

Summer 2021

# THE BIBLICAL STORYTELLER

A Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. Publication

## Biblical Storytelling in Difficult Times

**The 2021 Virtual Festival Gathering:**  
WORKSHOPS . KEYNOTE SPEAKER . WORSHIP . COMMUNITY

2021 VIRTUAL FESTIVAL GATHERING OF BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

# Biblical Storytelling in Difficult Times

**KEYNOTE SPEAKER:**

Dr. Richard Ward


Find Your  
Renewal  
and Courage

**FEATURED TELLERS**

Thelma Ruffin-Thomas

Joyce Parr

Hands-On  
Workshops in  
Storytelling

A woman with blonde hair is holding a white sign with black text. The sign reads: "IF YOU ARE NEUTRAL IN SITUATIONS OF INJUSTICE, YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE SIDE OF THE OPPRESSOR". Below the main text is the hashtag "#BLM". In the background, other people are visible, some wearing masks, and another sign with the text "THREE GAMES THE GREAT SILENCE: RACIAL JUSTICE" is partially visible.

IF YOU ARE  
NEUTRAL IN  
SITUATIONS OF  
INJUSTICE, YOU  
HAVE CHOSEN  
THE SIDE OF  
THE OPPRESSOR

#BLM



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THE BIBLICAL  
STORYTELLER

The Biblical Storyteller is a publication of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l., an ecumenical, international, non-profit organization of scholars, clergy, and laity whose mission is to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories. We provide and develop resources for telling biblical stories through audio, video, and computer technologies as well as telling them face-to-face.

Subscriptions to *The Biblical Storyteller* are a benefit of Network membership. Memberships may be purchased online:

[www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org)

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## Tell Me: How Did YOU Survive?

Has it been the freaking year or what? Pandemic, death, isolation, fear, and unbelievable political pandemonium the likes of which I have never seen in my lifetime.

But if you're reading this, you survived it! Praise God! Because I want to say right now that you're a deeply valued member of our tribe.

*As a biblical storyteller,  
you are a keeper of  
the sacred truth.*

Hard times have come before. My parents were children of the Great Depression. Born in 1920, they witnessed the arrival of toilets, running water, and electric lights in their childhood homes. Times were hard then. As in, hard times were a day-to-day reality, not some exception you made emergency provisions for.

Ross and Virginia married during WWII and at their 50th wedding anniversary party, my aunt's speech opened with these words, "When you joined your lives, there was no silk for a dress, no sugar for a cake, no fuel for a honeymoon. All you had was love and faith in God. Turns out that was all you really needed." I didn't like my aunt much, she was strict and cold, but I have heard her words time and again when difficulties have dropped in on my life.

When my mother's 43-year victory over breast cancer ended and the fresh-out-of-diapers and med school



oncologist told her that he wasn't sure how long she had, a thin smile drew across her lips and she said, "No, I don't imagine you do. That's up to God, young man, not you."

When Daddy was dying in a nursing home where they redefined medical incompetence on a daily basis, he gripped my hand until I thought it would break and we recited the 23rd Psalm together, just like he had in Sunday School as a poor mountain boy, over and over and over again—until he made it clean through the valley.

After my husband died, my mother-in-law and I were both widowed. I lived out the book of Ruth with her. Of course, I'm still waiting on my Boaz, but you get my gist.

So I want to hear your story! What biblical stories have strengthened you, especially during this last year of pandemic, death, isolation, fear, and unbelievable political

pandemonium?

In our next issue, I'd like to feature *your stories* about how you made it through this last year!

Please email me with your story!  
[donnamarie@donnamarietodd.com](mailto:donnamarie@donnamarietodd.com)



# Biblical Storytelling in Difficult Times

An Interview with  
**Richard Ward**  
Keynote Speaker  
2021 Virtual Festival Gathering

## *An Introduction to Our 2021 Virtual Festival Gathering Keynote Speaker*

Richard F. Ward recently retired from Phillips Theological Seminary as the Fred B Craddock Professor Emeritus in Homiletics and Worship. He also held positions on the faculties of the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, the Yale Divinity School, and the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. In addition to homiletics, ritual and worship, Richard taught storytelling courses in each school, with particular emphasis on biblical interpretation through storytelling.

