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Stories to Live By: Reading the Bible in the New Millennium

by Ched Myers

> I will tell you something about stories...
> They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled.
> They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death...
> Their evil is mighty but it can't stand up to our stories.
> So they try to destroy the stories, let the stories be confused or forgotten...
> Because we would be defenseless then...
>
> — Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

IT IS AN OPEN QUESTION whether the Bible's status in Western civilization has improved much since the last millennium's turning. Now, as then, it continues to provide grist for popular eschatological fantasy, self-serving rulers still too often cite it for political gain, and it remains overly captive to the interpretive authority of the clerical and academic elite.

Two important things have changed since 1000 C.E., however. On one hand, the advent of the printing press and the slow triumph of the vernacular in the church have meant that the Bible is widely accessible. On the other, since the Enlightenment the forces of modernity have steadily displaced the Bible to the cultural margins.

In North America, some Christians lament this latter fact, while others accept it as preferable. The Bible is still the most widely translated piece of literature around the world, yet gathers dust on the shelves of most modern Western homes. It continues to be both overexposed and misunderstood, fetishized by some and maligned by others, invoked in the culture wars and ignored in everyday life.

Despite all this, the old stories of scripture have survived every attempt to dismiss, banish, deconstruct, or enshrine them. And they continue to demonstrate the power to comfort the afflicted, to afflict the comfortable, and to fire the imaginations of poor people around the world. Why? Perhaps it is because sacred narratives are as indigenous to human societies as language itself. They help order, interpret, and change the world.

The Bible was originally the integrating sacred story of Hebrew tribes, then the charter for the Israelite nation. It was embraced (and expanded) by the early Christian movement, and eventually adopted—if sometimes at the point of the sword—by the expanding civilization of Christendom. But in the modern era these stories have been largely abandoned as "myth and superstition," and replaced with the brave new narratives of technological triumphalism, managerial rationalism, and capitalist Progress.

In the First World we have, however, turned the corner into the era of post-modernity. Those "scientific" orthodoxies of the industrial revolution, from the heroic myth of Manifest Destiny to the virtual utopias of Internet culture, have been unmasked as just another form of sacred storytelling. Twentieth-century Christian apologists spent a lot of energy trying to defend the Bible against the hostile attacks of modernist skepticism. In the 21st century, we ought rather to question the adequacy of these sacred surrogates that have promised prosperity, power, and prestige, but delivered only captivity and deepening anxiety.

It is a moment of great evangelistic opportunity for the church, but in North America there is great uncertainty. The gulf is growing between a secular majority who are either ambivalent or hostile toward the scriptural tradition, and a fundamentalist minority who cling to its "infallible authority" with increasing vehemence. Left in an uncomfortable middle are a lot of believers who, intimidated by modernity, have been fooled into thinking our scriptural stories are just entertainment.

Many conservative Christians have become confused about the biblical narratives, reducing them to morality tales for private spirituality that ignore the public crises of violence and poverty. Many liberals, meanwhile, more optimistic about progress, have forgotten the stories altogether. Thus our churches have been too often defenseless against the competing sacred narratives of the dominant culture, from the official pronouncements of the State Department to the packaged infotainment of the six o'clock news, and from the seductive fabulations of Hollywood to the puerile promises of Madison Avenue.

Can we reach hearts and minds within and outside of the church with the biblical good news that is older and deeper and wiser than presidential press releases or commercial huckstering? I suggest three ways we might re-engage the Bible for the next generation. First we will have to recover it as a "people's book" through practices of populist literacy. Second, Christians will have to improve our willingness and ability to discuss differing readings of scripture. Finally, we must more faithfully embody our interpretations in order to make the Word flesh in our world.

THERE IS AN ANCIENT story about King Josiah of Judah, who was presiding over a remodeling of the temple and instituting some economic reorganization (2 Kings 22). In the course of cleaning out the basement of the temple, so to speak, someone stumbles across an old manuscript, which turns out to be "a book of the Law" (22:9). The king summons all his advisors to interpret its meaning, but it is an obscure figure—Huldah, the wife of a "keeper of the wardrobe" (22:14)—who

supplies an interpretation. Her reading presents a hard word of judgment upon the king's and the community's apostasy, yet promises renewal if the leadership has the courage and vision to repent (22:15-20).

This account refers to the "appearance" of the book of Deuteronomy that launched the Josianic reform, a major turning point in the history of Israel. But it is germane to our situation on two accounts. First, it serves as a fitting metaphor for our own need to relocate and dust off the Bible, in order to hear its hard-but-healing words to church and society. Every major epoch of reform and renewal in the history of the church has been animated by fresh, challenging, and controversial rediscoveries and reappropriations of scripture, from the early monastic movement to the Protestant Reformation, and from 19th-century abolitionism to recent liberation theology.

Second, the story suggests that the Bible should be interpreted not by the rulers to the people, but vice versa. People who live and work on the underside of society—marginal figures like Huldah—know what bishops and theologians conveniently forget: The Bible has the power to pronounce the emperor naked.

