach us, something to teach us about how to live simply, something to teach us about how to live a contented life, something to teach us about how to live with hope and faith in the midst of pain. You’ve got something to teach us.”

Don doesn’t respond with words, but is clearly moved by the thought. The show of emotion is the only I have seen from him. We are entertaining the possibility that the presence and word of God might abide somewhere in the space between us – in the space where we are present enough and still enough to listen.

I know a man who lives in a bus. His name is Don.

II. Story, Narrative, and the Mission of God

We are here at this Think Tank to create the space to think, listen, share about the missional church – more specifically, about story, narrative and mission. So, we begin with a story: “I Know a Man Who Lives in a Bus.”

But what does it mean, what does it do? What’s happening here? What do we mean when we speak of story or narrative? Do we mean the same thing? Are they interchangeable terms? And do they necessarily have anything to do with the mission of God?

I want to suggest that it may be helpful to think about story and narrative as related but distinct terms. And though there may be different ways of unpacking that, for me it makes sense to distinguish them this way:

Story

I’ve just told you a story. It’s been crafted with some care. It has a beginning and an end. The beginning and the end frame the story rhetorically. They report on an experience, but they are not the experience itself. In fact, if Don were here, he might

tell the story differently. But the story holds the experience in view so that we might have access to it, interact with it, and arrive at some shared sense of meaning.

Stories are important. We tell stories not merely to remember things that happen, but also to construct meaning. I heard someone recently tell a story related to mission. It was a story years old now that has been told over and over again. In the end, he explained that that story, more than any other, captured the communities "narrative identity."

Don's story is like that. It is, as is commonly spoken of in the rich heritage of African American preaching, a "set piece" – spoken over and over again by the storyteller until it passes into the community's consciousness. The story is a way of speaking of and maintaining a sense of God's mission.

So, story is a set-piece, self-contained through which a community forms meaning and maintains identity in the mission of God.

But do we mean the same thing when we speak of *narrative*?

Narrative

It seems to me that it's possible to mean something different when talking about narrative – narrative as something larger than the telling of the story. Of course, a story may be one episode of a larger narrative than extends beyond the story. Speaking of narrative in this way, we are hinting at the limits of story – that the narrative is larger and more open than any single story can contain.

Narratives, in this sense, are messy and don't end neatly. Narratives are always open and opening. Narratives contain the kind of future horizon that Moltmann is after in his *Theology of Hope* where the people of God receive the promise of God within their common life and carry it forward, often in the form of a story, until the word of promise is interrupted by the experience of reality which demands appropriation of God's promise anew – anew. It is that opening that places story within the narrative horizon of God's future, that opens the space for transformation, surprise, and the "always-coming-One."

Speaking of narrative in this way both requires and makes possible attentiveness to the other so that God's presence and future emerges in the space between storyteller and listener – something like what I try and describe happening between Don and I, the place of deep listening – where God's life and mission are both disclosed and embodied.

So, as we are here to share this space together over the next two days, it is an opportunity to dwell more deeply within the stories that are a part of our own experience and those of the congregations we serve, but also the larger narrative of divine disclosure that opens onto God's promised and preferred future.