

1. Bibliolog – an introduction

1.1 *Three examples of Bibliolog – an appetizer*

The best way to understand Bibliolog is by experiencing it. Re-narrating a Bibliolog, however, comes closest to actually experiencing it and therefore helps to understand this approach. The roles and questions were taken from my notes. The participants' utterances, however, as well as mine during the echoing and interviewing were taken from memory.² For a better understanding, everything I say in my role as conductor in direct speech is printed in italics.

Bibliolog during Sunday service
Matthew 14:28–33

Dear congregation,

Preaching usually means that the preacher studies a biblical text in preparation for the sermon and then communicates the results of this study to the congregation. The members of the congregation listen and reflect upon what is said. I have been invited to deliver a different sermon today: instead of telling you about my take on the text, I would like to take you into the text and discover it from within – in other words, I would like to “preach” together with you. By using an approach called “Bibliolog” we will enter into a dialog with the Bible.

It's pretty simple: I am taking you with me into the world of a biblical text. I am going to read part of the story and then stop. Then I will ask you to identify with a person from the Bible. In this moment every one of you will be this person and I will address you as that person and ask you a question. You are invited to share your answer with the group, even if it is quiet and short. I will be coming to your seat and will repeat your answer in my own words, loudly so that everybody can understand. I might have to check with you at some point. Most importantly, there are no wrong answers: everything that is said is valuable and gives insight into the biblical story. Everyone does not have to share his or her thoughts with the group. To keep them to yourself can also be just as valuable and worthwhile. If, however, nobody chooses to express his or her thoughts it would be like having a meditation – which is

² For these essential techniques please refer to Ch. 2.4., in which the meaning and significance of echoing – beyond making quiet utterances audible – will be explained.

very nice as well but not as lively as a Bibliolog. Therefore, do not hesitate to share your ideas!

The story that we are about to enter can be found in the 14th chapter of Matthew. Jesus and his disciples have been on the road for quite a while. The disciples have made many different experiences since they joined Jesus. They have seen Jesus healing people and exorcising demons; they have listened to him discussing and arguing – and they have done the same in his name (Matt. 10:5–15). Just today the disciples have seen Jesus feeding a great crowd although they had nothing there but five loaves and two fish! Immediately afterwards Jesus orders his disciples to leave and get into the boat and go ahead to the other side. He would meet them there. His disciples do as they were told but soon find themselves in the midst of a storm rocking their boat to and fro. The boat gets battered by the waves, the situation becomes dangerous, – and then they see a figure on the water moving in their direction. They cried out in fear, “It is a ghost!” But then they hear Jesus’ voice saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

In this situation one of the disciples, Peter, reacts differently than the others. The Bible says (I open the Bible and read out Matt. 14:28): Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

You – all of you – are Peter. Peter, what makes you say these words? What makes you want to leave the boat?

– I don’t care where I go – but I have to get out of this rocking boat full of screaming people.

I just have to leave this small rocking boat and I have to get away from those screaming people around me. I just want to get out, even if that means I have to go onto the water.

– I’ve been with Jesus for quite a while now. I can heal; I can exorcise demons, so it’s time for me to learn something new.

I want to learn more from Jesus and I’m eager to enhance my abilities. Today’s lecture is walking on water.

– This is my chance! If he can do it, maybe I can as well!

Now is my chance to walk on water myself! And if it works, that would be ...

– Amazing! Walking on water – wow, I’ve always wanted to do that!

Being able to walk on water – that must be amazing and a long-cherished dream would come true for me.

– I want to know if that really is Jesus. If it is indeed him then it’ll work.

I want to find out if that person really is Jesus and this is my way to prove it.

Thank you, Peter.

And it says in the Bible (Matt. 14:29): He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

You are Andrew, Peter's brother, who, just like his brother, chose to follow Jesus and is sitting in the boat right now. Andrew, you see your brother walking toward Jesus on the water. How do you experience this situation?

– Shoot! He was faster than me ... again.

I am angry and annoyed that he was, again, faster than me.

– I wonder if that's gonna work ...

I am not sure whether this is going to work out or not. Why are you doubtful, Andrew?

– I know my brother and he has a big mouth. He likes to talk big but in the end he never follows through.

He's just not as good as his word. He never finishes what he's started.

– Oh, that is so typical. Always him!

I'm used to my brother acting like this. He's always ...

– He's always the star. He's just got to be the center of attention.

My brother likes to be in the spotlight. What about you, Andrew?

– I don't even have a chance anymore.

Because of my brother I can never be on top. He pushes me into the background.

– But I'm also scared for him. The waves are so high ...

