

ARTIKEL VAN ERIC RIECHERS, THEOLOOG – PALLOTTINER – IN VALLENDAR OVER DE SAMENHANG TUSSEN BIBLIODRAMA EN NARRATIEVE THEOLOGIE

Nico Derksen: Within the Scripture stories we find our story

When I was a boy growing up in Alberta, I used to listen to two old neighbours. The couple were childless, but they made room in their lives for the numerous children of the neighbourhood. At least once every visit we would beg them to tell us the “story.” This was the account of their courtship during the Second World War and to us it was high adventure and romance.

The neighbours were boyfriend and girlfriend when he went off to war. He was a gunner in the air force and she worked in a bank. After months being overseas, during one of his forays his plane was shot down over Egypt. The old man was the only survivor. Declared missing in action for some months, he eventually surfaced at a POW camp in Germany.

His wife waited and worried back home, faithfully believing he was alive during those dark days of his being missing. She was equally faithful in sending letters and care packages overseas to the prison camp once he was found.

After a daring escape and the war’s end, he was finally shipped home. She pulled every string she could in order to be present at the station when his troop train arrived. The moment of their encounter on the crowded platform was the stuff of romantic movies. As children, we thrilled to the moment when he located her amidst the hundreds of teeming soldiers and swept her up in his arms.

No matter how many times we heard it, we never wanted them to change a word of that story. It was both wonderful and powerful. There was danger, fear and loss, along with courage, hope and fidelity. Best of all there was the happy ending of true love winning out over all. With repeated tellings it entered my imagination, indelibly shaping my images, expectations and understandings of love and commitment.

Many of us have these kinds of stories in our lives: stories that shape and influence us. They might be about how our ancestors came to this country or the way our parents met. They may be birth stories or death stories, but what they have in common is that they stir us profoundly, touching the deepest levels of our identity.

The same power is found in the stories of great literature. My childhood

favourites, such as Anne of Green Gables and The Three Musketeers, were supplemented in junior high school by a gifted teacher. Mr. Cartwright introduced us to his favourites: Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn and even excerpts from William Shakespeare. Our tiny classroom became a stage where Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth came alive. While I can't say we understood all of it, great lessons of life were drawn as our teacher used the incidents and quotes to make points about our life and living.

All great stories do this. They speak to universal human experiences: love and longing, dreams lost and recovered, hearts broken and healed, loss and redemption, betrayal and fidelity, death and resurrection. As we read them and enter their drama, our own lives are pierced through and our story joins the story. That's why we never tire of hearing them.

If "ordinary" stories have this power to touch and transform us, how much more so the stories of Scripture! This is easily said and oft repeated, but it frequently no more than a cliché. It is not often that someone actually has the courage to transform that cliché into a challenge to living faith, and therefore it is all the more startling when we are graced with an encounter with a person who believes that these biblical stories can carry us, that they can literally carry the entire weight and burden of our daily lives.

Several months ago I had such an encounter. Nico Derksen, the founder of the school of bibliodrama which is employed in the house where I serve, was sitting at the breakfast table with us and I was enjoying his light banter as well as the sheer warmth of his presence. To be honest, on that Sunday morning I sat and waited at the table drinking cup after cup of coffee, simply to insure that I would enjoy at least a little of the fine atmosphere that seeped into the room the minute he took his place at our table.

He had come to lead a workshop on bibliodrama in our house. A confrere of mine, who was supposed to participate in the workshop, had grown ill over the weekend and had excused himself from the sessions. As concern was expressed over his penchant for excessive almost manic work ethic, Nico expressed the hope that this illness might slow him down a little and make him take sorely needed rest. As I, rather flippantly, remarked that it would take more than that to change his stubborn ways, Nico said, "We have a story for that, too." And then we spoke about the plagues over the house of Egypt.

At first I laughed (never a bad first reaction). Yet, gradually I was profoundly struck by the wisdom and conviction of those words. Here was a man who

really believed that the stories of God and the stories of faith can carry any and every human eventuality. God has something to say about what it takes to get our attention, about the lengths he is willing to go in order to make us take heed. Plagues need not be merely interpreted as punishments. They can also be attention getters, moments that draw our attention to pressing needs beneath the surface of our stubborn patterns and superficial living. They can compel us to pay attention to that which we nonchalantly dismiss and cavalierly ignore. We all know what it is like to live in this state at one point or another. Indeed, we really do have a story for that.

