



In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts

THE STORY TIME! AUSTRALIAN aborigines will say, “dream time.” What a beautiful expression! Story is conceived in the womb of dreams, nurtured and developed in it. And when the womb cannot hold it any longer, it gives birth to it. As a baby arrives from the womb of its mother, a story, when it matures, is discharged from the womb of dreams to be told in the circles of children, men, and women. If it is a good story—good in the sense of compelling—it will be told from one generation to another generation.

JOSEPH’S DREAMS

The future is won by those who dare to dream and to tell their dreams in stories. The dreams of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, at once comes to mind (Genesis 37). He has dreamed extraordinary dreams and, not being able to keep them to himself, he tells them to his brothers. “Listen to this dream that I dreamed,” he begins. Whether he tells his dreams in innocence, in pride, or perhaps with humor, we can only guess. “There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed to my sheaf” (37:6–7). His brothers are not amused, but their displeasure does not stop him, and he tells them another dream. “Look,” he says, quite excited, “the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (37:9). This time even his father is offended. “What kind of dream is this that you have had?” Father Jacob, scarcely concealing his annoyance, rebukes him and says, “Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” (37:10).

According to the story told in the rest of the book of Genesis, this is what happened. His parents and brothers, forced by the severe famine, had to come for help to Joseph, who had, in the meantime, risen to become the most influential politician in Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh.

Story is dream and dream is story. The Australian aborigines are right. Story time is dreamtime. We can also reverse it and say that dreamtime is story time. The future belongs to those who dare to dream and strive to convert their dreams to stories, stories of struggle, stories of suffering, also stories of hope, faith, and compassion. Is it not true that almost all prophets in ancient Israel and Judah were dreamers—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, to mention only three? At the critical juncture of their nation's history, they dreamed powerful dreams, fantastic dreams, out-of-this-world dreams, then proceeded to tell their people stories of their dreams. Isaiah, the prophet of Israel in the eighth century BCE, is a case in point. As he tells it: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.

And in his dream and vision he saw "the pivots on the thresholds shake at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke" (Isa 6:1–5). As we know, that dream of Isaiah's epitomized the long struggle of his nation to survive in the harsh realities of geopolitics that were changing the face of the ancient Near Eastern world.

SURROUNDING AN EVENING FIRE

It is said that people without vision will perish. We can also say, people who stop dreaming and who have no stories to tell will perish. Stories are hatched in dreams and handed down from one generation to the next. A song from the Pacific puts it in this way:

Surrounding an evening fire
a group of children listen,
they listen and listen to the words,
the words of the old man.

This old man, he draws a story,
a story from the ashes,
together with the flickering fire.

This old man he weaves a story,
a story from the fire,
together with the rising smoke.
This old man, he plants a story,
a story of the past,
and he plants it calmly.
The story rises with the smoke
to plant itself in
winds that are green.¹

There is, to use an expression in Chinese, “a picture in the poem and a poem in the picture” (*shi chong you hua, hua chong you shi*).

The poem, so simple and natural, paints a picture of an old man telling stories to the children surrounding him. It may be a village marketplace, a dusty roadside under an age-old banyan tree, or a beach at the seaside. “Winds that are green” are sending fresh cool air to the old man telling the story and the children listening intently to his story. What a rustic scene and a peaceful image! You can almost hear cicadas singing in the trees and insects buzzing in the bushes. The voice of the old man is soft and calm, but the children are ardent and eager. As the story slowly trudges along, the old story the old man plants in the hearts and minds of the children becomes a new story, the story of the past is transformed into a story of the present.

This is the magic of story, the magic that connects the old and the new, converts the past to the present. The story, the old man the storyteller and the children the listeners, these three, are woven together into an event occurring here and now. This seems to be what the poem is alluding to when it concludes by saying: “The story rises with the smoke to plant itself in winds that are green.” This is a poem. This is a picture. And the poem and the picture weave a story.

What does “green” mean? It means young, new, blooming. It means a new generation of children. It means future generations of men and women. Is this not why we still read ancient stories from West and East, past and present, and do not cease to be fascinated by them? Above all, is this not why we continue to read the Bible, the book of the stories told

1. “This Old Man,” in *Songs of the Pacific*, 16.

many, many centuries ago in far, far away lands, moved by them, inspired by them, and renewed by them? We love stories because God loves them. How can we not love stories when God loves them in the first place?