It is very dangerous out on the water and I am afraid that something could happen to him!

This is what happens next (Matt. 14:30–31): But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

You are Jesus. Jesus, how do you say these words to Peter? What are your reasons for saying this?

– Well, I thought he had finally understood what all this is about – but I guess he's not ready yet.

I thought he had made greater progress by now. But he still needs to learn a lot.

– Oh, that's too bad. It looked quite promising at first – but in the end it wasn't enough ... again.

I am disappointed with my disciple. I really thought him capable of doing it – and he didn't make it.

– But at least he tried. He ventured to take the first step.

I appreciate that he had the courage to give it a try.

– It's a pity that he was doubtful in the end. I'd really like to know why so that I can help him next time.

If only I knew the reasons for his doubts. I could help him overcome them. And then ...?

– It would work the next time!
If I helped him he would be able to make it.

We continue to read in the Bible (Matt. 14:32–33): When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

You are Peter once again. Peter, we see your fellow disciples falling down on their knees and saying, “You are the Christ”. Surprisingly, you remain silent at this point. Peter, what do you do, what do you say now? Or what do you think without saying it out loud?

– This whole situation is very embarrassing for me. I wasn’t thinking and then it went all wrong.

I’m not saying anything at all because I feel so embarrassed. I was acting without thinking and hence I failed.

– I am still shocked by what has happened.

I’m still frozen in shock. I need to take a deep breath.

– At least I was daring enough to try, as opposed to the others. It’s easy for them to criticize. They were sitting safely in the boat all along.

I was the only one daring enough to actually do something. The others are only talking big. And for me this is ...?

– I think it’s completely wrong that suddenly I am the one looking small. I mean – I was the only one with the courage to step out of that boat.

I am upset and think it is unfair that my courage, unlike the others’ words, is not appreciated.

– Jesus held out his hand to me and saved me. He was there for me when I really needed him.

What’s really important to me is that Jesus reached out to me when I needed him.

– It’ll work next time.

It wasn’t that bad for a first attempt. It’ll work next time, I’m sure. It’ll work because ...?

– Because now I know that I mustn’t look down at the water. I should only look at Jesus.

Now I know that all I have to do is concentrate on Jesus instead of the dangers of the sea. And then it won’t be a problem.

Thank you, Peter.

This is how our story ends. We do not know how Jesus and his disciples reached the shore or what they thought. We also do not know what this experience has meant for Peter and his relationship to his brother, the other disciples, and Jesus, respectively. But there are other passages in the Bible addressing those issues, telling stories of courage and fear, of faith and doubt

and of the relationship between Jesus and those people believing in him – now and then.

Thank you, Peter, Andrew and Jesus for being present and for telling us about some of the things we could not find in the text but were able to read between the lines.

I am asking you to return to this book (at this point I make a gesture with the Bible as if inviting the biblical characters back into the Bible). Thank you, dear congregation, for being open to this way of discovering a biblical story from within and for lending the biblical characters your voice. You are yourselves again, members of the “Church of x”. You are now going to hear the whole story again, as yourself. If you like you can check whether there is a new aspect or a certain sentence of the story that has become important to you (I reread Matt. 14:28–33).

Together we have interpreted a biblical text and we have seen how multifaceted this almost 2000-year-old story is. It combines many different experiences, emotions and motives regarding Jesus and the people. Furthermore, we have realized that some of the emotions, thoughts and experiences that were portrayed are quite close to those moving and affecting us today. When biblical stories get connected and interwoven with our stories today, there is a great chance of experiencing the biblical message as relevant for our own lives. Maybe you have had this experience today.

Bibliolog in religious education Crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 14:5–15:21)

The 4th grade in an elementary school in Hamburg is learning about Moses. What is special about religious education in Hamburg is that every child in the class, regardless of his or her religion or denomination, participates (“Religious education for everybody under the responsibility of Protestantism”).

At the beginning of the unit we talked about the Israelites’ experiences as slaves in Egypt and about slavery in general. The children quickly realized that this unbearable situation called for a change. “We really need to leave this place”, one student said. We further discussed the back and forth that went on between Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh. The latter has forced the Israelites to stay until he experiences the plagues brought upon Egypt and lets them go. On the evening before they leave, the Israelites celebrate Passover. Here our Bibliolog sets in.

The class has experienced Bibliolog before and therefore already knows the “rules”. However, I remind them once again (prologue):

I am telling a part of a biblical story again. Then I will stop and tell you what character you are going to be and I will ask you something. If you want to say something – as this person from the Bible – raise your hand and I will come to you and repeat your answer in my own words, audible for every-

body. As you know, everything that is said is valuable and important. And you know as well that you can but don't have to answer in front of everyone – but it is going to be more interesting to hear many different ideas.

