

Outreach Issue 2021

THE BIBLICAL STORYTELLER

A Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. Publication

LITTERATUR PÅ SVENSKA

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ANNOUNCING
Our New Storytelling Lectionary Library

2021 FESTIVAL GATHERING OF BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

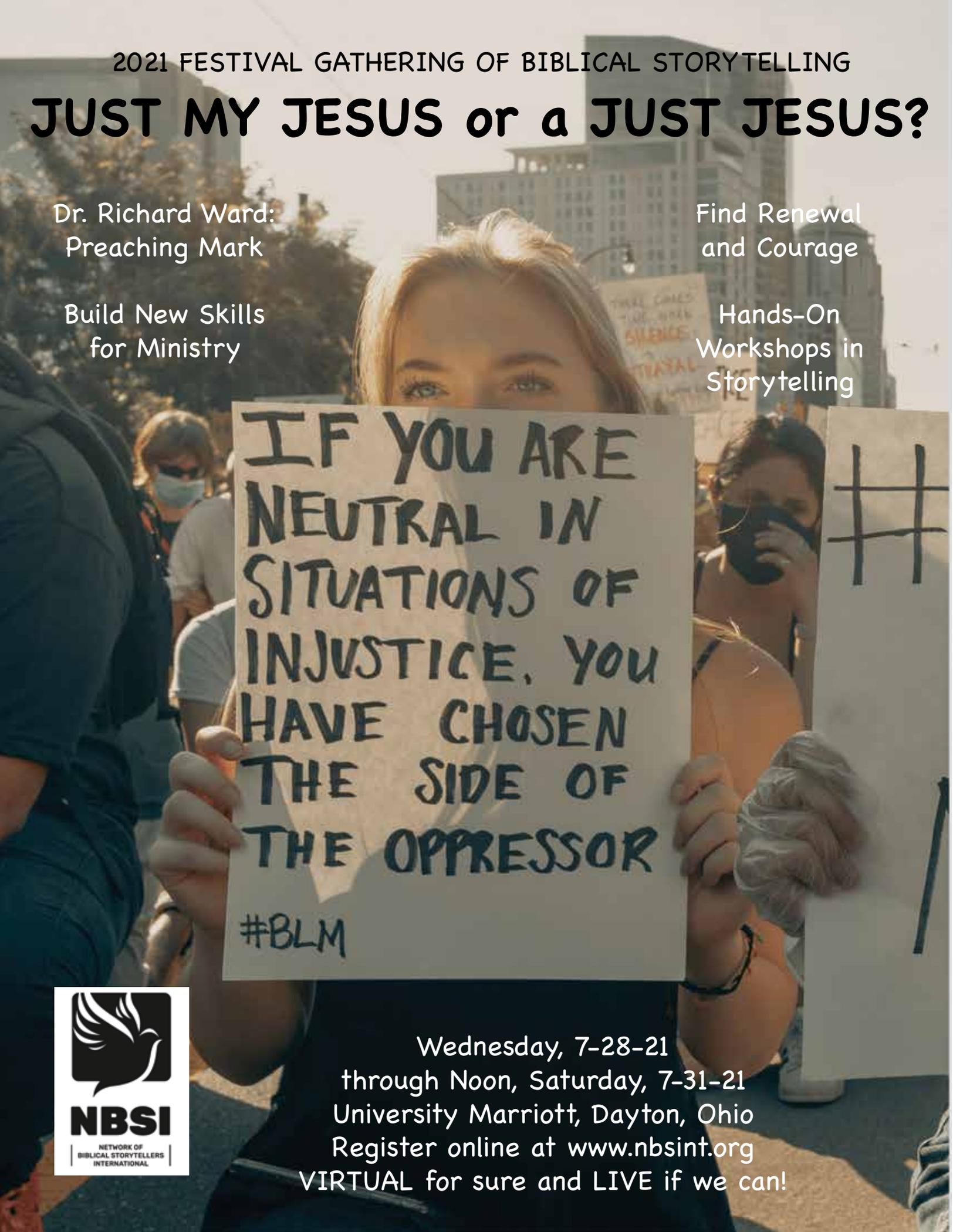
JUST MY JESUS or a JUST JESUS?

