

The story

By [David Lewicki](#)

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There's wisdom in putting biblical storytelling at the heart of worship. We are formed by stories. I'm fond of the line by the poet Muriel Rukeyser embedded in the street outside the New York Public Library, "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms."

When you think about what makes up *you*, it's not the cells of your body, it's more likely a story of some kind. Asked, "Who are you?", you would respond, "I was born in 1975 in New Hampshire, where I was raised by wolves," or something. Stories take the discrete events of life and connect them to create art, movement, drama, pathos, and sometimes joy.

Stories do another incredible thing. They create moral order (an observation discussed by Christian Smith in [Moral, Believing Animals](#)). Stories in a culture define what, if anything, is sacred. Institutions grow up around the moral order defined by stories. Those institutions, more than anything else, shape who we are and the choices we are afforded. It is not too much to say, then, that the stories we tell—or the stories told to us—become us.

We live in a strange time, though. The way we tell stories and the kinds of stories we tell seem to be changing. I believe we live in "postmodernity." Mostly, I understand this to mean that the world has [lost its unifying stories](#):

- The story of moral progress (negated by the Holocaust)
- The story of technological progress (negated by climate destruction)
- The story of the nation state as a legitimate object of love and identity (negated by any number of things: Watergate, Vietnam, *Citizens United*)
- The story that we will eventually find answers to every question (negated by epistemological uncertainty)
- The story that individuals, acting in our own economic self-interest, will maximize outcomes (negated by [Piketty](#) and a growing pile of evidence)
- Even the story that the Bible provides an all-encompassing guide that tells us everything we need to know is challenged by the presence of persons of deep

integrity who profess loyalty to other religions and by other sacred texts that contain wisdom. (Buddha, anyone?)

I don't lament the loss of unifying narrative. In principle, not having master or metanarratives seems like a good thing: the diversification and localization of storytelling should mean that no person or network or institution should have too much control over the stories that we hear. Voices long silenced are able to be heard. It's true that in a world without dominant narratives, the individual has greater responsibility to choose *which* stories we encounter—we have to work harder, listen more judiciously, and be careful to listen to more than just the stories we want to hear.

Which brings me back to church. What I love about the church's practice of gathering around a single, old story is that it creates a space to practice the art of communal listening and interpretation. Notice I didn't say assent. I don't expect the people in my church to assent to the biblical story. They're not passive vessels into which the story is poured. In a world stripped of metanarratives, no story, even the Bible, has the privileged right to universal assent. Every person has the responsibility to rise to the level of interpreter. But interpretation, as "religions of the book" teach, is never an individualized act. It is done together. Ultimately, we listen to stories so that we will hear them, gain understanding from them, and internalize that understanding so that it forms the way we live together. We are made, socially and institutionally, by stories, and we need there to be stories shared in common among broad groups of our neighbors. We also need skilled communities of interpretation. Church is one of few places (outside of schools, book groups, and some Twitter commentary on *Scandal*) where such a practice still exists.

Interpretation of stories in groups is a profoundly ethical process. How do we listen rightly? How do we say what we hear? How do we channel shared emotional responses to a story into communal action or practice? What do we do when people in a community hear different things in the same story? How do we treat, and honor, those differences? Do we have legitimized means for evaluating different responses to a story? Do we give more credence to responses rooted in established academic disciplines, or can we validate responses grounded in emotion, even the responses of children?

Congregations fear that they don't know enough to interpret the story. I've found that the way to talk to my congregation about engagement with the biblical story is

to invite them to encounter it as one would another human being. Come to the story with openness, humility, and curiosity. Ask questions of it. Give it space to answer. Pay attention to what it says, not what you want it to say. Believe in its worth, that it has something to show you that you do not yet know. Don't be overly deferential—it is not higher than you. It has much in common with you. It speaks your language. It is also older, and perhaps wiser, than you. It has faults. Know them, but don't condemn the whole because of the faults.

In the best case, as in every meaningful relationship, the story becomes part of us. It changes us. And we change it. Yes, we change it. Every time we return to the text, it reads differently, it is new, because we are not the same.

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