“I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY”

There is a hymn called “I Love to Tell the Story” in many Christian hymnals. Most of us are familiar with it. We are not only familiar with it, but love to sing it. The hymn goes like this:

1. I love to tell the story / of unseen things above,
of Jesus and His glory, / of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story, / because I know 'tis true;
It satisfies my longings / as nothing else can do.
2. I love to tell the story; / more wonderful it seems
than all the golden fancies / of all our golden dreams.
I love to tell the story, / it did so much for me;
and that is just the reason / I tell it now to thee.
3. I love to tell the story; / 'tis pleasant to repeat
what seems, each time I tell it, / more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story, / for some have never heard
the message of salvation / from God's own holy Word.
4. I love to tell the story; / for those who know it best
seem hungering and thirsting / to hear it like the rest.
And when, in scenes of glory, / I sing the new, new song,
'Twill be the old, old story / that I have loved so long.

Do you love to tell the story of Jesus? Do you love to listen to it? Do you love to tell the stories that fill the Bible? Do you love to listen to them? Do you love to tell the familiar stories and listen to not so familiar stories from your own land? Do you love to listen to mostly unfamiliar stories and sometimes familiar stories from foreign lands? Theology, however else you may have known it and practiced it, in the ultimate sense of that word, is story telling and story listening. Theology, however you may have understood it and spent many agonizing hours over it, above all things, is God telling stories through countless people in every land through the ages because God loves stories.

IN THE BEGINNING WERE STORIES

So in the beginning were stories. Life begins with story. The whole universe begins with story. And creation begins, not with a horrendous explosion called the big bang, but with an idyllic story of how God created it. The story of creation begins with God. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,” so the first chapter of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible tells us, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind [spirit] from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:1–2). This is the story of creation our forebears in the land of the ancient Near East handed down from one generation to the next when they gazed at the immense mysterious sky above them and surveyed the endless desert land that stretched before them. Is it an unscientific account of how the universe came into being? Maybe. Is it an illusory tale of an irrational mind that has taken flight into the world of religious fantasy, the world that does not exist? Definitely not.

Creation is God’s story. It is the story of God in charge of the vast universe, big bang or no big bang. It is an old story, as old as the beginning of creation itself, but it becomes a new story, a story of many people in many lands when it is told in different versions in an infinite variety of ways. When human beings are faced with turbulence in the voyage of life, confronted with the world in chaos, encountered tragedy in history, they return to the beginning for God’s assurance. This is why that prophet in the land of captivity pleaded with his fellow captives to listen when he addressed them:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth . . .
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth nothing. (Isa 40:21–23)

The prophet was referring to the story of creation his audience had perhaps dismissed as old, ancient, and outdated. But he invited them to listen to it again and again until it was transformed into a new story, until it became their own story, a story of hope and faith, a story of a new beginning of their life and history.

It is John, the author of the Gospel that bears his name, who has grasped the deep meaning of the creation story and converted it to the incarnation story. In words of incomparable profundity and beauty he declares:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God . . . (John 1:1)

“The Word” here is an event that happened and a story of that event told in the beginning. The statement is deeply theological, but difficult to grasp. If we read “Story” instead of “Word,” it is still deeply theological but less difficult to grasp:

In the beginning was the Story, and the Story was with God, and the Story was God. The Story was in the beginning with God . . .

“In the beginning” was not just God, but “Story was with God.” The Story was not simply with God, “the Story was God.” This sounds a little heady and clumsy, but is there a better way of saying God is the God of story, that story is the “essence” of God, that story is the “nature” of God? Jesus, to paraphrase the author of John’s Gospel, is that “Story of God who became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Who says theology has to be ideas and concepts? Who has decided that theology has to be doctrines, axioms, propositions? Theology, if it has to do with God, must have to do with stories, since God is the God of stories, since “in the beginning was the Story, and the Story was with God, and the Story was God.” That is why God cannot but love stories. For God not to love stories is to deny being God. God without stories is an empty God. God who has no story to tell is a God of no substance. Is theology still theology if it sets aside stories, stories of God turned into the story of Jesus and stories of us human beings, and stories of Jesus and stories of us human beings turned into God’s stories?

There is what I call “healthy agnosticism” in some Eastern religions and philosophies. Many of us know these famous first lines of *Tao Te Ching* (Classic of the Way and Its Virtue) attributed to Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher:

The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Name is the mother of all things . . .²

The Tao, the Way, the One, the First Principle, or the Origin of all things between heaven and earth, whatever you may call it, plays tricks with us human beings and our language. As soon as we name IT, it is no longer IT. No sooner have we uttered a concept to define IT than IT eludes us and is no longer what we define IT to be.

