

Steps for Biblical “Animation”

(The method used by Ched Myers of Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, www.bcm-net.org)

Read the Biblical Text

Make a handout of the scripture verses you are studying. Have people read it, with gusto, as if they were telling a real-life story—not the flat way we often read scripture.

Read the text again from different translations.

Analyze the Text (use flip charts, ways to record)

Identify episodes, as if scenes in a play. Where does each scene start, end?

Name the characters. How do they relate to one another? Who has power and who does not? Who is in safe space, who is unsafe; who has a voice, who doesn't?

Describe settings (time, place, space). Where does this scene occur?

Discuss plot: events and happenings. Events are about what the characters do. Happenings are about what happens to the characters.

Identify major points of conflict. The great majority of stories in the gospels are conflict stories.

Look at the ways conflict is resolved or deepened. With Jesus, the conflict is almost always deepened. Conflict leads Jesus to the point of crucifixion.

Define the formal structure to the episode. Think English class. If the scenes move from scene A to scene B to scene A again, it's a “sandwich” or “circular” structure. View the scenes as chunks and see how they stack up.

Check out how this scriptural passage links to other ones. MIDRASH is the Hebrew practice of linking one story to another. This is how people originally hearing scripture understood it—that one story stood on an older one. We know this from our families—we mention something someone did and understand it based on the whole family history. Jesus spoke based on the assumption that his hearers knew the older stories. We need to recapture those linkages, or else reading a gospel story is like “watching the last 5 minutes of a movie.” So, for instance, if the New Testament story is about bread, think of all the other bread allusions in the bible. Write them down so you can look up those stories in scripture. This creates a web of messages on a topic, and enriches the meaning of the particular text being discussed.

Read and discuss the older stories and identify their relevance to your text. How do the themes in the text being discussed fit with the earlier or other texts?

Reflect on the Text

List your questions and perplexities. After all this analysis, what questions come to mind? What seems confusing, odd? Our current church culture leads to looking at the bible for answers, for "right-answeredness." This is especially true with more conservative cultures. We need to allow the perplexities to exist, to get beyond the tapes of "received" interpretation, and to become more comfortable with the questions scripture brings, the wrestling with what we do not know.

Make associations with our world (real situations, not vague ideas). When we see the biblical story, think of what would be a similar setting today. That is: use analogical thinking, which is the key to cross-cultural understanding.

Say where you identify with the characters and situations in this story.

Re-tell the biblical in our own social context. This is the whole point of making the biblical story relevant. What is our own new story that re-narrates the same dynamics as the biblical story? Who has power now and who does not? Who is hungry now and who is not? Etc.

Experiment with embodying/acting the story out. Take roles. Act it out in physical space. Do it quickly and jump right in; people take parts (it's interesting to check out who relates how to the parts they took). Remember that the biblical author had the power to select which words and stories were most important to include. Think about what the writer left in or out and why these choices were important. (If someone asks you: "What did you do yesterday?" you pick and choose what to relate. Acting out the stories can tell you a lot about this priority setting.)

If there is time, discuss theological/spiritual meanings of the text. This is what we generally jump to, forgetting most of the earlier steps.

IF YOU ONLY HAVE AN HOUR OR SO, DO THE BASICS:

- ❖ Read the passage together.
- ❖ Identify characters, setting and plot. What are the scenes, in time and space?
- ❖ What's the conflict or energy point and how is it resolved?
- ❖ What other scriptural stories connect to this scripture?
- ❖ How does this story relate to our culture? Where do we see the same social dynamics?
- ❖ (Remember—biblical writers showed Jesus' life so we could learn how to see and act as He did. Jesus healed all, championed social outcasts, and said the last shall be first. If we're not paying attention to our own social and economic dynamics as we read the bible, we may be "spiritualizing" the book—making it too "heavenly.")

Considerations:

When teaching in a group setting, though all of the steps of Animation are important, I'd like to further highlight these pieces of the process:

- 1- ***Not allowing folks to place the scripture safely away in heaven.*** I think because of the tapes running in our heads, this is the first movement that most folks want to take. Don't let them go there. Keep them firmly planted on earth. For example, if the characters in the narrative have not yet named Jesus as God's son, don't allow the hearers of the story to do it either. If they do, they will miss much of the contextual tension of the story, thus, ironically missing the spiritual implications because they have moved too quickly to the spiritual realm. Of course, the reality is that it is all "spiritual realm." So, keep folks real. The theological implications will emerge soon enough.
- 2- ***Recontextualize the story into our culture.*** With the animation of the Tale of the Two Daughters in Mark 5. After Jesus has the interaction with the "bleeding-daughter," we look back at Leviticus 15 and discover that she is the one who was the total disruption of the entire religious project. We then ask folks to reflect on the question ... "who is the one who most disrupts your religious project? Who would you wish had never existed at all? This is the one who crawls toward Jesus." We don't specifically answer the question for the hearers, we allow the narrative to, as Ched says, "do the heavy lifting." Folks get to reach their own conclusions of who the woman is in their cultural context. Very powerful stuff that unlocks the "spiritual" implications.
- 3- ***In your preparation to lead the sessions, give PLENTY of time to the process.*** I think it's a do-able process even without years of "formal" training, but I cannot overstress the need to spend ample time in scripture, use solid commentaries (Interpreters Bible, Interpretation Series {Abington}, Ched's stuff, etc.), utilize a good Bible dictionary and concordance, use a Greek & Hebrew dictionary, and do the reflective work getting back to the "earlier testament." Computerized versions of any of these can be very helpful, especially the Greek/Hebrew dictionary.
- 4- ***Finally, resist providing "answers."*** Use lots of leading questions and allow the narrative to lead folks in their answers (or in most cases, many more questions.) Your role is to help folks "see" the narrative being unveiled in their own context and gently guide them to new and liberating space. Radical love is always dangerous for it will always claim justice for the most vulnerable and it will do so through nonviolent action. If it doesn't, then in my mind it isn't truly love. Such Christ-centeredness will always be a frightening place to venture, particularly in this American/success-driven/consumerist/militaristic society, where might makes right. Just remember, Jesus critiques EVERY culture and calls every culture to the Banquet Feast that is His life. He doesn't choose for anyone to be left behind.