


PRACTICE GUIDE

JOURNEYING IN THE WILDERNESS

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TELLING STORIES OF FAITH



Everyone has a story.

As a fourth-grader, I was a guest at the confirmation retreat my dad was leading. During the retreat, Dad shared a story: The Friday before Christmas when I was three, my Mom and Dad went to a Christmas party while my two-year-old brother Scott and I stayed home with a babysitter. When they returned, Scott was sick, so they gave him aspirin and went to bed. The next morning, Scott was worse, so they took him to the hospital. After an exhausting day of tests and waiting, Mom came home while Dad stayed. That night Scott died from Rey's Syndrome. As Dad shared the story, my mind drifted to a memory. It was of a Christmas tree shining in a dark room with my mom crying in the shadows. That was my first memory. While I knew the facts about Scott's death, hearing Dad tell the story that day had a profound impact on me.

Stories have power. Stories bond, inspire, communicate, and teach. They activate both sides of our brain and tap into cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic dimensions of our lives. Stories can convey complex truths, integrate ideas into everyday circumstances, and connect unrelated experiences. **Stories are capable of challenging attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and can linger long after the storyteller is gone.** All of us have stories to share, and sharing stories is a transformative practice.

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*Journeying in the
Wilderness, 65*



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What if everyone told their story? Seeking to find out the answer to this question, Dave Isay opened a StoryCorps booth in New York City's Grand Central station. As a journalist, he had seen the transformative power of telling stories, so he decided to develop a platform for ordinary people to tell their own story. The experiment invited people into a space and into a storytelling process while he recorded. People came to tell stories and to listen, and it was a profound experience. Sharing and receiving stories is "an act of generosity and love" and listening to people's stories felt like "walking on holy ground," Isay said. As a result, he expanded the platform and now, twelve years later, StoryCorps has recorded more than 100,000 stories of people from all fifty states. They have the largest collection of African American recorded stories, honored the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorists attack, partnered with educational initiatives, honored military personnel, highlighted people with memory loss and in hospice care, and created a series around justice. StoryCorps is fueled by the power of stories.

What if congregations became platforms for curating stories? Mount Zion Temple, a Jewish congregation in St Paul, MN, started curating stories as part of a strategic planning process three years ago. Aware that people did not know each other, they used storytelling to create community. Adapting the "Humans of New York" concept, they interviewed a different person each week and published their story on their website. When the planning process was done, the storytelling practice remained.

Sharing stories has been a common practice in the church for centuries. Not only does sharing stories create the conditions for personal conversations and a caring environment, but it also is a means of forming faith. Telling stories of faith provides opportunities to reflect on God's presence in our lives, and hearing stories of faith points to God's presence in the world. *Storytelling is an accessible and engaging practice that witnesses to God's transformative love in our lives.*

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Journeying in the Wilderness, 66



Everyone has a story.

Telling stories is an art available to people with various skill levels. Prompts help communities adopt or expand this practice. Here are three to consider:

- First, **interview people**. StoryCorps uses this method and offers a great starting point. Questions can vary, but be sure to include some about faith.

Second, **tell stories related to a theme**. Four themes StoryCorps found to be powerful are: thank you, I love you, forgive me, and I forgive you.

Third, **write a story based on ten pictures** from your life. Once people have written them, share both the images and the stories.

Sharing stories is also a means of confessing our faith in God. Storytelling was the main avenue for sharing faith in the early church. Without written accounts, verbal witnessing to Jesus's life, death, and resurrection was the only means available. In today's world, witnessing is often associated with legal systems or testifying to an experience. Witnessing to faith does share our experiences of God, but it also includes confessing a belief in something not seen but known to be true.

Scott's death highlights one of my bedrock claims of the Christian faith. Since the age of three, Christmas and death have been fused together. Part of my faith journey was wrestling with how death fits into the Christmas narrative. Christmas had to be more than presents or a Norman Rockwell portrait. Opening myself to the grief of Scott's death allowed me to see how God coming to earth to live among us matters. Christmas is connected to Easter, the time when God declared that life is more powerful than death. Dad's story led me to a deeper understanding of Scott's death, and my telling the story about Scott's death helped me discover hope. My life is grounded in the hope of the resurrected Christ. Christians tell our stories of life and death, hope and despair, and love and hate so that others may know the extent of God's love and the hope of the resurrection.