And that is how a man, whose work has long enthused me, deepened my pastoral ministry and broadened my thinking with new horizons, made music that only my heart could hear.

On that morning, he offered us a story to help us move into the situation in a new way. It is precisely what he does every time he takes a biblical text and lays its various parts lovingly into a room and invites us to walk it, wander through it, settle into it, and explore its spiritual, emotional and physical topography. He offered us a story that morning, which allowed us to explore our own understanding, our own role, our own place in that story, just as he does every time he lures us out of the passive role of the bystander and into the roles of the biblical narrative.

John often writes of how God functions as the plot of the stories of faith. But the cast of characters are the ordinary run of people: cheating accountants, longing fathers, grumbling workers, pleading widows, demanding friends, arrogant clerics, joyous farmers, wily servants, frantic housewives, beaten men, murdering tenants and clever schemers. Yet both the people within the story and the people hearing the story do not remain on the level of the everyday. They are thrown back into the fundamental relationship to Mystery. If our relationship to Mystery often appears static, the narratives reveal its dynamism. If our relationship to Mystery often seems dispensable or compartmentalised, the narratives show how it sweeps us along and penetrates to our inner being. When the narratives function as catalysts for the basic faith relationship to God, we naturally speak of God's activity. The biblical narratives are stories about people. But because of what is happening to the people in the stories and to the people hearing the stories, they are always stories of God.

To enter into a story through bibliodrama is to experience in your bone marrow the meaning of these words. You know the text to be a story about yourself,

about people like you. At the same time, you realise that this story is doing something to you and then it becomes a story of God.

We have a story for that! Blessed are they who believe those words. We have a story for that. Not a catechism! Not a list of dogmas! Not propositions of truth! Scripture is composed of the accumulated stories of our faith. They are neither precisely science nor history. Instead, they are the inspired accounts of how God has touched us in the past, moved in our history and continues to be present today. Alive with the Spirit, they are points of encounter with a Living Word.

What so enchanted me that morning at the breakfast table was the incarnation of the three principles of our way of doing theology. Nico gathers the folks, tells the stories and breaks the bread with people. In his bibliodramatic way of telling the stories we find ourselves challenged, inspired, moved and motivated. The only place you won't find yourself in his way of storytelling is on the sidelines. In the telling of the stories we are meant to be transformed.

Bibliodrama is a particular way of telling the stories. By taking the text, laying it out in the room, thus giving it scope, breadth and dimensions, we can be a part of its narrative and its flow. And through the invitation to take on a role within the story, as well as the interviews and conversations within the dramatic play, we are lured into story, driven to tell it anew through association with our own lives.

The laws of mathematics and physics have forever been one of our great constants. They are predictable and reliable, not given to strange surprises. But now, more and more, scientists are finding that even the laws of physics sometimes offer unexpected surprises and exhibit a freedom that leaves us baffled. Freedom, it seems, is everywhere.

Biblical storytellers have always known this. Jesus is the prime example. He creates an imaginary character, like the merciful father of two prodigal sons, begins to weave a story, and we later discover that these characters do not simply follow what the Evangelist had in mind in the retelling of the Jesus story. The father becomes his own person, develops his own attitude, goes his own way, and shapes the story in a way that the original storyteller might never have intended, at least not explicitly. In the end, partly independent of the storyteller, each character writes his or her own story. It is this ceaseless dynamic of the biblical story that enables us to preach a million homilies on the same text, and it is this dynamic that allows a million bibliodrama players to fill the roles with their own telling of the tale.

Nico Derksen takes this concept and uses it to offer us a wonderful challenge within which each of us is invited to edit our own life so as to make our story a better and more noble one.

