

Related articles:

The power of storytelling
(page 20)

Living Lutheran,
April 2021

Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Study guide

The power of storytelling

By Robert C. Blezard

Long before there was anything resembling an alphabet to record words with ink on paper, people passed along information in the form of stories. The oral tradition is as old as humanity itself, and stories today still hold enormous sway in our culture. How are stories influential in your life of faith and that of your congregation?

EXERCISE 1: YOUR FAITH STORIES

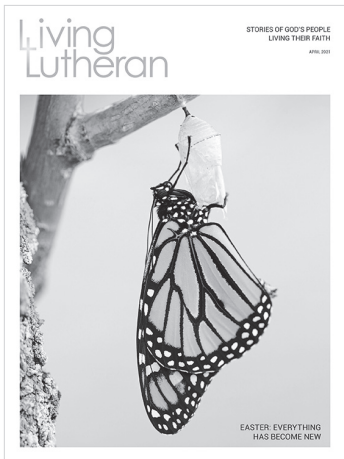
Stories of faith aren't just for the Bible or for biographies of Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other luminaries. We all have them. It's up to us to share them with one another. Below are some story prompts that can help you and your friends and loved ones share stories of faith. As a study group, practice telling stories to one another and encourage others in your church to do so too.

- My favorite Christmas was
- I learned about God the hard way when
- My favorite Sunday school teacher was
- The craziest thing that happened during worship was
- I knew there was a God when
- I was so mad at and/or disappointed with God when
- My earliest church memory was
- The time I most enjoyed in church was
- The person who taught me most about faith is
- The funniest thing that ever happened at church was
- Think of your own story starters!

EXERCISE 2: JESUS THE STORYTELLER

Throughout his ministry Jesus told stories and parables as a primary way to teach people about God and matters of faith. For instance, when a religious official asked him what must be done to inherit eternal life, Jesus answered with the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Asked to arbitrate an inheritance dispute between brothers, Jesus told them the story of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21).

- Exploring these two examples, describe how Jesus' storytelling works.
- In each example, what is the theological principle that Jesus wants his hearers to understand?



Study guide: **The power of storytelling** *continued*

- How do the characters in the stories help us relate our lives to the teaching?
- How does the storytelling impart that teaching more effectively than a mere statement of the principle would?
- As a class exercise, have members share their favorite stories of Jesus, explaining why they like it and what thoughts and emotions the story arouses. Explore together Jesus' storytelling as a teaching technique.

EXERCISE 3: BIBLE STORIES

It's not hard to envision the Bible as a collection of stories, with characters, drama, action and resolution. Discuss:

- Which Bible stories did you like best when you were a child?
- How did they help form your faith?
- What do you think about when you remember them today?
- Today what stories in the Bible are challenging you in the faith and giving you spiritual growth?
- As a study group, take turns identifying, reading and enjoying favorite Bible stories.

EXERCISE 4: EXPOSITION VERSUS STORY

When you read the Small Catechism or just about any of Martin Luther's other works, you digest the words of a theologian who explains matters of faith and God in an expository manner. By contrast, Jesus often told stories and parables to give his hearers insight into matters of faith and God.

In the Small Catechism, read Luther's explanation of "The Sacrament of the Altar" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 1166).

Next read Jesus' parable of the landowner in Matthew 20:1-16. Discuss:

- Describe the teaching approach in each piece of writing. How does each convey information and teaching?
- What are the strengths of Luther's straightforward approach? What are the limitations?
- What are the strengths of Jesus' storytelling approach? What are the limitations?
- Which approach does a better job of inviting people to use their imagination in pondering the things of God? Why?
- Which approach appeals more directly to a person's rational or intellectual mind? Explain.
- Which approach appeals more to the heart and soul of a person? In what way?
- Which approach is more likely to make a person think? Explain.
- Which approach is more likely to cultivate a person's faith? Explain.