There is also “healthy agnosticism” in the Apostle Paul. After agonizing over the convoluted relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the divine dispensation in the eleventh chapter of his Letter to the Romans, he finally has to say, not in exasperation, but in relief:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways. (Rom 11:33)

This is Paul at his best—Paul not as a pretentious theologian. He knows how to keep silent in the presence of the inscrutable God. Most theologians try to say too much about God, but at the end of the day God is not any less real to the men and women who cannot make heads or tails of theological abracadabra.

“ALL I CAN DO IS TO TELL THE STORY”

God is not concept; God is story. God is not idea; God is presence. God is not hypothesis; God is experience. God is not principle; God is life. What is the best way to gain access to this God? How do we become aware of the presence of this God with us? Surely not by means of concepts, ideas, hypotheses, or principles, but by means of the life we live, the experiences we go through, in a word, by means of the stories we weave, the stories we tell and share.

I remember a story that has left a deep impression on me. It is a Jewish story, the story told by people who have gone through the trials of life in their long history of adversity and affliction.

2. See this English rendering in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 139.

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient."

And it was sufficient.³

This is a heartrending story, yet a marvelous story, a story just to the point of what we have been discussing. There will hardly be people, including you and me, who, although not Jewish, will not find this story resonating in their hearts and minds. They may grind their theological axes when they debate the concept of God, the doctrine of salvation, the meaning of the church, its sacraments, or speaking in tongues; they ought to be humbled when they are confronted by this God of stories.

"All I can do is to tell the story," says Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn. There is a faint echo of apologetic tone here, but the good Rabbi does not have to be apologetic at all. Is there anything you can do except to tell stories in times of helplessness? When you are at a loss as what to do, does not telling stories enable you to regain your faith and hope? In times of crisis, whether personal or national, does not sharing stories help you turn crisis into opportunity? History in story shows us the way. Humor in story gives us courage. Hope in story empowers us for the future. In

3. From Wiesel, *Gates of the Forest*.

the midst of darkness, a story becomes a light illumining our way. Does not the creation story in the Hebrew Bible begin with God bringing light into darkness? Does it not tell us how God creates order out of chaos?

If there is a beginning, there must be an ending, so they say. If this is true of all things, it must be true of story as well. But when it comes to story, beginning and ending become closely related. When a story seems to arrive at the end, that end becomes a beginning again. This is another wonder of story. Story not only creates a beginning in the very beginning, it also creates a beginning out of an end. A child seems to be aware of this wonder of story instinctively. When the story his/her parents are telling is about to come to an end, a child will plead with them for another story. Even after one story after another sends them to sleep, stories continue in their dreams, nurturing their imagination, fostering their curiosity. Did we not say that for the Australian aborigines story time is dreamtime? Story and dream—they together redeem our lives from spiritual stalemate and save our world from moral decay. This must be why Joel, the prophet in Judah, during the Persian period of Jewish history (539–331), tried to inspire his compatriots with these stirring words:

Then afterward

I (God) will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men and women shall dream dreams
and your young men and women shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:28–29)

God and human beings, young and old, get locked together in stories and dreams through God's Spirit. The Spirit of God that works in the human spirit enables human beings to dream dreams and tell stories. To be filled with the Spirit of God is to be able to tell stories and dream dreams, besides speaking in tongues. Furthermore, all people—women, men, and children, old and young—and not just a few, can be filled with the Spirit to tell stories and dream dreams.

This is why there are numerous myths, legends, folktales, stories of life, death and eternal life in all tribes and peoples all over the world, East and West, South and North. Show me a tribe, any tribe, that has no myth to tell. There is none. Name for me a people that has no folktales to narrate. There is none. And bring me a woman, a man, a child, who

has no life story to share. Again there is none. Should there be a tribe, a nation, a person with no story to tell and no dream to dream, they would have to invent it. For no one could live without story, just as God without story is not the subject of our faith and theology.

Why is this so? The answer has to be that God is a Story-God, a God who, with the stories God tells through innumerable people throughout the ages, creates beginnings, a God who, with stories, converts ends to beginnings, a God who, with powerful stories, transforms death into life, a God who, with tender and compassionate stories, turns despair into hope. This is why the story of God through Jesus cannot end at Jesus' death on the cross. There must be the story of the empty tomb. The story of the crucifixion must be converted to the story of the resurrection.

