

# Embodying Scripture through Performative Interpretation

BY KATHY MAXWELL

Internalizing and performing Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching gives Scripture freedom to work in the lives of the hearers in refreshing and unexpected ways. It gives a voice and body to God's Word, which was (most likely) originally spoken and heard.

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Everybody enjoys a good story. Whether we are reading a dog-eared novel, watching a well-executed movie, or telling a whopper about the one that got away, stories are ingrained in how we come to know each other and the world around us.

When it comes to Scripture, however, we "love to tell the story" and then condense it to three points and a poem. As a preacher, teacher, and interpreter of God's word, it is a scary thing to leave the understanding of a story in the hands of our hearers. What if they do not reach the correct conclusion? What if they focus on this small detail and miss the main point? This concern, I believe, is real. But the benefit that outweighs the concern, in my experience, is discovering not what a *hearer* will do to or with the story, but what the *story* will do to the hearer. Internalizing and performing Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching gives Scripture freedom to work in the lives of the hearers in refreshing and unexpected ways.

Incorporating performance into the sharing of Scripture gives a voice and body to God's Word, which was (most likely) originally spoken and heard. However, most of us grew up in a text- or print-based culture. We are accustomed to encountering the Bible as something written and read. We assume that there is one authoritative copy of the ancient biblical text and that this copy is widely available and accessible. We assume that this text belongs to the author(s), in the same way that we think of modern

copyright and intellectual property. We tend to read this text silently, unless we are reading to someone else, in which case we often read without inflection or emotion, perhaps because we think this sounds more holy.

But if we are now, as Robert Fowler suggests, moving into a hypertext culture that assumes an active reader of a fluid, “multi-centered,” collaborative text, perhaps we can best communicate the gospel with a text that is read, heard, seen, felt, and even acted upon.<sup>†</sup>



When someone performs the text of Scripture, the stories become embodied before our eyes and we are invited to participate with the story teller. Even a simple gesture like eye contact by the performer does wonders for encouraging audience engagement. A small group of my students accepted the challenge of internalizing and performing excerpts from Paul’s letters. After the performances one student reported that when her classmate looked her in the eye and spoke Paul’s words, suddenly, the words were spoken *to her*. If she did not seriously consider these words, she was being as disrespectful as if she ignored sound advice from a friend or parent. This was no longer “just” the Word of the Lord for God’s people, but more specifically it was the Word of the Lord *for her*.

Performing Scripture is an effective way to communicate multiple layers of interpretation, including emotional interpretation. In one of my classes, students perform Mark’s passion narrative. Of course, they puzzle over the young man who is wearing nothing but his linen cloth, and loses it as he avoids capture by the unruly crowd. They have to figure out what tone of voice to give Jesus as he talks to the religious leaders and his disciples. When Jesus found his disciples sleeping in Gethsemane, was he irritated or resigned? Or (as in one of my favorite performative interpretations) was he hurt, feeling more deeply betrayed by their sleeping than by Judas’ kiss?

These students are quite familiar with the passion narrative and they have been exposed to visual images and medical explanations of the brutality of crucifixion. Yet each semester without fail, students say that from the performance of this story they experience the sorrow of these events in a new way. To see Jesus, portrayed not by a famous actor but by a friend and classmate, rejected and betrayed, somehow casts new light on the emotional pain of the passion. Hearing in a roommate’s voice the words of Peter’s denial or the crowd’s shout of “Crucify!” underscores our complicity in the death of Christ. Our hearts stop with the women when they look into the not-quite-empty tomb, and the words of the young man are spoken to us all: “Do not be alarmed.” After personally moving through these events, the words “He is risen!” stir a new hope, even in those of us who have always known the end of the story. But the ending of Mark has never stood in such stark contrast – and been so challenging – as when I watched a self-assured,

accomplished senior, who was gifted in ministry, perform the final verse by cowering behind a concrete wall, shoulders hunched, voice quavering and pitching higher, gasping out, "But they...they said nothing to anyone. Because they were afraid."



Last semester a group of colleagues and students at Palm Beach Atlantic University performed twenty-three stories we selected from Genesis's story arc from Abraham through Joseph. This was quite a challenge, even after summarizing some of the transition material. Each person memorized a story and we performed the entire story arc together, outside on a Tuesday evening. My story from Genesis 42, 44, 45, and 50 was the final piece: the story of Joseph's reunion and reconciliation with his brothers.

I find that preparing a story for performance shares many aspects of sermon preparation. One practice that takes center stage is putting myself into the sandals of the people I am embodying, guided and informed by the story's historical and literary context. In this case, family conflict and crisis are in full view. Jacob, to my ear, speaks bitterly and biting to his sons in the opening verses of Genesis 42, and I feel sorry for the ten brothers even though the earlier stories reveal that they have done terrible things to both Joseph and Jacob. Here are family relationships that have been corrupted for a long time, with parental disappointment and children (though grown) treated as the least favorite.

When I see Joseph for the first time in these chapters, he is the bratty brother who has 'done good' and is now waiting for his unsuspecting brothers at the end of their journey south. I experience the rest of the story from his perspective, primarily. He (along with the audience) sees his dreams in real life. When his brothers arrive, I wonder if Joseph thinks he is dreaming again. In any case, Joseph seems to act out of self-protection. Bowing before him are the brothers who literally sold him out. After a betrayal like that, how can I blame him for "treating them like strangers"? Joseph is facing not only his betrayers, but his abusers. Here are the strong, mixed emotions of confronting betrayers and abusers, and reacting non-violently in a way that protects oneself.

As the story continues, we see betrayers being betrayed, manipulators being manipulated, and slavers offering themselves as slaves. The motivations of Jacob, the ten brothers, and Joseph are not made clear in the story; and often such motivations are not clear in our stories either. At the end of the entire story arc, in Genesis 50, a final connection is drawn; it is different than those suggested above, but not mutually exclusive. Aside from dysfunctional families, confrontations, and role reversals, Joseph says that God has a plan for all this. (By the way, in my interpretation, this is quite different from saying "God *planned* all this.")

The first time I told the end of this story, having heard with our hearers the whole story arc, standing there looking them in the eyes, something unplanned happened. As I ended with Genesis 50:20, I slowed down for the “all this.” Joseph says, “Even though you intended harm to me, God intended this – all this – for good.” I swept my arm, catching the other storytellers who had told the journey from the Abrahamic covenant, to the binding of Isaac, to the heartbreak of Leah, to the selling of Joseph, to the shame of Judah and Tamar, to the recognition, reconciliation, and continuing fear of the brothers. *All this*. But the gesture also encompassed the people in our audience – their stories, too, including the betrayals and manipulations and disappointments.

If we are paying loving attention to the text, we see that this story from Genesis reflects and informs our own stories. If we live alongside this Story with our students, congregations, and friends, we find common ground on which to build and grow. As the Story unfolds, it connects us. It changes us. We find that God intends to use this – *all this* – for good.

#### NOTE

† Robert Fowler, “How the Secondary Orality of the Electronic Age Can Awaken Us to the Primary Orality of Antiquity or What Hypertext Can Teach Us About the Bible with Reflections on the Ethical and Political Issues of the Electronic Frontier,” *homepages.bw.edu/~rfowler/pubs/secondoral/* (accessed May 24, 2014). It is fascinating to see a “post-print” culture returning to many of the assumptions of the ancient rhetorical culture.



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