Contact us:

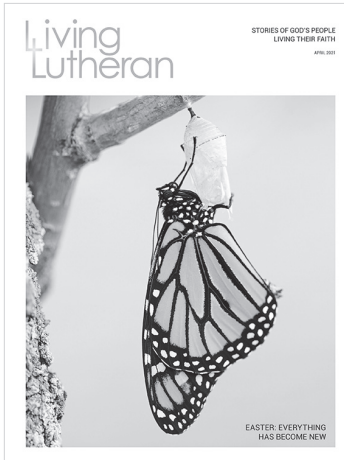
Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the
magazine of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



Contact us:

Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: **The power of storytelling** *continued*

- Which approach do you find more helpful, and why?
- In what ways do the two approaches complement one another?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Stories are woven throughout our culture—in books, movies, TV shows, podcasts, social media posts and so on. How important are stories in your life? What would entertainment and information be like if it weren't for stories to provide framework?
- Why are stories so enduring in our lives of faith?
- How have stories—spoken, written, on video or audio—helped you grow in faith and life?
- What stories have you/will you share with your loved ones to help them in their discipleship walk?
- What story in the Bible has the most meaning for you and why? (Read the story aloud and talk about it.)
- Who is the best storyteller in your family? Congregation? How has or how does that person influence you and the world around them?
- **For action:** Organize a time for storytelling in your congregation, whether it be 10 minutes before the service or a special social evening. Encourage people to tell stories publicly.

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Photo: iStock.com/Christian Horz



On Easter Sunday, people across this church will gather in their living rooms or sanctuaries to hear the story of Christ's resurrection. The Easter story is our story—one of death, life, grace and love. As we declare "He is risen!" in and beyond worship, we echo the first disciples, who galvanized Christianity by spreading the good news near and far.

In this piece, hear from seven ELCA storytellers on why their art remains vital for us as contemporary disciples. We hope their reflections will inspire you to introduce others to the greatest love story of all time—the Easter story.

—Erin Strybis

PART OF OUR “SPIRITUAL DNA”

A pastor on storytelling



Photo: Courtesy of Heidi Neumark

Heidi Neumark

“Go, tell!” the angel commanded the women at Jesus’ empty tomb. But they “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” So goes Mark’s Easter story, and while some boldly proclaim their faith stories, others are like these fearful women. Yet, we might assume they found their voices; otherwise how would Jesus’ story have come to us?

Storytelling is part of Lutherans’ spiritual DNA. In translating the Bible, Martin Luther wanted to tell God’s story in the language of those who had been left out. He wrote: “We must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly” (*On Translation: An Open Letter*, 1530).

The Bible is not just for them, the privileged elite—it is “for you,” including those on society’s margins. The importance of “for you” in Luther’s understanding of the gospel can’t be overestimated. It is at the heart of storytelling.

When you share a story from your own experience of how a stone was rolled away or how grace worked a change in your life, then others who long to know that there is a real, living word for them may be able to hear it.

In Luke’s Gospel, the women excitedly run to tell their story and find themselves mocked and ignored. This begs the question, whose stories aren’t taken seriously in our congregations? Whose stories are missing or silenced? Who may decline sharing a life-giving story because it won’t be heard?

We all need to share stories, but those with greater privilege in our church must sometimes refrain from telling their stories and instead center sidelined stories—queer stories, Native American stories, Black stories and more. There is a time for storytelling and a time for listening. The Word made flesh shines forth in both.

—Heidi Neumark, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan, New York; executive director of Trinity Place Shelter for LGBTQIA+ youth; and the author of three books (hneumark.com).

WITNESSING GOD’S IMAGE

A photographer on storytelling



Photo: Ziania Muñoz-Meléndez

Kristina L. Diaz

Stories, like the people in them, don’t exist in a vacuum. In this world of complex intersections and colliding contexts, there are a plethora of connected stories. So I look for them wherever I can, because the more stories I hear, the more the world comes into focus and I am able to see people better. I think that’s why I

love photography so much: it allows me to bear witness to the love and beauty of God in the world.

As a portrait photographer, I experience a certain level of privilege in that I've been invited to take a closer look at an individual or group. When families invite me to help them capture moments, the first thing I do is try to get to know what brings them joy.

