

Old Book, Fresh Wisdom: Why the Bible is Worth Reading (again)
A Better Question

Matthew 13:24, 13:31, 13:33; 13:34; 20:1; 22:2; 25:14

As we've come to this twentieth anniversary of 9/11, I've been listening to stories. Maybe you have too. A story of a family that lost a child in the World Trade Center and has completely reshaped itself around that loss. A memory of how it felt to walk for days through New York City asking if anyone had seen a fiancé. The account of a young man detained for years in a cage in Guantanamo, never understanding why he was there.

With twenty years of perspective, there are things we can see now that weren't clear at first. It's the work of scholars and journalists to comment about what happened, analyze the big picture, assess the long-term impact of that event on American history and policy and culture. But in some way, it's regular people's stories that tell us *the story* of 9/11. And I wonder if the most important truth of a historical event isn't often held in the small, personal stories of the people who were there.

I wonder something similar almost every time I do a memorial service. I love officiating at memorial services. It's one of the great honors of my work, to summarize the life of a person who has died, to say something important about what their whole life means. But at *every* memorial service, the most important and memorable things said are not mine or any pastor's; they're the stories told by family members and friends. Stories that are funny, or that bring tears to our eyes. Stories that aren't about a whole life at all, but about a single moment. How she laughed that day. The work he put down so that he could bend down and lift up his child or listen to a co-worker who was having a hard time. That one inconsequential conversation that, somehow, you have never forgotten. Maybe the most important truth of every life is told in the small, personal stories of the people who were there.

That's how the Bible communicates to us who God is. It tells the truth of God in the stories of people who were there, people who knew God themselves. Together these stories give us a picture of God. No one story, and no summary, can do it alone.

The Bible doesn't paint one consistent portrait of God. It doesn't even try to. It's a collection of sketches—one thing, seen from different angles. Every writer, every character, had an experience that seemed to them holy, that *was* holy. Every one of those experiences tells us a story of God, how God was present in a particular moment, how God appeared to someone who looked up and discovered they were not alone.

To a people who'd been pressed into slavery in Egypt and then somehow found themselves free, God was the One who opened a way for them through the Red Sea and closed it back up behind them. How else had they escaped the strongest military power on earth?

To the early Israelites who lived in a world where many gods competed for power over the sun and moon and storms, a good harvest meant that Yahweh was 'the best God among all the gods.'

When the people telling this story won an improbable victory over an enemy, they *knew* that their God must be the one with the stronger weapons.

What we hear in all these stories—Old Testament and New—is God refracted through the needs and problems—the real lives—of real people. Just like us, they all lived at a particular time, in a particular place, with a particular way of understanding and explaining the world. And just like there is no single experience of God now, there is no single ‘God of the Bible’. There’s not even a single ‘God of the Old Testament.’ There are stories of God.

In this very same Bible, King David hears God tell him ‘Don’t build a temple. I don’t want a temple; I’m not living in a temple. I live outside, in a tent, with my people.’ A generation later, as the housing and economic capacity of Israel grew, King Solomon seems to be blessed as he builds the Temple that would stand for hundreds of years as Israel’s central monument, the place where God lived.

In this very same Bible, the people who first heard God deliver commandments Mt. Sinai get exquisitely detailed instructions about how to make sacrifices and perform rituals of worship. Later, when their society had stratified into classes, when some people got richer while others stayed poor, their prophets hear God say, ‘I hate your animal sacrifices and fasting rituals. *This is the fast I choose: release people from their restraints. Set free the mistreated. Here’s how I want you to worship me: Share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, cover the naked when you see them.* (Isaiah 58:6-7)

In this very same Bible, what distinguishes the people of God from all the pagan tribes around them, for hundreds of years, is their faithful practice of circumcision and their strict fidelity to a set of guidelines about what they should and shouldn’t eat. They didn’t make those rules up; they heard them from God. And then come Peter and Paul—followers of Jesus who are faithful Jews themselves, who hear, *from God*: it isn’t circumcision or food purity laws that connect people to God. What will set the people of God apart now is a new, radically inclusive community. Jews and Gentiles eating together, living together, circumcised or not. Now, for you, a new wisdom said, it’s the practice of love, caring for one another, that makes people ‘children of Abraham’, members of God’s family.

That’s not inconsistency; it’s love. The kind of love that steers a parent to understand that every one of their children is different, needs something different. The kind of love that comes from a God who stands by patiently as human beings grow and change. The kind of love that is here for the long term, confident that if we don’t get it right this time, God will be here to show us again.

Our work as we read the Bible is not to try to be clever enough to make all the stories of God fit together in one seamless picture. It’s to do what the biblical characters show us, the wisdom work that’s demonstrated in the Bible itself: to discover God again. To ask what God is like now, for *this* time, in *this* place--for *us*. That is the sacred responsibility of people of faith.

Today we see God in matters of justice that no one in biblical times ever imagined. Full equality for people who are marginalized because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Justice for people of color. Protection for people who leave one country and move to another to escape violence. Changing how we live for the sake of the earth. None of those things are major concerns in the stories of the Bible. But they don’t have to be, for us to imagine that they are God’s concern now. They are us seeing God in our time, our lives.

That's how it works. Adapting the stories of our tradition, seeing who God is *now*, is our sacred responsibility. For us to imagine what God might say about the questions of our time, to hear God's word for ourselves—that isn't turning away from Scripture; it's turning toward it. It's accepting the challenge that people of faith have always had: to look up and see God again, not expecting that these people took care of that for us. It's the Bible itself that sets the pattern.

When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, that vision of what God hopes for creation to look like, what it means for human beings to flourish together, he always started with the same phrase. "*The Kingdom of God is like...*" And then he would tell a story--about someone making bread, or a shepherd who watched over a flock of sheep, a farmer who planted seeds in a field. Jesus didn't make broad philosophical pronouncements about who God is or what God wants. Not because philosophy wasn't a thing then; it was. More likely because Jesus knew he could never capture the Kingdom of God in any one description. Maybe because small, personal stories are how he could best tell the truth of God, what living in God's picture of creation would look like for the people in front of him.

It's theologians who answer big questions about God. They stand back from the story and make thoughtful observations about it. They offer a larger perspective, put the stories of God together into theories and theologies that say something big about who God is. Theologians are the narrators of God's story.

You don't have to do that. You are not the narrator of God's story; none of us is. We have a more important role. We are *actors* in the story. We're participants in the story of God's life among God's people--now. With our lives we are making Scripture still to be written. That's what it means to be faithful: to live *inside* the continuing story of who God is, how God is alive now.

So I wonder if the questions we sometimes ask about God are too big. Maybe we don't have to be able to tie up all the loose ends in the Bible, or find a description big enough to hold who God has always been, or say something that's true for everyone. Maybe the only question we can ever hope to answer is 'What is God like?' We'll find the answers to that question--not just one, but many--in the moments that hold holiness for us, now, in this life we are right in the middle of.

Maybe that's exactly what the Bible is trying to tell us.