Now let's begin our story about the Israelites who are finally free to leave Egypt. Eventually Pharaoh let them go and before he could change his mind they quickly set off. They walked through the desert, Moses and Aaron ahead, followed by many women, men and children. They haven't been on their way that long when this happened:

(I am reading – in part – from a Bible translation for children and teenagers³) Soon Pharaoh regretted his decision to let the Israelites go. He gathered his army to pursue the Israelites and chased after them. Meanwhile, the Israelites have reached the Red Sea. In front of them was nothing but water. Suddenly they saw Pharaoh's mighty army drawing nearer from a distance. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. And they accused Moses, "Is that why you made us leave Egypt? So that we would die out here in the wilderness? We should never have trusted you in the first place!"

You are an Israelite. In front of you is a huge sea and behind you Pharaoh's army is approaching. You can already hear them. What do you say in this situation? Do you also cry out to God, are you angry with Moses as well – or do you perhaps say something completely different?

Several hands go up spontaneously.

– I'm angry with Moses, too. It was obvious that Pharaoh wouldn't just let us go.

I am angry. It is Moses' fault. He should have known that, with Pharaoh, things never turn out well.

– I guess we will have to carry heavy rocks again and that is sooo exhausting ...

I fear that we have to go back working for Pharaoh and that can only mean struggle and pain.

– And our babies will be killed again. I don't want that!

The worst thing about this is that our babies will be murdered again.

– Help! I cannot swim.

I am scared of drowning in the sea.

– Pharaoh is going to ice each and every one of us!

I am scared that we are all going to die.

– I'd rather keep carrying those rocks.

It was really bad for us Egypt, but it is way worse here.

– Maybe there is a sand bank somewhere.

I'm not giving up just yet. I'm looking for a way to save us that we just haven't seen yet.

³ For more information on choosing a translation see 2.1.4.

– I’m praying. Maybe God will show me where to go.
Maybe God can save us. I’m asking for his help.

Thank you, Israelite.

Let’s hear how the story continues (I continue reading). Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pick up your staff and raise your hand over the sea. Divide the water so the Israelites can walk through the middle of the sea on dry ground. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they will charge in after the Israelites. All Egypt will see my glory and know that I am the Lord!”

The pillar of cloud also moved from the front and stood behind them. The cloud settled between the Egyptian and Israelite camps and the Egyptians and Israelites did not approach each other all night. Then Moses raised his hand over the sea, and the Lord opened up a path through the water with a strong east wind.

You are an Israelite once again. You feel the strong wind and see a path opening up through the water. What is your first thought?

– Wow, that’s great! We can walk through now!

That’s wonderful, a passage for us!

– But I wonder if that’s safe. That should actually be impossible.

I wonder if that really is a path for us. A sea usually does not behave like this. And ...?

– I believe it only looks as though we could pass.

I am afraid that we are deceived and that this is not a real path.

– Besides, the Egyptians are coming after us. And then?

It’s a pointless endeavor anyway. We are not safe because the Egyptians can simply follow us.

– I want to go through now!

I want to get going. Because ...?

– The faster we are, the greater our chances.

We have to be fast now and grab our chance.

Thank you, Israelite.

In my own words I add: And the Israelites walk on the path through the water. Moses stretches out his hand with the staff and the path stays dry.

You are once again an Israelite. You are walking through there. To your right, there is water and to your left there is water but your feet stay dry. What is it like passing through the water?

– Why? I just keep going. La la la ...

That is nothing special. I’m just going through there, singing to myself.

– I think it’s weird.

It feels weird walking through here. Weird, because ...?

– Because this is practically impossible ...

It is an odd feeling to experience something that defies any explanation.

– Oh wow! That's like in an aquarium. So many colorful fish!

I can take a look into an entirely different and colorful world.

– I am scared because the water might come back.

I don't feel safe at all. Who guarantees that the walls of water will hold until we reach the other side?

– What would happen if Moses lowered his hand?

The rest of us are depending on Moses and that he keeps his hand up. Are you afraid he might put his hand down?

– Well, yeah. I mean holding his hand up can be quite exhausting.

I just don't know whether or not he has enough strength.

– God brought us out of Egypt. He couldn't just abandon us now.

To me it was clear that God would help us. He led us out of Egypt and he wouldn't just let us die now.

– I also didn't think he would bail on us.

I know that God helps us when we really need him.

Thank you, Israelite.