LIFE IS THE HEART OF STORY

What is then the main concern of the Story-God? And what is the heart of human stories? It is life! The creation story in the Hebrew Bible is the story of life: life of the universe, life of all things in the sky and on the earth, the life beyond the time-space frame of our existence. Do we not, in the creation story, hear God say: "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind" (Gen 1:24)? Does not this same God also say: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26)? In another creation story we read an account of how "God formed human beings from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life and they became living beings" (2:7). God's stories vibrate with life; that is why human stories can reverberate with life, life with its joys and sorrows, life with hopes and despairs, life with birth, old age, illness and death, and life, through these passages of life, on its way to eternal life.

Life is the perennial concern of humanity and it is around life that stories are told and retold—origin of life, passages of life, destiny of life, and immortality of life. For Maoris, the native people of New Zealand, life is also the heart of the story of the creation of human beings. It is reminiscent of the creation story in the Hebrew Bible. This is how the Maori story goes:

Tane [the god] proceeded to the *puke* (*Mons veneris*) of Papa [the Earth] and there fashioned in human form a figure in the earth. His next task was to endow that figure with life, with human life, life as known to human beings . . . Implanted in the lifeless

image were the *wairua* (spirit) and *manawa ora* (breath of life), obtained from Io, the Supreme Being. The breath of Tane was directed upon the image, and the warmth affected it. The figure absorbed life, a faint sigh was heard, the life spirit manifested itself, and Hine-ahu-one, the Earth Formed Maid, sneezed, opened her eyes, and rose—a woman.

Such was the Origin of Woman, formed from the substance of the Earth Mother, but animated by the divine Spirit that emanated from the Supreme Being, Io the great, Io of the Hidden Face, Io the Parent, and Io the Parentless.⁴

The similarity between this Maori story and the Genesis story is unmistakable. Except for the name of the deity and except for the creation of “woman” first instead of “man,” there is the divine spirit, the earth, the breath of life. Even the way the lifeless figure formed from the earth is made into a living being by the divine spirit is strikingly similar. Stories do bring us together as vulnerable human beings living a transient life in a transient world, and not as invincible human beings armed with beliefs and convictions that assure them of an immortal life.

THERE ARE NO STORIES IN HELL

As we have mentioned, story can turn despair into hope, sorrow into joy, even death into life, and hell into paradise. For this reason we cannot think of a life without stories, a world without stories, the universe without stories, and God without stories.

Stories can turn Hell into Paradise! What does this mean in the first place? It means that there are no stories in Hell. That is why people, from ancient times to the present time, are afraid of Hell. This is true whether you are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. Does not fear of Hell take up a large portion of religious literature in practically all religions? Most of these stories “make one’s hair stand on end” (*mau gu shu ran* in Chinese), that is, make one shudder in fear. Listen to this Buddhist story of Hell:

The departed spirit cannot escape from being boiled in an iron pot. Once in Hell, the departed one may at times be thrown on a steep mountain of swords and shed much blood; at times he may suffer from the excruciating pain of a high mountain of spears piercing his breast. Sometimes he is run over by a flam-

4. This Maori creation story is to be found in Eliade, *From Primitives to Zen*, 130.

ing wagon wheel which bears the weight of many thousands of stones; and at other times he is made to sink into a bottomless river of ice. Sometimes he is forced to drink boiling water, or to swallow molten iron, or he is roasted in roaring flames. In these circumstances he can obtain nothing to drink, let alone even hear drink mentioned. . . . Though he may raise desperate cries for help from Heaven, he finds no response and his chances for pardon decrease each night. . . . Once you fall into Hell, repentance is of no value. No matter how long you wait, even till the end of time, you will repeat your cries in vain.⁵

We cannot but be amazed by the fanciful imagination in this description of Hell. What a religious teaching such as this tries to do is to inculcate the fear of Hell in the believers and to exhort them to do good deeds in their lives.

This reminds us of Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). In that parable the rich man found himself in Hades (Hell) after he had died, where he was being tormented. Then he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames" (16:24). This is the reply he got from Father Abraham: "Child . . . between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us" (16:26). It seems that even Jesus is not entirely free from the popular belief in Hell. But Jesus, who told the parable, "descended to hell," according to the Apostles' Creed that finally became the creed of the Western church in about the year 700. What does this mean? We will come back to the question later.