While a doctoral student in Performance Studies at Northwestern University, Richard heard Tom Boomershine tell Luke's story of the birth of Jesus in a way that mesmerized a room full of biblical scholars—and he was hooked! Richard's interests in drama, religion and the arts had found an intersection!

Richard makes his home with his wife Amy in Denver, Colorado.

*Q. Your Ph.D. in Performance Studies combined with your experience as a storyteller, a professor of preaching, and also a preaching pastor promises to make your keynotes for the Virtual Festival Gathering very exciting! Can you give us an overview of your presentations, without giving away the juice?*

A. I'd be happy to. I will also be doing a presentation for the Festival of Homiletics this year on the theme "preaching for the future church". Naturally that has implications for our practice of biblical storytelling—we have been working hard to develop the "how" of biblical storytelling. We have learned that the skills we have been gaining are helping to nurture our biblical knowledge and present the fruits of performed interpretations to our listeners. We have made great progress in techniques.

### **What I am interested in now is the "why" of biblical storytelling and "why now?"**

As the future unfolds, we are seeing a resurgence of white supremacy, police violence, especially against bodies of color, an epidemic of mass shootings within a pandemic, and the dawn of a "post-truth" age. Our listeners might be asking more basic questions of us now like "how do I survive these

pressures and remain emotionally healthy?" I want to bring the insights and values, the wisdom offered by the practice of biblical storytelling to bear on these existential questions.

*Q. Why do you believe the church needs biblical storytelling? What does it bring to the table and how do you see it impacting church life?*

A. The scholars involved and invested in the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. have been bringing significant insights about doing the work of the Gospel in this particular communications culture we find ourselves in. They have turned our attention to the roots of biblical communication, especially that of the texts that make up our New Testament.

By re-experiencing those texts as the fruits of contested oral and performance traditions, we are better able to present them to contemporary audiences, shaped as we are by digital technologies that traffic in images.

**Biblical storytelling creates story "worlds" that help us to catch glimpses of God's vision for humanity.**

*Q. What skills would you suggest pastors hone to best use storytelling in their preaching and ministry?*

A. The most important skill set that I think pastors today can develop is the capacity to think in images. By all means “internalize” the words of texts and sermons derived from them and don’t overly rely on pre-packaged images from software packages—but also return to concrete, descriptive language that creates word pictures—just like we do in lively conversation.

**I want pastors to learn what the storytellers teach us—that the first “language” of storytelling is imaginal.**

*Q. What role do you see lay biblical storytellers having in congregational life? What can they do to increase their performance skills? How do you believe they can most effectively serve in their local congregations?*

A. I have been teaching for more than 35 years and over that time I have seen an appreciation grow for the role of the lector in congregational life.

When I started out, I spent a good bit of time raising awareness of the importance of reading scripture aloud as an act of worship leadership.

Biblical storytellers work at enlivening scripture by (as one of my colleagues Charles Bartow says) “turning ink into

blood.” That is, returning scripture to living human speech. Whether they do that in worship, in a bible study, or on a retreat, whether live in person or on Zoom, it is an act of service. It bears repeating I think that using the words of a text to craft images in the mind’s eye is a performance skill that can be learned and practiced. It would also be helpful to have what my friend and storyteller Doug Lipman calls, “appreciative listeners” that help to co-create a performer’s story for presentation.

*Q. How does storytelling impact and change preaching ministry?*

A. For a story to work as communication there has to be a network of connections: a connection between the teller and the story (how is this story true for me?); the teller and listener

the sermon should work—learning from the ways that storytelling establishes that network of connection.

