

Stories great and small: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

by [Adam Thomas](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

“Tell me a story.” No bedtime liturgy would be complete without these four magical, sacred words, or the four magical words that follow: “Once upon a time. . . .” Story shapes us. Fantastical bedtime stories fill us with fervent hopes for lives full of high adventure and romance, through which we learn chivalry, fidelity and courage. Stories we tell about our families and ourselves recall and rehearse the triumphs, failures and oddities of life. There’s the humorous one about being pulled over while driving a friend’s pickup, the painful one about the Pacific Theater in 1944 and the embarrassing one that you wish your parents had made up but know they didn’t.

Around and within each of our little stories, the one great story weaves, the story of God’s relationship with creation. This story subsumes and explains and connects our fantastic, personal and familial stories with those of the rest of humanity. This story has been recorded and bound, but it has never ended. When we tell the story, we participate in it and add to it. Put another way, when we remember the story, the story remembers us. We are members of the story and discover our place in it when God re-members—or reconnects—us.

Moses directs the people of Israel to observe this work of remembering when they enter their new home after 40 years of wilderness wandering. From the first harvest of your newly settled land, he says, take the first fruits of the ground and offer them to the Lord. As you faithfully give up the best of the harvest, rehearse your faith by telling the story. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.” Moses bids the people to locate themselves in the collective memory of Israel. Each member will be re-membered by identifying with the story. Even the youngest will say, “That’s me. I’m part of that great nation. I cried out to the Lord when the Egyptians afflicted me. The Lord heard my voice, brought me out of Egypt, and here I am in that land offering my first fruits to God in thanksgiving.”

By directing the people to tell the story as they settle in the promised land, Moses hopes that they will remember who they are and whose they are. Of course, over the next couple hundred years, the people of Israel do a horrible job of

remembering. By the end of the book of Judges, when a downward spiral has led to civil war, rape and murder, “All the people did what was right in their own eyes.” At this time no connection exists, no shaping of the faithful happens. Instead of the remembering that occurs with storytelling, there is literal *dis-membering* of a rape victim. At this low point in the story of Israel, Moses’ bidding to rehearse the collective memory all but vanishes.

But “the lamp of God had not yet gone out”: the story still remains in the hearts of the faithful. Samuel learns how to listen to God from his teacher, Eli, and holds the story in trust for several generations as the Davidic monarchy establishes itself. King Josiah finds the “book of the law” (which may be Deuteronomy) and realizes how much of the story has been forgotten (2 Kings 22). When the people are forced into exile, the connecting nature of the story sustains them. They remember how the Lord brought them out of their bondage in Egypt. The prophets tell and retell the story of God’s relationship with creation until its power begins to work a change in the people.

That change reaches fruition in the great story found in the gospel. Early on, Luke connects Jesus back to an earlier piece of the same story—Moses addressing the people at the end of their 40-year wilderness wandering. During his own 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus meets the devil and resists him by remembering the great story: “One does not live by bread alone. . . . Worship the Lord and serve only him.” Jesus frustrates the devil with the collective memory of the people of God: “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The early church shared this collective memory during the 40 days of Lent with the culmination of a years-long program of formation. Seekers discovered that they had been members of the great story all along. When they learned their part in it, the community of faith re-membered them with the sacrament of baptism on Easter. The story shaped them, and it will shape us if we take the time to remember it and tell it.

This Lent, if someone asks you to “Tell me a story,” begin it like this: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. . . .”