I continue reading: *Then the Egyptians – all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and charioteers – chased them into the middle of the sea. Then the waters returned and covered them all – the entire army of Pharaoh. Of all the Egyptians who had chased the Israelites into the sea, not a single one survived. The Israelites watched from ashore.*

Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron and Moses' sister, took a tambourine and led all the women as they played their tambourines and danced. And Miriam sang this song: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; he has hurled both horse and rider into the sea."

You are an Israelite again. Are you singing a song as well? What is most important to you right now?

– Great.

That is great. Great, because ...?

– We were rescued!

It is a great feeling to be safe now.

– That was a close call.

It could have easily come out differently. That was anything but a sure thing.

– I almost wet my pants.

I was very scared.

– But that the Egyptians are all dead now ...

I am thinking about the Egyptians who had to die. And what do you think about it?

– I don't like it. They should have turned around instead.

I feel sorry for the Egyptians. There was no need for them to die. It would have been sufficient if they had turned around.

– I think it's awesome. Now they can't harm us anymore.

Now we really are safe from them.

– I'm singing, la la la.

I'm singing a song. I'm singing, because ...?

– Because it feels so nice to be rescued and safe.

It is a wonderful feeling to finally be safe.

Thank you very much, Israelites, for being here and for telling us how it might have been back in the day. Thank you, dear class 4b, for giving your voice to the biblical figures and for sharing your ideas. You are yourselves again and as yourselves you will hear the whole story once more ... (I reread the story).

Bibliolog with university students

The encounter between Eve and the serpent (Genesis 3:1–7)

In an interdisciplinary seminar I, as a Practical Theologian, have worked together with a Systematic Theologian. We have dealt with the concept of sin and its relevance for people today. I begin our next session with a Bibliolog addressing the encounter between Eve and the serpent. In Luther's translation the biblical story is titled "Der Sündenfall" ("The Fall into Sin") although the word sin does not occur in it.

At first I introduce the concept of Bibliolog (Prologue):

We are about to discover a biblical text that is known as "The Fall into Sin" or "The Fall of Man." You probably know the storyline: Genesis 3:1–7 tells us about an encounter between a serpent and a human being that has serious consequences. We are going to access this story via Bibliolog, an approach that allows us to interpret the text together. In concrete terms this means that I will stop a few times while reading the story and I will ask you to slip into a certain role. I will address you in that role and ask you a question. If you want to answer this question, just give me a hand signal and then I will come to your seat. I will repeat your answer in my own words and I might have a follow-up question. In Bibliolog it is not about making profound theological statements but rather about making your own discoveries within the text, which is far more valuable and enriching. You also have the right to keep your answers to yourselves but our experience will be livelier and more exciting if we hear many different ideas.

Now let's discover the biblical text. We are in the Garden of Eden, which God has made as part of his creation and in which the first man and woman live. We know from other texts that their names are Adam and Eve. Together with many different animals they live in the Garden, eating the fruits growing

there. But in the middle of the garden is one tree whose fruit God has forbidden them to eat. Otherwise they would die.

We do not know what Eve, Adam and all the animals were normally doing all day long. But today something special happens (I open the Bible and read Gen. 3:1–3): Now the serpent was more cunning than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’? The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”

You – every one of you – are the woman, Eve. Eve, you answer the serpent by saying: We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’ How do you say these words? What is going through your mind?

– I have to set the record straight. The serpent misunderstood.

It was just a misunderstanding and I have to clear up the confusion.

– The serpent is addressing exactly those things I’ve been thinking about the whole time.

I have been wondering about this as well. For quite some time now I have been thinking about why we are not allowed to eat from this tree. Now someone is finally saying it out loud. What is it like for you, Eve, to have the serpent expressing these thoughts?

– I guess I didn’t dare to really think it through to the end. But now that the serpent is saying it ...

Other than me the serpent has the courage to speak about it and therefore my thoughts become more concrete as well.

– I’m wondering what he wants.

The serpent sure is not just asking this without a reason. He wants something from me? Does he want something from you, Eve?

– Well, he comes directly to me, doesn’t he?

It is no coincidence that the serpent comes talking to me.

– I feel a bit uneasy.

I feel uneasy because ...?

– Until now everything was just so peaceful here in the Garden, and so clear. And now this serpent comes along, making trouble. He wants me to do something that I was forbidden to do.

The serpent disturbs the peace in the Garden and only causes turmoil. Until now I had never been in a conflict between what I want to do and what I am supposed to do. But now that’s different.

Thank you, Eve. We are proceeding within our story (Gen. 3:4–5): But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you