*Q. What new challenges do you see churches facing? How can storytelling help churches meet these challenges?*

A. I want to use some of Tom Long’s concepts in his book *Beyond the Worship Wars* to answer, such as employing the biblical images of “tent (or tabernacle),” “temple,” and “house” to address the topic of space in church life and worship. Look at any congregational history and you will see (usually) some kind of movement from “house” to “temple” as in “We started out worshipping in a basement and then we built our own building and added this and that.” Sometimes these narratives include “tent,” as in,

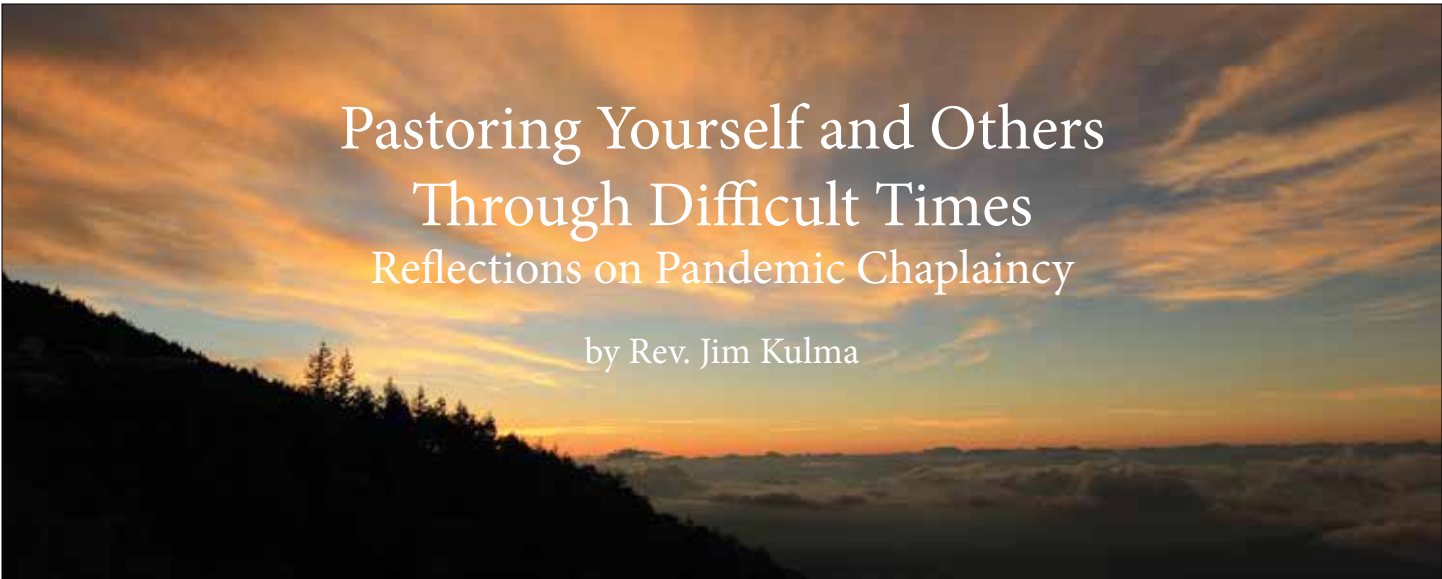
we moved from one house to another, and from meeting at a campground sharing space with another church, until we could get our own.

That’s a literal rendering of congregational histories around issues of space. I’ve been thinking metaphorically about those biblical images. I think the “temple” phase of many old mainline churches is over. We simply can’t afford the upkeep. I think in a very real sense “church life” is on

the move with the Spirit to “house” or even “tent” now. The shape of living communities is changing again, creating problems—yes but opportunities—especially for storytellers, since when we gather as Jesus people, in whatever space (literal or metaphorical), God’s story is at the center!



(feeding off one another’s reactions to the images and feelings the images evoke—being in the moment together and creating meaning); and of course a connection between the listener and the story (enabling the listener to enter the story “world” and find one’s self identified and named). That’s the way



# Pastoring Yourself and Others Through Difficult Times

## Reflections on Pandemic Chaplaincy

by Rev. Jim Kulma

I have served in chaplaincy for 33 years, in hospital, hospice, long-term care, and trauma center settings. My last position was at MetroHealth Medical Center, the regional trauma center and safety-net hospital for Cleveland.

The pandemic began for us on Friday the 13th of March, 2020. That was the day we shut down visitor access and the first COVID-19 (Covid) patients arrived at our door. The next several days were chaotic as our medical staff developed a pathway to handle Covid patients and their families. The Covid ICU was housed in my Medical ICU/Stepdown area. I served as their chaplain for 10 months.

The early predictions were very grave, and we made significant preparations for large numbers of patients.

At the beginning, some people were hopeful that we would move through the shutdown quickly, yet many of us had the sense that this would take months, even a year or more, to get through.