Over the last three decades, base communities around the Third World have re-animated regular folk to understand and apply the stories of scripture. This movement, however, has not "trickled up" significantly to the First World. Perhaps this is because of our socialization into the culture of spectating in our highly technological society. Our over-reliance on experts, whether they are plumbers or politicians, have rendered us passive. Our feelings of alienation or inadequacy toward the Bible is perhaps due less to clericalism—though that continues to be a problem in many Christian traditions—than to the modernist influence of academic culture.

The guild of professional biblical scholarship feels increasingly less accountability to living communities of faith or a responsibility to translate their findings to the "laity." Their complex linguistic, historical, and literary methodologies confound regular church folk, convincing many that they are not equipped to study the Bible on their own. Others simply reject biblical criticism altogether and retrench in simplistic—if highly formulaic—popular Bible study formats, blissfully ignorant of "hermeneutical problems."

Throughout the ages this "people's book" keeps getting expropriated by the expert scribal classes. Jesus himself complained bitterly of this betrayal (Mark 2:25; 7:9; 12:24, 35). It is true that the biblical stories originate in times and cultures far removed from our own, and that we need to take thoughtful care in our handling of these texts. It is also true, however, that we all have a certain "narrative competence" that enables us to interpret stories in meaningful ways, using the power of imagination, experience, and analogy—no matter what our level of education.

If we are to err, let it be on the side of trusting our people with these stories, because the Bible was written for and about regular folk, especially the poor. A strategy of "populist re-enfranchisement" must, of course, encourage disciplines of

study and reflection that will nurture biblical literacy. The popular education techniques pioneered by Paulo Freire are crucial here: starting with what we know, drawing from our experience of the world, questioning and being questioned by texts we are studying.

For example, we can start with cultural texts from our world—a newspaper, a cartoon, an advertisement—in order to practice interpreting symbols, implied messages, or the retelling of older stories. Regular people are in fact very sophisticated in their ability to decipher the hieroglyphics of modern media discourses. Such exercises will create positive momentum that can carry over when we turn to cultural narratives that are not as familiar to us, as is the case with the Bible.

With a little encouragement, we can learn to pay attention to form as well as content in biblical literature, to genre, to plot, character, and setting. We can become mindful of context, including the relations of social power and whose voice is being heard, both in the biblical text and in our world as readers.

Everyone can do this—and everyone's input is important. Bible study is a community venture. Like any other discipline, it takes practice, devotion, and commitment. We need to learn—and relearn—our way around the whole of the biblical narrative, especially the Old Testament. And we need to keep the process fun, interactive, and in constant relationship to our concrete situation. In populist Bible study we may get things wrong, but we nevertheless have the right—and the duty—to struggle with these texts.

A MAJOR DISINCENTIVE to populist Bible study is the experience of seeing so much official disagreement about what the scriptures say. We know too well the long and sometimes bloody history of fighting or dividing over differing interpretations, seeing Christians use the Bible to "excommunicate" (literally or figuratively) their opponents.

It is a platitude that the Bible can be and has been invoked to justify a myriad of doctrinal and ethical positions—though not, as skeptics assert, any and all positions. Indeed, scripture is often used in both church and society on different sides of a disputed issue, as is the case currently, for example, regarding the rights of sexual minorities. But this characteristic does not discredit the Bible, because it is not unique to it. Any important cultural text—beloved literature, legal documents, treaties—becomes the locus of interpretive struggle (think of the use of the Constitution in the debate over American segregation). This testifies to the enduring importance of such texts, not to their irrelevance.

Of course the church can try (as it has before) to impose unity from above, establishing the "orthodox" or "scientific" readings as determined by ecclesial or academic hierarchies. But the grassroots reality of the church has always been pluralistic. African slaves in early 19th-century America interpreted the Bible differently than their Protestant masters. Similarly, late 20th-century Latin American Catholic base communities read differently than do seminary-trained

members of the Roman magisterium. It is simply inevitable that believers will employ different texts, different readings of the same texts, and/or simply read the Bible differently.

But is this so bad? To be sure, biblical differences have driven modern Protestant hermeneutics in two divergent directions. Theological conservatives tend to have a high degree of confidence that the Bible itself can adjudicate all doctrinal and ethical disputes—when "properly" interpreted. Unfortunately, the correct interpretation is usually equated with the conservatives' own positions, such that their commitment to "biblical authority" too often ends up looking more like a kind of biblical authoritarianism.

Theological liberals, on the other hand, tend to see so many problems with the Bible and so much distance between the ancient texts and the complex realities of modernity that they have become diffident concerning scripture's relevance to current debates.

Neither approach, however, resolves the problem. Suppressing differences doesn't make them disappear; it only drives them elsewhere. Abandoning the Bible only means that some other text or tradition will be appealed to—and then people will read that differently! I believe we would do better to acknowledge and accept the following apparent contradiction: 1) the Bible is our foundational story, the church cannot do without it, and so must continue to wrestle with the task of interpreting it; and 2) the Bible will be read differently within the community of faith. To affirm both means that Christians must earnestly seek guidance from scripture and must learn how to talk about different readings in constructive and respectful ways.

