

Reading the Bible Again for the First Time¹ Encountering the Story

We love stories, narrative, drama. Story is everywhere. We hear stories from the time we are born. There is, of course, the proverbial bedtime story. How many times have you heard one or read one? There are nursery rhymes Jack and Jill and Little Miss Muffet, and we know what happened to them. There are fairy tales old—Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty—and fairy tales new—starring Shrek and Woody and Buzz Lightyear. You know: the world of “happily ever after”. There are the stories that teach us to imagine, to dream, and, eventually, hopefully, to read. And once we do read our life can be story filled with the Bobbsey Twins and Ann of Green Gables, with the Hardy Boys and Harry Potter, Nancy Drew and Vampires skulking in the twilight.

And those stories, the ones told and written and acted and drawn by others, are just a part of the world of stories that not only engage and entertain us but also form and direct us. Consider: how many novels and stories you have read and heard; how many TV shows you have watched; how many movies and plays you have attended; how many newspaper articles you have read; how many country songs you have listened to; how many soap operas—day time AND night time—you have followed. From birth to this day how many stories have you heard?

It is remarkable, really, that the word really is more powerful and enduring than the sword. The words of *The Iliad*; *the Odyssey*; *Beowulf*; *Don Quixote*; *Hamlet*; *Macbeth*; *Anna Karenina*; *Pride and Prejudice*; *The Great Gatsby*; *Moby Dick* and so many more are passed down from generation to generation, and those are just the works of Western

¹ Sermon title borrowed from Marcus Borg’s book of the same name.

civilization. There are the great stories of Asian Empires and African tribes, of Latino heroes and Arabian Nights. And all of them influence not only us but also cultures and nations. The wars and warriors and lovers and adulterers, the intrigue and dangerous liaisons, the heroics and the cowardice, the love and the hate. From stories told in caves and around campfires to stories gone viral on the internet. Story is in our DNA .

Beyond the universal there is always the personal. There are all the stories we hear in our families growing up, many of which we believe without question until we are about fifty-six years old. They are stories of things great uncles did in the Civil War, or the day Grandma stormed out of the house and never returned, or how dad landed on the beaches of Normandy or great grandma came through Ellis Island with only the clothes on her back. These stories are told over and over again at picnics and parties; they take on a life of their own. We say: “oh no; not this one again.” And then we listen anyway. Many times these stories of who we are and from whom we came weave their way into the fabric of our being without our realization. They form us. Story is extremely powerful. Story—whether actually true or false doesn’t matter as long as it is believed. What is believed becomes reality.

Some of these family stories become our stories. We are told things; we hear things; we overhear things. We begin to define ourselves by what we hear, by the stories we are told about ourselves. We write our own script out of other stories, selecting a perceived truth here and another there. Some are defined by the family story, by what teachers and friends and “well-meaning” pastors say. Some reject the family story, write their own stories, become different. Knowing what your “story: is, and how it influences your choices, priorities, decisions, self-image and more is crucial to your process

of becoming. Over the years at retreats many of you have distilled your story, that narrative that seemingly will not be repressed or altered. “My father died when I was six months old.” “My sister was always the pretty one.” “I was the smart one.” “My mother loved my older brother more than she loved me.” “My mother didn’t want any more children, then I was born.” “I was adopted.” “My husband left me for another woman (or man).” Everyone has a story, and whether you use it or it uses you can greatly impact your life. You can be imprisoned by your story. You can be limited by your story. You can be driven by your story. You can be empowered by your story. And, almost certainly, you need to know what your story is, know how it plays out in your life and know that you need to do some rewriting.

This is where the Bible comes in. This is where we explore encountering Scripture in a new and fresh way. Actually, it has more to do with our take on Scripture than I could ever cover in twenty minutes. Let’s begin with a simple sentence that somehow sounds blasphemous but is not. The Bible is a story book and a book of stories. That is to say that viewed in its entirety the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, has a meta-narrative. That is fancy language for big story, or over-arching story. And how you hear that story, how you see that story, how you read that story, how you perceive that story, how you interpret that story and what you believe about that story will play out in your life. Big time.

The impact of these stories on our individual and collective unconscious is important to understand because all the stories we have tucked away determine our values, our beliefs, our biases, our behavior and even how we vote. So to question these stories, to re-examine these stories, to challenge these stories can really shake things up. To offer new

interpretations and new ways to look at things can cause rifts that tear families, friends and faith communities apart. Consider the possibilities. “It was six actual twenty four hour days” faces off against day as metaphor. A real Adam and a real Eve confront Adam and Eve as symbol. Thousands of years later archeologists search for evidence of Noah’s ark, while others feel they miss the point. Folks somehow need all of this to be true. They need each story to be true for God to be true; they need each story to be real for God to be real. And it is terrifying to them to imagine any other possibility.

Yet once we begin to understand the transcendent, eternal truth of the word of God the fossils of Noah’s Zebras and the exact location of the garden and even the become less important. Perhaps this focus—in some cases obsession—with literalism allows the reader to spend time arguing and judging the perceived, accused, non-believer. Perhaps this focus on the literal saves one from the power and challenge of the story’s truth.

But The Gathering exists, and you are here, not to swallow every story your Sunday School teacher tells you, or what the liberals or conservatives tell you, or what TV’s prosperity preachers or the Pope tells you, but to earnestly and intentionally worship and study and pray and grow. This is a place to get serious about faith. This is a place to be willing take time to stop, “to come before his presence with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise,” to worship God, to think hard, to pray intently, to let music stir your soul, to let the Gospel change your heart. This is a community of women and men who claim to embrace and try to follow the Jesus story. Well to follow it we must read it and hear it and think about it and let it in. We need to do what Jesus did. And in so doing there will be days when old truths may fall. That is the only way that new truths may rise.