As the number of Covid patients grew, we turned several nursing units into dedicated Covid units. We ended up with four nursing units dedicated to Covid patients. These logistical decisions were a week-by-week response to the situation.

Every hospital in our area was sending staff home to work remotely, and only keeping “essential staff” on site. Our chaplains were committed to remaining present in the hospital to provide hands-on care during this crisis.

My units had the sickest patients. We did not allow chaplains to visit in the rooms, so the telephone and Zoom meetings became the way to connect. Most of the patients were not able to communicate because they were intubated and on ventilators, or on high-flow mask support. Some patients were on ventilators for weeks, often with unclear prognoses.

In those early months, we were not allowing any family into the hospital under any circumstances, so my contact with family members was by phone or Zoom. The isolation and limited communication with the medical team was very stressful on these family members.

We did not let family members into the hospital even at the end of life. The most intense situations were working with the dying without family at their side. Whenever possible, we would arrange for a video conference with family members, and place a tablet in the patient’s room. We tried to let family members see their loved one, and allow the patient to hear their voices as they expressed their love and

farewells. When I was involved, I said, “You hear that people are dying alone in the hospitals. But I can assure you that your loved one is not alone, they are with nurses and doctors who are compassionate and care very deeply for them. They are not alone.”

I would hold the tablet so that the family could see the nurses and staff in the room, in full PPE, holding hands, speaking to the patient lovingly, expressing their heartfelt support.

After situations like this, my main focus was to listen to staff as they talked about their experience. There were few words to describe what they felt and saw. However, the simple act of inquiring, listening, and standing with the staff opened a door to their healing.

At the end of the day, I experienced a mix of emotions. On the one hand, I was very much engaged and present to the high intensity of the day. On the other hand, the days taxed my energy and demanded a kind of keen presence to stay on track with the work, to determine who was most in need of care, and to be careful not to take on emotions and energies that were not my own. I don’t like the term “boundaries,” but it’s crucial to know where I stop and the next person begins. They are experiencing their grief, not mine. I have my own grief, and it’s disrespectful to absorb their grief as

my own. I don't carry another's pain around with me.

I'm not here to give another person "hope" or "faith" or "trust." People tell me that I am giving people hope or strengthening their faith. No, I am not. I hardly have anything to give away.

Rather, I simply "witness" what is happening, with all the whole-person presence and attention I can muster. Please note that I listen for the whole experience. Even in the midst of terrible tragedy or enormous suffering, I still see things like devotion, courage, determination, or courageous trust. I have the job of staying in the room with a person, not checking out emotionally or mentally, and noticing the whole kit and caboodle. I recognize it, acknowledge it, name it, and say it out loud. This simple activity of listening and naming is the balm that heals the wounded soul. If anyone has something better, I wanna hear about it, cause I haven't found anything more powerful.

It's not a matter of telling them about God, or quoting the Bible, or getting people to hear about Jesus. It is a matter of naming, out loud, the pain and suffering AND the resources and strength that are already present.

I talk to hospital staff about self-care this way: It's important to find a way to re-humanize yourself. If you work with trauma and death and dying, the energy of that event lands "in you." So, you have to find ways to process that energy, to re-humanize yourself in a way that works for you.

One day some nurses in the ICU were taking a breather. I came in and sat with them while they talked. When they got up to return to work, I said, "Thanks for letting me sit with you for a while." Echo said, "Jim, people ask us what it's like working here, and there's no way to tell them. If you're not here, you don't get it. But you are here with

us, and you get what we are going through—that means so much to us."

Notice that this isn't about what I say, or do, or fancy programs I provide. It is the simple, safe, trusted presence that makes this all work.

What is our role as storytellers now, as we move through this next phase of the Covid plague? My inclination is to encourage "story-listening" rather than "storytelling."

You have developed a skillfulness toward being sensitive to an audience; you know when they are "with you." In my view, storytellers are now being called to practice the art of story-listening; listening carefully and with rapt attention to those who have suffered mightily during the past year. I see that it is time for tellers to seek



out those who have stories to tell, especially the ones who do not know how to put those events into words or do not have language for what they experienced.