He does this through a series of autobiographical forays into the text, without ever losing sight of the primacy of the Word. It is this remarkable reverence for the person who plays together with the reverence for the story of God that is personally most impressive for me. In bibliodrama Nico invites us into a story so that we can edit our lives. What we do not do is edit the text. In his school of thought, we speak of being advocates of the text, meaning precisely that we do not aim to edit the text. To be more precise, we do not edit it by making it mean only one thing, by narrowing its scope to the levels of interpreters other than the players. Instead, we remain within the boundaries of a given text, but at the same time we never place any constraint upon the player that the text does not demand.

In the taking on of a role within that text, we exercise the other form of reverence, that which we reserve for the players. They, too, are not constrained by the literal working of the text. Players are invited to pour their heart and soul into the role, filling it with life as they know, feel and taste it. At the same time, the role offers a certain security to explore options other than the ones we always entertain (and which we promptly project into the text). Thus, Nico challenges the players to write a better story with their own life and then invites the players to each edit their own lives so as to build a story which is more interesting and more noble, one which, like a great movie, will leave its audience in tears and longing to do better things with their lives when the final credits roll. All the while, he points to the text in which we are standing and moving and playing and telling us: This is what the stories of God do for us. They give us this chance. They open up for us this kind of space to grow, change, explore, fail and struggle. Freedom, it seems, really is everywhere.

It personally took me a long time to grow into this way of telling the stories of God, but slowly, almost imperceptibly, and this is Nico's genius, depth, idealism, Christian vision, disarming common sense, and his real challenge begin to seep through, becoming clearer and more inviting as his way of telling the great narrative of faith goes on. I have been privy to moments within the story, both as a player and later as a guide, in which men and women have been able to discern the real voice of God from the many false, neurotic voices that they, and most everyone else, commonly can confuse with God's voice.

I have to date never had the privilege of experiencing a bibliodrama under Nico's guidance. But since that breakfast, I have yearned to walk a text with him. One of his students, who also happens to be confrere of mine as well as one of my teachers as how to guide through bibliodrama, opened this world of storytelling to me. It was after one especially trying excursion in the world of Moses and the burning bush that I wrote down my impressions.

"As a kid, the only sense I got from God was guilt, something I dismissed as a hypersensitive conscience I got from being raised in a church with a controlling pastor. But that wasn't the voice I heard this afternoon. The real Voice is stiller and smaller and seems to know, without confusion, the difference between right and wrong and the subtle delineation between the beautiful and the profane. It's not an agitated Voice, but ever patient as though it approves a million false starts. The Voice I heard is a deep water of calming wisdom that says: Hold your tongue; don't talk about that person that way; forgive the friend you haven't talked to; don't look at that woman as a possession; I want to show you the sunset; look and see how short life is and how your troubles are not worth worrying about; buy that bottle of wine and call your friend and see if he can get together, because, remember, he was supposed to have that conversation with his daughter, and you should ask him about it. And that Voice is forever saying to us: "Enjoy your place in my story. The beauty of it means you matter, and you can create it even as I have created you. To be honest, it scared me half to death to realise, that I knew that Voice. My problem is, that I am a master at ignoring it."

Thus, we are no longer looking at the story. Instead, Nico invites us to look at life in general and our lives in particular through and within the narrative.

Thus, we are Abraham and Sarah, hungering for new life, laughing at some of God's more outrageous promises and then being amazed when they come true.

Thus, we are Moses standing on holy ground, being asked to take on tasks for which we don't feel fit.

Thus, we are the Israelites wandering in the deserts of our lives, murmuring about what we've left behind, fearing what lies ahead.

Thus, we worship false gods, cry out for mercy, dance like Miriam and weep like Rachel.

Thus we will find ourselves invited to walk on water, anoint each other's feet, drink the living water and take up our cross.

We have a story for that. At that breakfast table, Nico Derksen made it clear to me what he does in a room full of people during a bibliodrama session. The words of the great biblical narrative are not meant to lie there passively: they are to move off the page, into the world, toward us, toward our trouble, toward the turmoil of God's people. They are meant to be read over and over, told again and again, brought to life through a deep touching to our own life, and assimilated into our living, walking, praying, questioning, seeking and wanderings, until we know them as our own.

Until that happens, we haven't really heard them.

And so, if nothing else, you can learn a great lesson, true of Nico Derksen and true of all genuine storytellers. Anything can happen at a breakfast table.

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