

Never-ending story: God's plot

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

As a preacher and teacher, I make my living telling stories. While I know people who say that they “use” stories to make important points, I am one of those listeners who consistently remember the stories and forget the points. That is because the points tend to be perfectly clear and well behaved, as very little in my life ever is, while the stories (at least the good ones) star flawed characters with muddy motives whom I recognize at once.

So when it is my turn to talk, I generally skip the points and get right to the plot. Narrative is not a choice I make when it comes time to tell the truth; it is the way that truth comes to me—not in crisp propositions but in messy tales of encounters between people and people, between people and creation, between people and God.

For most readers of these pages, the central story is the biblical one, told for millennia around campfires, altars and ordinary supper tables by parents, teachers, preachers and friends. If it is different from the other stories that shape our lives, then that is because it was not written by George Lucas or J. R. R. Tolkien but by a whole host of people struggling to speak of things that were beyond them. Their collective efforts were so luminous in one way or another that the keepers of tradition bound them together and called them sacred, declaring that no humans could have written them without a lot of divine help. What this means is that the biblical story is not only our story but also God’s story, which places an extra burden on those who are stewards of it. Not only are we called to tell it well, but we are also called to tell it *all*, and not just the parts that serve our own purposes.

If you use your Bible very much, then you can pick it up, look at it from the side, and tell what your own sacred scriptures really are. See the pages that are darker than the others? They are dark with the oil from your own fingertips, which have searched out the parts of the story that are most meaningful to you. But if your Bible looks anything like mine, then there are lots of pages with very few fingerprints on them. Spent much time with the book of Joshua lately? How about Ezra and Nehemiah, or the middle section of Revelation?

There are good reasons not to go there. There are whole chapters of John's Gospel that I would like to snip right out of the book so that no child ever has to read what John said Jesus said about Jews. But as long as Bibles keep coming out with those passages in them, then I have a responsibility to address them, if only to explain how they ever became part of the story in the first place. I still remember the student who said that she left church for good when she was 12, right after she read the Bible for herself and discovered what a colossal snow job her Sunday school teachers had done on her. Most of us can recall our own versions of her disillusionment, but since I count the loss of illusion as a good thing, I have to rejoice for her and for all of us whose illusions about God are routinely exposed by stories in the Bible.

Lately I have been tracking the illusion that God favors my group to the exclusion of all other groups—which is fairly easy to maintain, depending on which stories I choose to tell. Since the Bible contains the foundational stories of two distinct faiths, it is chock full of attacks on those outside the fold. Sometimes the attacks are sanctioned by God and other times they erupt from pure human meanness, but in either case they come as no real surprise. When any group of people is trying to discover who they are, they usually begin by declaring who they are *not*: we are not Canaanites, not Samaritans, not Pharisees, not Romans, not Greeks, *not them*.

These are satisfying parts of the story to tell around the campfire, because they reinforce the boundaries of the group as well as its rightness. Sarah orders Abraham to cast Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert so that Isaac's inheritance is sure. The Egyptians are drowned in the sea. Jesus turns over tables in the temple. No one comes to the Father but by me. If these stories are beloved, then at least one reason is because they guarantee the privileges of those who tell them.

But the truly astonishing thing about the Bible is that it also includes stories from *outside* the fold, where God seems determined to work through those whom the community of faith has cast out. God visits Hagar in the desert and promises to make a great nation of Ishmael. God anoints the Persian King Cyrus to end the Babylonian exile. Samaritans star in at least two of Jesus' own stories, and he almost gets killed in Capernaum for reminding his own people that God sometimes skips right over them to go take care of people who don't share their faith.

As disturbing as such news may be, it is our assurance that God's plot is always larger than the ones we weave to reassure ourselves, and that even when we say the story's over, the story's not over. As long as anyone is alive to play a part or talk

about it afterwards, the sacred narrative continues—at least until the day we wake from sleep to find that there is room in God’s story for us all.