There are many who have experienced great grief, deep sorrow, and painful isolation during the shutdown. They have been kept away from the rites and spiritual services that serve as containers for deep lament. They have not had the consolation of their dear ones sitting beside them in silence.

It is my prayer that storytellers are being sent to these persons who have been alone and lonely, so that the tell-

ers might become the audience with the high craft of story-listening. We storytellers are the ones who can sit quietly with rapt attention.

We have the opportunity to practice a kind of village mindfulness that understands the opportunity to go to our friends who have lost loved ones or served on the front lines of this pandemic, and ask them to dare to tell about their work and service. To listen to what they have seen or done that they never imagined, and simply don't have the language to express.

With presence, and listening, and acceptance, and the skill of language, we can help create the safe and accepting space for them to tell of their journey out and back again.

**Now is not the time for biblical storytellers to find two or three biblical stories about surviving a pandemic. Now is not the time to go about starting with the story about the grace of the Almighty. Now is not the time to begin talking and telling.**

Now is the time to ask, what did you do? What was it like? Please try to tell me, I want to know. Together, let's find a way for us to share in this suffering and healing.

It's only after we have listened carefully, with rapt attention, that we will be able to come upon a word that will give rise to that first true line, that leads to another true line that forms the arc of a story. Then that story will have enough ground and substance to be a container for all that has gone before, and will point to a sacred story that might reflect and mirror the inexpressible journey that is the pandemic of our day, time and place in this world.



# DIVE DEEP

## into the 2021 Virtual Festival Gathering August 6 and 7, 2021

### YOUR 2021 VIRTUAL FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

#### Friday, August 6

12:00 PM Welcome & Opening  
Worship  
Keynote 1:00 PM  
Workshops 2:30 PM  
*From beginner to master teller,  
we've got you covered!*  
Featured Tellers 4:30 PM  
Epic Telling (w/ Talkback) 6:30 PM  
Lighting the Fire 9:00 PM  
*Bring a story to share and enjoy  
stories from other storytellers across  
the US and the world! A favorite of  
festival goers for years, this is late  
night fun for everyone!*

#### Saturday, August 7

Welcome 10:00 AM  
Keynote 10:30 AM  
Workshops 12:30 PM  
Speed Networking 2:45 PM  
*Catch up! Find new friends!*  
Featured Tellers 3:30 PM  
Speed Networking 4:30 PM  
Closing Worship 5:00 PM



Join the always engaging and creative **Carole Danby**, Australian Christian Education workshop leader, as she provides insights and practical

tools that help children of your congregation become biblical storytellers.

New Testament professor **Cliff Barbarick** will outline the process he uses to create Epic Tellings for his college classes. Bring the insight and community building we experience during our Epic Tellings at the festival to your hometown!



**Pam Faro**, the exquisitely nuanced storyteller from Colorado, will take on the joys and difficulties of interfaith storytelling, especially in trying

times like those we experienced in a hard, pandemic year.



The founder of NBSI, **Tom Boomershine**, tackles two of the most toxic stories in the Bible (Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden

and Jesus' trial before Pilate), and their connection to the subordination of women and Anti-Semitism. **Amelia Boomershine** will again provide her delightful "Biblical Storytelling 101" workshop for those new to the art.

Loyola PhD student **Megan Wines** will lead a lively exploration of listening to echoes of the Hebrew Bible in the Gospel of Mark.



What's so funny? **Madelyn Campbell** explores how to find humorous moments in the scriptures we tell and use them to delight our audiences and develop

deeper connections with the characters in the stories we tell.





# Our Famous Immersive Workshops, Featured Storytellers, and Wonderful Worship Leaders!



Commune with the beautiful mind of professor and author **Richard Swanson** as he leads an exploration into how to provoke the stories that

provoke you. You know the ones: women cut into pieces, enemies slaughtered (including all their cattle), trenches are dug between “Us” and “Them.”

Join **Elizabeth Adkisson**, ABS Certified Master Storyteller, as she explores how to bring the delicious thuds, yawns, and piercing vowels in a scriptural text to life.



**Mary Kisner** leads this workshop that provides a step-by-step process for putting together a video of your telling. Learn the elements you need to create a virtual

telling.