Then I find myself compelled to have them share their stories with each other. I'll ask a parent to remember when their child was small and could fit in their arms. I encourage them to pause for a minute to talk to each other. Then I capture what follows—the surprise, the nervous giggles, the tear-filled hugs—a physical expression of their love story.

If I'm lucky, we experience *namaste*, a Sanskrit word meaning “the divine in me bows to the divine in you.” I often witness the divine—the image of God—in others, and I try to reflect that in my work.

When I think about sharing God's love story with the world, I try to follow the lessons I've learned in photography. I don't seek to be perfect—instead I focus on truly seeing those around me. I lean into the beauty of their stories, and I do not shy away from the harder moments, because without them we are incomplete. I invite you to do the same.

—*Kristina L. Diaz, photographer and multimedia storyteller from the ELCA Caribbean Synod, and assistant creative marketing manager for BJG Consulting LLC.*

AN EARLY SERMON

A novelist on storytelling

When I was growing up within the walls of Trinity Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wis., one of my very favorite pastors was Kurt Jacobson. Kurt began his tenure at Trinity just as I entered confirmation, meaning we essentially grew up together—he as a young pastor, me as a defiant preteen looking to poke holes in theology. But I did relish Kurt's sermons, his storytelling.

Kurt understood that the most successful sermons join the biblical past and the quotidian present ...

Even from a young age, I sternly held that the crux of a service was the sermon. Not the hymns, announcements, fellowship, prayers or offering. The only aspect of a service remotely as important as the sermon, for me, was communion. The rest you could piece together yourself at home with a TV, a Bible and your family. But the sermon was the one time a week when I would be told a story and could actively interrogate my faith.



Nickolas Butler

Photo: Travis Dewitz Photography

Kurt understood that the most successful sermons join the biblical past and the quotidian present seamlessly in story. Searching my memory for favorite Trinity sermons, I recalled one of Kurt's, circa 1987, that braided Bruce Hornsby's song "The Way It Is" with our responsibilities as Christians. Back then, FM radio was all there was for me, and that song was on heavy rotation.

The song was unusual for its era (late hair metal), because it was really a country story-song with a progressive social vision. But it was also a parable. It was a genius way to build a sermon because everyone from church would later be listening to their radios for that song and its lyrics while examining their own Christian actions and beliefs. Kurt's sermon made us listen more closely to our world.

During Kurt's tenure there were other pastors that I did not, could not relate to. I suppose this stems from the fact that I've always been a harsh critic. Any pastor who took the pulpit to quote at length from scholarly text was far over their skis, as far as I was concerned. They'd lost sight of the storytelling, which inherently, emphatically, is not a lecture.

A sermon is a lesson disguised as a story. Or, at least, the best ones are. Even kids understand this, which is exactly the point.

—*Nickolas Butler, author of four novels and a member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, Wis. Connect with him at nickolasbutler.com and on Instagram (@wiscobutler).*

SACRED VULNERABILITY

A bishop on storytelling

In November 2020 I stood center stage at the Philip Lynch Theatre at Lewis University in Romeoville, Ill. The burgundy chairs, the smell of stale paint and the taste of sawdust from recently cut wood transported me back 30 years to when I performed there as one of the writers, directors and actors of *The Struggle Is Not Over*.

The play, a potpourri of real-life stories from African American students, became a sacred space in which many of us shared our journeys publicly for the first time. The experience was transformational.

Indeed, the vulnerable sharing between us didn't end on that stage. In dorm rooms and at cafeteria tables, the conversation continued. The more we told each other, the more our stories became intertwined and the closer we became—so close that many of us remain connected today.

Like the students at Lewis University, we in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod have started sharing our stories publicly in our newsletter series titled "Why I Came, Why I Stayed." The intent is to provide a platform for another meaningful exchange of real-life stories so that, in finding out about each other, we might uncover or rediscover our collective self. I think it's working.

