

ENSEMBLE STORYTELLING

The theatrical dynamic of Biblical Storytelling with a group

WHAT IS ENSEMBLE STORYTELLING?

Ensemble storytelling is the use of more than one person in a storytelling presentation.

If you are presenting an epic-telling of a few chapters of the Bible rather than simply a few verses, it is often wise to break it up and give it to a few storytellers to present. But what do you do with everyone when they're not storytelling? Many epic-tellings simply place the extra storytellers off to the side as they wait for their turn. This method makes a storytelling event much easier to prepare for, as each storyteller can prepare their stories without rehearsing lots of times with the other storytellers. Unfortunately, it also can make a long storytelling seem disjointed and even make it feel like a bit of a factory conveyer-belt with each storyteller getting up, doing their bit and then sitting down again.

There are many more creative options for a group of storytellers that simply aren't being utilised. Ensemble storytelling is about using every available storyteller to tell the story more effectively. It does take more work to prepare, but the pay-off is a storytelling presentation that is a lot more dynamic, engaging, and visually interesting, as well as being more powerful and effective in communicating the story you are trying to tell.

BENEFITS OF ENSEMBLE STORYTELLING – HOW IT CAN BE USED.

Physically:

- Non verbal characters in scene.
(eg. The King's nobles are mentioned in Dan 5, and could be represented by non-speaking storytellers)
- Help set the scene.
(eg. Scribes in Dan 4 aren't mentioned in the story but could be portrayed to help to show that it is a letter being written by the King)
- Represent symbolic, spiritual, theological or thematic elements of the story.
(eg. Angelic guards aren't mentioned in Dan 4, but could be portrayed to represent that God prevented Nebuchadnezzar from returning to his throne)
- Part of the set.
(eg. Imagine Zacchaeus climbing on to the shoulders of a person to represent climbing a tree, or a group of people coming together to form Noah's Ark)



Verbally:

- Distribute the lines for effect
(eg. Daniel 7 is quite surreal and works well when broken up into short, punchy sections to allow the feeling of being bombarded with images in the same way Daniel was bombarded with the vision)
- Choral – saying the lines in unison
(eg. The "Legion" in Luke 8, or the host of angels in Luke 2)
- Adding lines that aren't in the text
(eg. Cheers, screams, applause, laughter, mocking, crying, or specific words that assist the story rather than distract from the story.)
- Soundscape
(eg. Imagine a group of storytellers making a buzzing sound as the plague of locust from Exodus 10 is described, or making the sound of the wind & waves during the squall mentioned in Mark 4)



USEFUL SKILLS FOR ENSEMBLE STORYTELLING.

- A servant attitude:
 - Every non-speaking storyteller has to see their role in ensemble storytelling as being a support or servant of the speaking storyteller. The speaking storyteller has to carry the story and everyone else is there to help them in that role, rather than to distract attention.
- Energy and concentration:
 - In ensemble storytelling, every storyteller needs to know every part of every story. Since they are actively involved in all of the stories being told, they need to remain focussed and "on the ball". This takes a lot more mental and physical energy than if they were just sitting to the side waiting for their turn.
- The ability to portray lots of different characters:
 - This ability is useful for any storytelling, but with ensemble storytelling the non-speaking storytellers may be moving around portraying lots of characters in the one story.
- The ability to give a physical performance without words:
 - Most storytellers have spent a lot of time learning how to verbally tell a story well, even if they're sitting down the whole time. If you are being involved in an ensemble storytelling and you're not the one speaking, you have to learn to use your whole body (gestures, facial expressions, posture and other actions) to assist the telling of the story without the use of words.

PROBLEMS WITH ENSEMBLE STORYTELLING.

- It does take more time to prepare. Instead of simply having to learn just your own story, every storyteller has to know everyone else's stories intimately, so that they know where they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to be doing at every point.
- It can be better to not represent something. The imagination is very powerful and less can often be more. For example, if you had three storytellers representing an immense army, it may actually make it harder for the audience to imagine the size of the scene. If you don't use anyone, the audience's imagination may be able to picture it better.
- It can make the storytelling too "busy". If the storytellers are running around changing characters every two seconds, it can end up making the story more confusing and can make the presentation just seem messy.
- Once you start, it's hard to stop. If you use ensemble storytelling for one story, to keep the whole collection of stories consistent, you might have to use it in every story.



A skilful storyteller can help you imagine an entire scene, without the need for ensemble storytelling



REMEMBER:

Never use the principles of ensemble storytelling for no good reason. Use it only to help the story. If you feel it is at any point not helping the story, then DON'T DO IT.

Think of it like a sprig of parsley on a meal. It can help the presentation and make it all more interesting and appetising. But don't conclude that a plate covered in a pile of parsley is even better! You always want to be able to see the meal more than the garnish, and with storytelling, you never want to obscure the story with any theatrical device.

If you would like more information about Ensemble Storytelling or the process of putting on a larger-scale biblical storytelling production, please contact Kable Dale -

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