How can differences be so discussed? A given interpretation must necessarily be argued with care (from the Latin *arguere*, to make clear); after all, important issues are at stake. But we also need the discipline of conversation (from the Middle English *conversen*, meaning to associate with; also from the Latin *conversus*, meaning to turn around). Conversation holds within it the possibility of mutual conversion. This requires that partners commit themselves to two disciplines.

FIRST, EACH positional group must be willing to articulate and to examine honestly the interests and values that underlie its reading of scripture. The reality of "interpretive interests" is recognized in scripture itself: A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "In the Law, what is written? How do you read it?" (Luke 10:26).

Jesus' counter-question seeks to investigate not only the text, but the community of interpretation as well. In this case, the lawyer cites the text (though Luke 10:27 is already a conflation of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18), but it is his reading of that text that is at issue—namely his agnosticism on the matter of who constitutes a "neighbor" (10:29).

No matter how passionate our viewpoint may be, we should always remain open to others, because scripture itself is multifaceted and further reflection or different

perspectives may yield a more compelling reading. After all, our contexts as readers change through time and space. The biblical tradition was itself in formation for a millennium and has engendered a rich and diverse interpretive legacy for another two millennia. One need only to study the history of the interpretation of any biblical passage down through the centuries to see how contingent our readings are.

The church has not been particularly well served by the long and necessarily combative hermeneutic tradition (embraced both by authoritarian conservatives and liberal academics) that assumes a text has only one "correct" reading. Fortunately, post-modernism has exposed the fallacy of claims to either doctrinal or historical-critical objectivity. Women, ethnic communities, and churches of the poor have offered readings that not only reveal facets of scripture that white male academics and clerics could never see, but that also unmask the hidden interpretive interests of those professional classes!

Questing after (or insisting upon) the "one true reading" is neither the only nor the best way to honor the authority of scripture. Indeed it may concede too much power to the interpreter. We Christians might do better to rediscover a more Jewish approach. The rabbinic tradition, broadly speaking, has seemed more comfortable with the notion that only a multiplicity of approaches can do justice to the marvelously deep and wide spectrum of meaning(s) in the sacred texts. This both preserves the text as the center of the community and allows us to offer our various interpretive efforts to the body for discernment. This perspective is ritualized by Jews on the feast of Simchat Torah, when the scrolls are taken by synagogue elders into the middle of the congregation and held lovingly while everyone dances in celebration around them. It always brings me to tears.

Embracing pluralism does not preclude critical engagement with other interpretive positions. There are matters of integrity and justice at stake, and not all readings are benign or respectful. After all, scripture acknowledges that even the devil can cite scripture (Luke 4:9-12). Still, it is the responsibility of readerly communities to guard against our natural tendency to use texts to justify ourselves. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, Christians need to learn to read scripture "over against ourselves" rather than simply "for ourselves."

Thus we must allow scripture to question, as well as to support, the positions we take. "Is this not the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?" (Mark 12:24). Jesus' sharp query is addressed to all of us, challenging us to move beyond rigid interpretive positions and toward creative self-examination.

The best way to persuade others of our reading of scripture, of course, is not by telling it, but by showing it. True biblical interpretation is about convictions, not abstract opinions. "Opinions are the stuff of debate and discussion," writes James McClendon. "They may require thought, but they require no commitment. Convictions, on the other hand, are less readily expressed but more tenaciously held.... They are our persuasions, the beliefs we embody with some reason, guiding

all our thought, shaping our lives."

This means our conversations about scripture should focus on our actual practices and what we are willing to live by, and steer away from theoretical imperatives or what people in general ought to do. A classic statement of this "epistemology of embodiment" is found in the Lukan exchange between Jesus and the lawyer referred to earlier. Twice the scribe gives Jesus the "right" theory (Luke 10:27, 37a); twice Jesus responds with an invitation to practice: "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live" (10:28); "Go and do likewise" (10:37b).

Postmodern America hardly needs more shrill opinions—we have popular talk radio for that. The Bible invites us to join Jesus in making the Word become flesh (John 1:1ff), exegeting the text with our lives. "No one has ever seen God; the Son...has made him known (Greek *exegesato*)" says John 1:18. "Unless Christian communities are committed to embodying their scriptural interpretation," write Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones, "the Bible loses its character as scripture." How does one argue that Jesus meant what he said about love of enemies, or the last being first, or the way of the cross, except by trying to experiment with such truth with our own lives?

"Their evil is mighty," concludes Silko's elder, "but it can't stand up to our stories." This native wisdom is good theology for Christians. But only if we know our stories, listen to one another in our quest to understand what they require of us, and embody them in the world.

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Sojourners Magazine • 3333 14th Street NW, Suite 200 •
Washington DC 20010
Phone: (202) 328-8842 • Fax: (202) 328-8757