Let us, then, look at how Dante (1265–1321)—said to be Italy's greatest poet and author of *The Divine Comedy*, an account of his imaginary journey through Hell, Purgatory and his final glimpse of Heaven—describes the unspeakable horror he encounters in Hell. Dante, led by his Guide, is struck with fear as he reads these words at the vestibule of Hell:⁶

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.
(*The Inferno*, Canto III)

5. From *Kobodaishi zenshiu*, III, 347–55, in De Bary, *Buddhist Tradition*, 297.

6. All these stanzas are from *The Inferno*.

As his journey progresses, Dante witnesses horrible scenes in which those in Hell undergo painful torment. He tells what he with his mind's eye witnesses:

Thus we descended the dark scarp of Hell
to which all the evil of the Universe
comes home at last, into the Fourth Great Circle

and ledge of the abyss. O Holy Justice,
who could relate the agonies I saw!
What guilt is man that he can come to this? . . .

Here too, I saw a nation of lost souls,
. . . they strained their chests
against enormous weights, and with mad howls . . .
(Canto VII)

There is in Hell a vast and sloping ground
called Malebolge, a lost place of stone
as black as the great cliff that seals it round . . .

Below, on my right, and filling the first ditch
along both banks, new souls in pain appeared,
new torments, and new devils black as pitch.

All of these sinners were naked; on our side
of the middle they walked toward us; on the other,
in our direction, but with swifter stride . . .

We had already come to where the walk
crosses the second bank, from which it lifts
another arch, spanning from rock to rock.

Here we heard people whine in the next chasm,
and knock and thump themselves with open palms,
and blubber through their snouts as if in a spasm.

Streaming from that pit, a vapor rose
over the banks, crusting them with a slime
that sickened my eyes and hammered at my nose . . .

Once there, I peered down; and I saw long lines
of people in a river of excrement
that seemed the overflow of the world's latrines . . .
(Canto XVIII)

What poetic imagination! Lurking within it is a universal fear of human beings for divine punishment in Hell. And how have religions, almost without exception, used people's fear of Hell to manipulate them into submission!

Whether it is a Buddhist's frightening story of Hell, Jesus' sober parable of Hell, or Dante's lurid description of Hell, they tell us at least one thing, paraphrasing a Chinese idiom: Fear of Hell is "the same with everyone everywhere" (*ren tong zhi shin, sin tong zhi li*). This is another illustration of how stories can travel back and forth across cultural and religious borders and converge at the deepest level of human consciousness. It may be that stories of this kind, that is, stories of Hell, for example, proceed from the unconscious. Does this not tell us that story theology is a theological effort to engage us human beings and God at the place where human beings are most vulnerable, naked, and defenseless?

At any rate, there are no stories in Hell. What stories can these tormented souls in Hell tell? Pain numbs their sensibility to things beautiful. Torment deprives them of ability for that which is noble. Groaning renders them impotent for that which is good. And in the darkness of pain, how can they perceive the light of truth? And love? It does not exist in Hell, love as the fountainhead of stories, the fertile soil of stories, the womb of stories. Above all, time comes to a standstill in Hell. There is no day and night any longer; all is night. There are no more four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter; all is bleak winter all the time. When time stops, story too stops. As love is the soul of story, so time is the fabric of story. Without love and without time, how could there be story in Hell? Those in Hell have no story to share. Eternal silence falls on Hell. That is why Dante, at the gates of Hell, has to read these words: "BEYOND TIME I STAND," and "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE."⁷

If love is the soul of story and time the fabric of it, then hope is its impetus. When you abandon hope, you die, not only physically but spiritually. When you give up hope, even if you continue your physical life, you are reduced to being "the living dead" and "a walking corpse." But how could human beings into whom God breathes the breath of life to enable them to become living beings be reduced to "the living dead" and "a walking corpse"? It must be for this reason that Jesus "descended

7. Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III.

to Hell,” to enliven those in Hell with love, time, and hope, to make them become living beings again, to give them the ability to tell stories again.

GOD LOVES STORIES

Story is a primary word. It is the primary word of God. It is the first word God uttered: When God says, “Let there be light,” and there was light (Gen 1:3). Since God uttered these first words, stories have continued to proceed from God, told and retold in human myths, legends, folktales, fairytales, in stories of the lives of millions upon millions of people who have walked the earth. Stories flow from parents to their eager children, from village elders to village men and women, from professional storytellers to their listeners. All sorts of stories are told by poets, novelists, playwrights, artists, performers, and entertainers on the stage and on the movie screen.

Stories are even told by thinkers, philosophers, and theologians, if they do not belittle stories and regard stories beneath their professional dignity to handle. But to belittle stories is to belittle God. How could they belittle God when their business first and foremost has to do with God? How could they regard it beneath their professional dignity to handle stories when they have to deal with stories from human beings into whom God has breathed the breath of life? And how can they profess to love God and their fellow human beings if they do not also love their stories, since both God and their fellow human beings are story-makers?