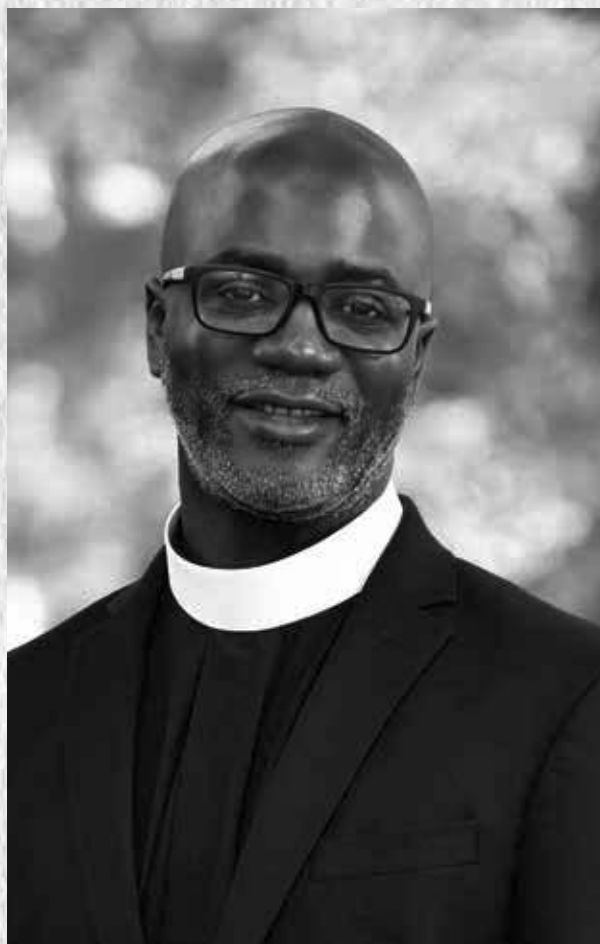


Photo: Nancy Valledolid

Yehiel Curry

Thus far, laypeople have learned that some longtime friends were not cradle Lutherans as they had assumed. Through story, rostered ministers have touched, tasted and smelled the sacrifices of leaders who founded new ministries. Youth have learned about grace-filled experiences fostered at Lutheran camps and retreats that helped reluctant young adults discern a path to seminary.

As we share them, these stories extend beyond our church communities. They are being shared again at work, at the salon and in our community centers. Every time a faith story is shared, our journey with Christ's love-in-community is placed center stage. It becomes a venue where we can connect, become aware, learn something new about one another and discover ourselves anew.

—*Yehiel Curry, bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod.*

EMBODYING THE GOSPEL

An ELCA professor on storytelling

I'd been teaching a biblical seminar at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, S.D., for years. We'd study a Gospel or origin stories, and my students would write a

research paper. Out of 15 students, I knew what to expect: I would get four excellent essays. Three people would have the world land on them, and their essays would show it. The eight essays in the middle would be competent.

This disappointed me. The stories of Scripture shake the earth, paint the heavens, reverse the flow of life and death. Such stories, I believed, should call out more than competent writing.

Then I was invited to be a storyteller at the ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans. The experience was scary and exhilarating. I came home and decided to use storytelling as the mode of engagement in my next biblical seminar.

We studied the Gospel of Mark, engaging with scenes by performing them. When the mother heard Jesus say the children should be fed before dogs such as she, the

students winced. When the Gerasene demoniac woke from his violent fever dream, they breathed the freedom that came with calm. And when Rome crucified Jesus, my students stood with the women who had followed Jesus and were now watching him die. They understood why these women came later to wrap and anoint Jesus' body, despite the risk.

At the semester's end, out of 15 essays, a few still came from people dancing with disaster. Life is like that. But there were also seven of the best essays I had ever seen. Even the essays in the middle were amazing. My students had not simply thought about the Gospel—they had embodied it.

Embodied storytelling changed the way I teach and study and think and write. The Bible is not a book of ideas. It is a book of bodies, bodies that live and die, that feel both hope and fear in the pits of their stomachs. Just like everybody. Every body. I owe those students a lot.

—Richard Swanson, professor of religion, philosophy and classics at Augustana University, Sioux Falls, S.D.; an ELCA pastor; and a member of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls.