The talented and energetic Canadian team of **Linnea Good** and **Catherine Stuart** will help you see what the ukulele and biblical storytelling have

in common. Learn all about “Ukulele Church,” born in the exile of the past year, which combines the telling of scripture and ukulele instrument learning with an art-and-faith, praise-and-prayer process. Prepare to be hooked!



Let experienced librarian and educator



**Barbara Tucker** show you how to use biblical storytelling to foster the growth and spiritual formation of your congregation.

Great workshops fill up fast! Register today for the Festival Gathering and make *your* workshop selections! More workshop leaders on the next page!

*Your Gift*  
will let  
biblical  
storytelling  
continue  
to shine the  
light of God  
to future  
generations.

Please  
include the  
Network of Biblical  
Storytellers, Int'l  
in your will or  
estate planning.

*Thank You!*

Photo by Quimó Al on Unsplash



## Workshop Leaders

(continued from page 9)



**Bobbie Pell**, award-winning author, professor, and nationally known storyteller specializes in Celtic tales and ballads. This engaging teacher

will help you explore how storytelling enhancements in both poetic forms (blessings, poems) or musical additions (song excerpts, instrumentals, percussions, string instruments) heightens emotion, suspense, and drama for the listener. Learn engagement techniques applicable for both children and adult audiences.

**Dina Wildlake** is an instructional designer turned Episcopal priest. In her workshop, you'll learn how biblical storytelling can become an embodied prayer practice that opens you to noticing the ways you and your stories vibrate with God's stories, and through that practice, how you might discover dimensions of God's abiding love, challenge, and care for humanity and the world. She designed the process you will learn as a prayer practice for her parishioners.

**Ruth Elsbree** is a published voice artist on Audible.

Through her work on "The Seeds of Christianity" historical fiction series, she learned to use her voice to create a variety of characters. In this



hands-on, voices-on workshop she'll help you explore how to vary your voice through pitch, rhythm, pace, tone, and volume to help you differentiate one speaker in a story from another. Learn how to better use your voice in this fun workshop.



**Susan St. John** wants to help you establish a youth-focused ministry based on biblical storytelling! Pulling on her years of experience in

human services, this workshop will help you understand how to create an environment where youth can develop a personal, long-lasting relationship with God, the biblical stories, and their own developing identities.

**Theresa Eggleston** believes biblical storytelling can be used in response to religious trauma. Throughout history the Bible has been used as a weapon resulting in religious trauma. During this workshop, participants will engage how the art of biblical narrative can begin the conversation to heal religious trauma.

**Sandhya Ruban** is the founder of NBS India. In her workshop, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall," you'll explore beauty through Middle-Eastern eyes. Explore the use of different essential oils, get a taste of Eastern beauty traditions, understand the reason behind the preparation, and finally see how the stories of Ruth, Abigail and Esther took a dramatic turn because of the preparation.

**Philip Liebelt**, served as the coordinator of NBS Australia for 12 years. In addition to his work as a pastor and storyteller, for 30 years he



has written and performed eye-witness accounts told by biblical characters. In this workshop, you'll learn how to utilize the background information you have already gathered (such as cultural material), that you cannot use in biblical storytelling, to create this type of first-person narrative.

## Pre-Festival Special Events!

**Thursday, June 17**  
*Favorite Bible Stories*  
storytelling performance

**Thursday, July 1**  
Workshop: *Manna for this Wilderness*

with Lori Ruge-Jones  
*God gave the people just what they needed, but they didn't know what it was! Learn about Biblical Storytelling--what it is and why we need it and begin to learn a sacred story.*