Do not be afraid of this. Do not think that your doubt threatens God. God is not surprised by your doubt and skepticism. God is not threatened by your search. God gave you the mind that you have. God gave you the intellect you have. God is not put off by the questions. For God's sake it means that you are thinking!

And since you are thinking think about this. Maybe Genesis and the prophets and Jesus and Paul have all kinds of new things to say to us if we would just listen. Maybe we need to do the very hard work of listening as if we have never heard God's words before. Maybe we need to do this because we have accepted what others have said rather than risking an encounter with the living God of today. Maybe we need to dust off those Sunday School images and ask: "what do these words say about God and others and us? "

And with all that said let me give you an example. Let's go back to Genesis and look at one story a new way. Take the story that says: "Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." Theologian Susan Niditch, for example, offers us an alternative way to hear and see the main point. Dr. Niditch suggests that the seminal moment, or at least a moment as important as fruit picking, is the murder. It is not just any murder. It is the murder of a brother. She believes that the theme of Scripture is brother against brother—brothers in biology and brothers in humanity. As Genesis continues this assertion becomes the main thrust of the Jacob/Esau story and of the Joseph story. Both of those stories could be made into a blockbuster, juicy mini series. They are filled with jealousy, trickery, envy, hatred, plotting and scheming. Cain. Abel. Jacob. Esau. Joseph. His brothers. The nexus of each story is brother against brother; the driving force is brotherly un-love. Read the stories. Aren't the authors trying to deal with the essential

mess we are in? Whether in family, workplace, faith community, our own country, tribe against tribe or nation against nation we cannot stand each other. We have within us the capacity to murder our brother; THAT is the story! Just think of how many brother against brother stories there in the Bible. Thinking this way reframes the story. Enter Jesus.

Then into this history comes one telling another story. It is essential that the story Jesus tells should be read and understood as a continuation of the Hebrew scriptures. Remember. Jesus is talking to the poorest of the poor, the least powerful in the most powerful empire, but he is also talking to ones who knew those stories and knew them well. Jesus starts with their stories. Think about what stories they knew and believed. Think of how much hatred they had. Think of the kind of “religion” the Pharisees preached. Think about the hundreds of laws they were supposed to follow. Think about the fact that if God has to say don’t kill, don’t steal and don’t screw around God assumes that you are killing and stealing and screwing around. Think about the oppression and poverty in which most of them lived. Think about the savior they wanted. Think about the story they wanted him to tell: kill the *&!*** Then imagine what it would sound like to hear him say: “But I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6: 27-31 NRSV) I didn’t make that stuff up. It’s all in Luke.

These words of love might be common and familiar to us. We’ve heard them our whole lives. We can mouth “Love the Lord your God with

all our heart mind soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself.” We can sing God is love songs with angelic voices. But could you imagine if we believed and lived that story. It is the antithesis of Cain and Abel and David and Uriah and every other act of not loving.

The one known as the Son of God spent his whole professional teaching career telling stories that challenged not just the mind but the heart and the Spirit. Jesus challenged everything that people believed. He often did this by acknowledging the stories that they believed but then saying: “you have heard it said, but I say unto you.” He reframed every story. “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.” (Matthew 23: 25-26 NRSV) That is reframing the story. When he cleanses ten lepers only one turns back to thank him. “He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’” (Luke 17: 15-18) NRSV) That’s reframing the story. And of the lost son: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” (Luke 15: 20 NRSV) No father in that culture behaved like that. That’s reframing the story. In the Sermon on the Mount, in parables and in action Jesus shows a whole different way to see, to understand, to think, to live, to be. It’s as if he is saying: “I am offering you an alternative to beating your brother to death, to stabbing your sister to death, or even to wishing or wanting someone dead. I am the new story. I am the love story.” And the point of it all is this: if you do not change the story you do not change the

way you live; if you do not change what you believe you do not change how you behave.

We have heard Jesus' words so often we do not hear them. Not loving is what kills families, friendships, faith communities. How many families do you know where Aunt Mary walked out of Thanksgiving dinner and never came back or Grandma refuses to talk to grandson or father to daughter? How many former friends do you know who disagreed about something long forgotten? How many faith communities do you know that are torn apart by petty dislikes and middle school gossip? All over this country there are people who have walked out of churches because of some disagreement and sworn they would never return again. How many nations do you know that are fueled by hate and thrive on war? How many cultures and gangs do you know that exist to execute the "other"?

Isn't all of this from the most personal to the international just a different expressions of the same theme? Brother against brother. Sister against sister. Brother against sister. Sister against brother. And every other pairing you can imagine. We don't get it. We just don't get it. Read Genesis. Read David's story. And then imagine Jesus standing on a hillside in the shadow of the almighty Roman empire, in the shadow of hundreds and hundreds of years of murder and mayhem opening his mouth and saying: not only do I call you to love but I call you to love the people who are hard to love, who you don't feel like loving. And they are thinking: That is NOT what I came to hear. I like my stories the way they are.

What a contrast to the reality in which they lived. What a contrast to the reality in which we live. What a contrast to how most of life plays out. This is the new story. This is the Jesus story. This is the love story. Reading it is one thing. Living it is another. Reverend Sharon Smith/The Gathering/10/15/17