Richard Swanson

Photo: Michael Shaffer

My students had not simply thought about the Gospel—they had embodied it.

WORD MOVING IN THE WORLD

A journalist and deacon on storytelling

In my roles as a journalist and deacon, I am called to “word and service” or, as I like to say, “word through journalism.”

My first deployment was to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, Jerusalem, as communications officer and ELCA missionary for four years. Today I serve in communications with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), based in Geneva.

As a trained journalist, I know that “word” with a little “w” is a practical means through which ideas, thoughts, emotions, reality and the service or work of God function through communications.

Romans 10:14 defines this practical call for me (emphases mine):

“How, then, can *they* call on the one *they* have not believed in? And how can *they* believe in the one of whom *they* have not heard? And how can *they* hear without someone preaching to *them*?” (New International Version).

In historical missions, “they” are thought to be the unreached, the non-Christian or the unsaved who have not heard, but in my call as a communicator, “they” are members of the church who have not heard.

“Have not heard what?” you may ask. My interpretation of Romans 10:14 is: “How will *they*, the church, know how the Christ lives and breathes in our global siblings if journalists are not there as witnesses?”

Gathering and cultivating the glimpses of Christ's work among the LWF's 148 member churches in 99



Photo: Ben@bengray.com

Adrainne Gray

countries is part of my call. We share these stories so that all may know of God's goodness and faithfulness in the world.

We share these stories so that all may know of God's goodness and faithfulness in the world.

Lutherans around the world are Christ's living testimony! If we in the ELCA ignore the experiences of our fellow LWF members or are unwilling to hear, empower and allow those stories, then Christ's message will be incomplete, fragmented and a sketchy proclamation.

By receiving their stories, just as the Word calls us to do, we reclaim the dignity of all and a fuller picture of God's global church.

—Adrainne Gray, communication officer for communion relations with the Lutheran World Federation, Geneva. She is a deacon and member of the Lutheran Diaconal Association.



Photo: Sara Parrott

Sheryl Anderson (second from left) and the *Sweet Magnolias* cast.

TELL YOUR PARABLES

A screenwriter on storytelling

A pastor told me, after he'd been chided for using too many anecdotes in his sermons, "Jesus taught through parables. Why shouldn't we?"

I'm a television writer, and that framing shook me. Why wasn't I looking at every script I wrote as a chance not just to tell a story but to tell *the story*? And "I love to tell the story ...!" (Sing this hymn with me!) If I was striving to infuse every action in my life with faith, I should have been doing the same thing with my writing, whether I was crafting a family drama or a police procedural.

In communication, when we instruct, particularly when we correct, the audience's first response is intellectual: I agree, I disagree, I didn't know that. If they feel admonished, they lean away. But when we tell a story, the viewers respond first with their hearts—they laugh, they weep, they lean in to know this world and its characters better. And they want to hear more.

This creates a marvelous opportunity for us, whether we identify as writers or not, to tell our own parables. To share the gospel in subtext. Not every story needs to feature God, but we can share his love through tales of redemption, equality and grace. We can show what happens when we neglect to love our neighbors as ourselves or when we turn away the stranger.

Classic works of literature are built on the failure to feed the hungry, whether that hunger is spiritual, physical or emotional. The musical *Les Misérables*

A pastor told me, after he'd been chided for using too many anecdotes in his sermons, "Jesus taught through parables. Why shouldn't we?"

probably isn't the first title that leaps to mind when you think of faith-based art, yet prayers resound throughout the show, and the finale declares, "To love another person is to see the face of God."

Some years ago, I contemplated giving up writing and going to seminary. As I prayed for discernment, God answered me in a surprising way: I sold a television pilot. Not only was my path forward confirmed, but I realized that if I taught through parables, if I wrote gospel as subtext, I could share God with millions of people. And that's why *the story* is a part of every story I tell.

—*Sheryl Anderson, a screenwriter whose most recent work, Sweet Magnolias (Netflix), features a fictional ELCA congregation. She is a member of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Santa Monica, Calif.*

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.