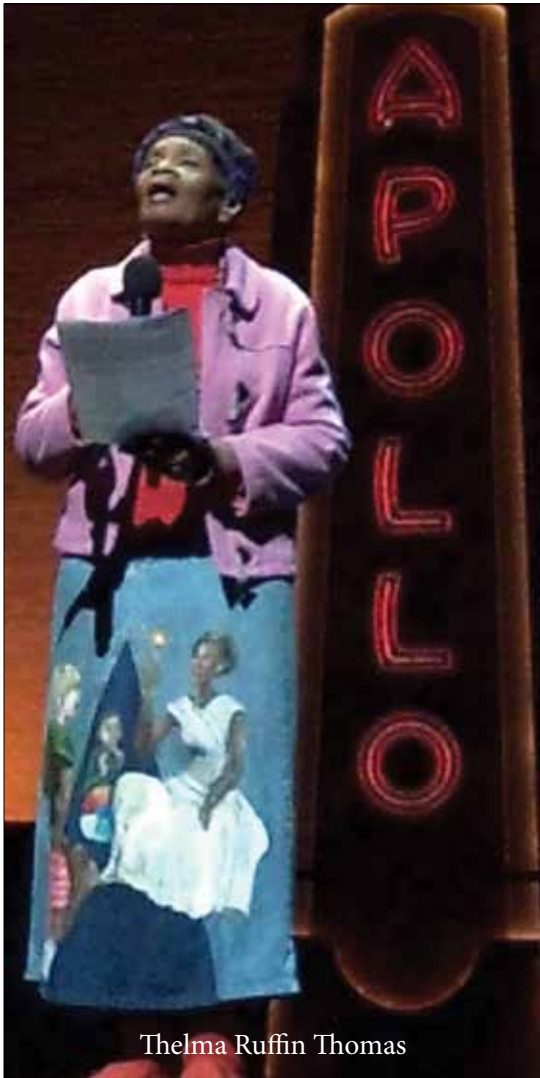
**Thursday, July 15**  
Coaching for Biblical Storytellers

**AND**  
**Thursday, July 15**  
Stay with us for the *Lighting the Fire* "open mic" storytelling! Join the fun!



**Thursday, July 29**  
**Richard Ward's Keynote:**  
**Biblical Storytelling**  
**in Difficult Times Part One**

# Featured Storytellers and Worship Leaders



Thelma Ruffin Thomas

## Thelma Ruffin Thomas and Joyce Parr Featured Storytellers

Joyce Parr is a great example of the storyteller's art. Her stories are drawn from around the world with a special emphasis on African traditions. This native of the world shares a wisdom common to peoples of all cultures. Join her as her stories invite, celebrate, and promote inter-cultural understanding.

Thelma Ruffin Thomas serves as the Artistic Director of the Pearls of Wisdom. She performs throughout New York City and along the eastern seaboard. She has traveled all over the world telling stories in Tanzania, Brazil, Ghana, Costa Rica, South Africa, Russia, and Australia. Thelma is a founding member of the African Folk Heritage Circle, and a member of NBSI, The Storytelling Center, the National Association of Black Storytellers, and the Harlem Arts Alliance.

## Worship Leaders Rachel Doll and Sarah Agnew

Author Rachel Whaley Doll is also a vocalist, biblical storyteller and speaker. She is the author of two books, *The Exquisite Ordinary*, and *Beating on the Chest of God*. She is the Christian Educator at Winter Park Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, NC.



Sarah Agnew is a storyteller, poet, and minister. She holds a PhD from Edinburgh and was our 2020 Key-note Speaker and is the author of *Embodied Performance, Pray the Story, and Hold Them Close*. Sarah is now a co-pastor of Wesley United Church in Canberra.



## What We Get From the Festival Gathering and Biblical Storytelling



"I'm drawn by the beauty of the ecumenical spirit: We who come from many denominations gather as a family to share our love of telling stories. The experience is always fresh; each year I learn something valuable that inspires me."

Linda Schuessler, Copy Editor,  
*The Biblical Storyteller*

"Going to the Festival Gathering is like going to family reunion where we get to feast upon and be nourished by the food, fellowship, and stories shared with our kin people in the faith."

Kathy Culmer,  
Festival Workshop Coordinator



"Serving a congregation that hadn't decided whether to continue its mission or close its doors is like walking a high-wire with no net. Luke has always been my storytelling wheelhouse. As I told the stories about "good" Samaritans and prodigal sons, about Marthas and Marys, and long walks to distant villages while heavy with grief, the community rallied. We decided to hold an Easter sunrise service. I drug our fire pit to the parking lot in the dark and lit it, expecting maybe two families to arrive. As dawn came, more and more neighbors arrived, including persons who lived around the church but who had never attended worship there. As the sun broke through the clouds I proclaimed the story of a risen Christ. Living into the Story gives rise to a new and glorious dawn and the Story goes on!"