No wonder Jesus loves stories, because he is keenly aware of the most fundamental fact that both God and his fellow human beings love stories. He teaches people in stories, and what he does turns into stories. His parables are in essence stories, brief and succinct in form, but long and deep in meaning. They are told in plain and commonplace language, but provocative and soul-searching in their implication. Jesus proclaims the rule of God, the heart of his message and ministry, in parables and stories.

“With what can we compare the reign of God,” he asks his audience, “or what parable will we use for it?” (Mark 4:30). For him this is not merely a rhetorical device used by many preachers and evangelists to heighten the expectation of their listeners. By asking the question, Jesus is genuinely looking for a parable, a story, which would move the heart of his audience with the good news of God’s rule. It does not take long for him to come up with a story that parabolically illuminates for his

audience what he means by the rule of God. “The rule of God,” with his voice echoing in the air on the slope of a hill or on the shore by a lake, he proceeds to say, “is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all seeds on earth, yet when it is grown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (4:31–32).

Whether the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds on earth, and whether it becomes the greatest of all shrubs when it grows up, is beside the point. The point is that the rule of God may be modest and insignificant in the beginning, but it will grow to be impressive and important in the end as dispossessed people find shelter under it. Jesus must have concluded his short but powerful parable by saying: You, each one of you, are the rule of God! Is this not in line with some of the things he said in what is called the “Sermon on the Mount”? He, for instance, intimates to his listeners that “blessed are you,” each one of you, “who are poor, for yours is the rule of God” (Luke 6:20).

And there is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard” (Matt 20:1–15). This is a parable stretched into a story, no longer brief and compact as many other parables, nonetheless at once profoundly parabolic and strikingly pertinent to down-to-earth life situations. You may call it a parable-story and a story-parable. In a parable such as this, Jesus shows himself a master storyteller who combines deep theological insights with penetrating perceptiveness of the human mind and the human community.

Jesus begins the parable with these familiar words: “For the rule of God is like,” making it clear from the outset that his message and ministry of God’s rule is the key to understanding the parable he is going to tell in a story. The rule of God is the stage of this story-parable. Losing sight of it, you reduce the parable-story to nothing more than a political protest against the social conventions that spare no compassion and justice for the socially marginalized people. It must be for this reason that Jesus deliberately sets the climactic moment at the very end of the story-parable when all laborers, including those hired early in the morning and those hired almost at the end of the day, “received the [same] usual daily wage” (20:9).

The rule of God consists of stories such as this. Jesus does not confuse people with a theory of justice; he tells a story to bring home to them, literate and illiterate alike, the injustice prevailing in their society

and the just society envisioned by him in God's rule. He does not force people to accept a concept of equality. What he does is to tell a story that encourages them not to acquiesce to the disparate and shameful way they are treated in society. Instead, they are to stand to be counted for true equality, the cornerstone of God's rule. He does not baffle them with an abstract idea of human dignity. Instead, he implants in them a story, making them aware that their daily subsistence is essential to their dignity as human beings and that the rule of God is not rule *of God* if it does not assure them of their daily subsistence and of their dignity as human beings.

Who says God is silent? It is those who have no appreciation of stories that say God is silent. Who has postulated that God is mute? It is those who have no fascination for stories that have postulated that God is mute. There are people, even believers, who assert that they have not seen God, because they have not encountered God in stories. There are also men and women who look everywhere except in stories for the presence of God, but where else would they find God if not in stories of people who struggle to live in a harsh world and seek to live a meaningful life in a world beset with uncertainty, anxiety and fear?

Telling a story is then not a pastime, not something you do when you have nothing else to do. It is a serious business, because it is first God's business and then becomes our business. Listening to stories is not a waste of time. How can we be wasting our time when we listen to God's stories? If this is not the case, we have to say that prophets of ancient Israel wasted all their time listening to God. If this is not the case, we have to conclude that Jesus wasted his precious time at the critical moment of his life praying to God, saying: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). If this not the case, all Christian believers and believers of other faiths in the past and today have wasted their time praying to God and listening to what God has to say to them. And if this is not the case, our prayers are nothing but us talking to ourselves, or to use the Apostle Paul's words, we pray "as though beating the air" (1 Cor 9:26).

Telling stories and listening to them, then, is not an option; it is a necessity. It is not a choice, but an obligation. It is not something we can take or leave, but a matter of life or death. For in the beginning were stories, not texts.