Janet Steele, NBSI Editorial Board



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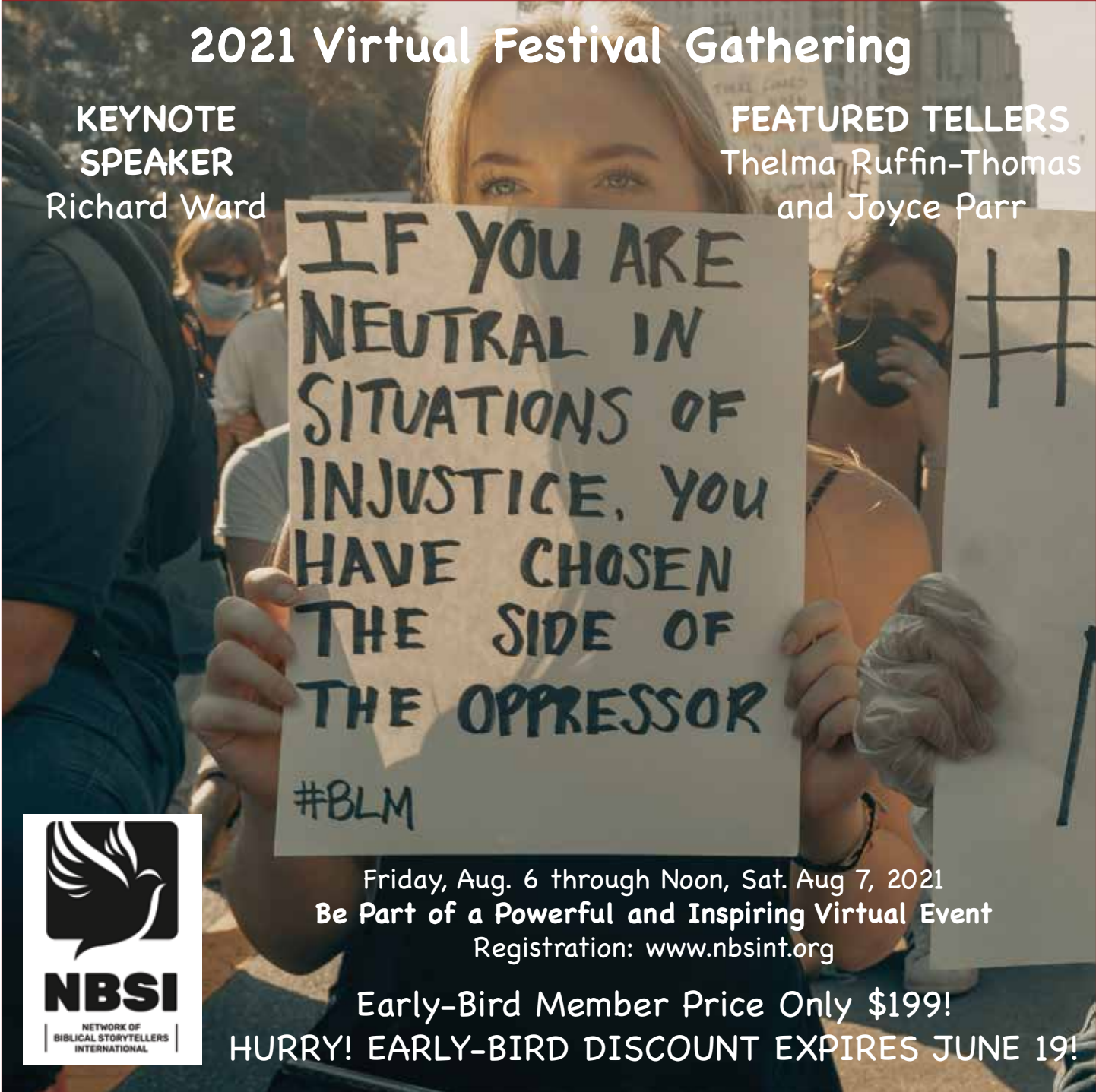
## 2021 Virtual Festival Gathering

**KEYNOTE  
SPEAKER**

Richard Ward

**FEATURED TELLERS**

Thelma Ruffin-Thomas  
and Joyce Parr

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