Dr. Richard Ward:
Preaching Mark

Build New Skills
for Ministry

Find Renewal
and Courage

Hands-On
Workshops in
Storytelling



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



Wednesday, 7-28-21
through Noon, Saturday, 7-31-21
University Marriott, Dayton, Ohio
Register online at www.nbsint.org
VIRTUAL for sure and LIVE if we can!

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

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Mission Impossible? Going Virtual

Starting in March of 2020, my clients all over the United States began to call:

“We’re going to have to cancel the clergy retreat.”

“We can’t have you for our conference this year, we’re canceling because of COVID.”

“The governor is closing the schools! We won’t be able to have you in residency.”

Call after call, my wonderful year of traveling, teaching, and storytelling disappeared. It slid off the face of the earth! It was surreal. By the end of April, every conference, retreat, residency and storytelling festival on my calendar was gone. One of the last blows was the cancellation of the live NBSI Festival Gathering, where my retreat for widows was to be the pre-conference event.

Stunned, heartbroken, and scared about the financial implications for my life, my first thought was, “What in the heck am I going to do? How will I make it?”

I got busy writing a recovery resource for widowed persons. I had food in my refrigerator, I was safe and healthy. Meanwhile, people across the world began dying at unprecedented rates.

Watching the world of COVID and its strange manifestations was like watching science fiction movies on TV as a child (like my personal favorite, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*). COVID’s symptoms ranged from “no worse than the common cold” to strokes and clots, organ failure, fatal lung infections and lingering inflammation and brain damage.

A dear friend of mine, an experienced ICU doc, was terrified. (I’d seen her tired after night shifts but never scared.) “I feel like I’m back in residen-



cy,” she said early on. “We can’t figure out what this thing is doing! People are dying when we don’t expect it.”

Life as we knew it was (and is) on fire. There was (still is) incredible disinformation and a lack of real reporting. (Don’t get me started on the fall of journalism in our country!) When we hit 100,000 dead, some Americans still thought it was a hoax. Seriously?!

Then the first call came: We want you to do a virtual retreat event for us on Zoom— help our church talk about grief and fear. A big teaching hospital



called: We read your book, we want to talk about a video series for our bereavement program. I looked at my MacBook and wondered if it was up to the task. Some lights and mics later...

I’ve reached more people online than I ever reached live. You can, too! Read this issue and tool up! (Read film producer Jason Chesnut’s article on page 6 to learn how.) Start recording and be a part of the NBSI Lectionary Library. NBSI wants YOU to be a part of our virtual world!

CALLING ALL STORYTELLERS

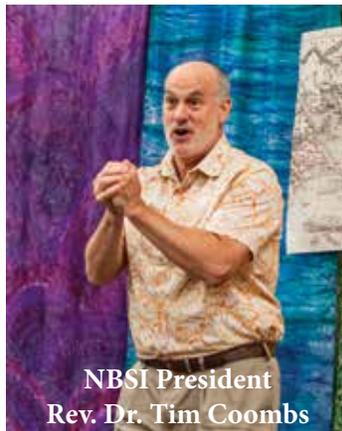
Record a Story for the NBSI Lectionary Library!

What is the NBSI Lectionary Library program?

Rev. Dr. Tim Coombs,
NBSI President

The NBSI Lectionary Library program will be a collection of all the stories recommended for use for Sunday worship according to the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL).

The Library project is being directed by Michele Rizoli, who is both a member of NBSI and NBSCanada. Michele will begin by collating all the videos we have on our YouTube and Vimeo channels and then add to that with an invitation to the Network. I imagine some passages will have several recordings to choose from.



NBSI President
Rev. Dr. Tim Coombs

result of the pandemic. Our thought was with so many churches having to worship virtually, that having an available library of good quality tellings to be accessed for livestreaming would be a wonderful way to share the art of biblical storytelling, helping us to fulfill our mission to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories.

How did the Lectionary Library program come about?

The truth is we have been talking about doing this for years, but the idea became a way to fulfill a need as a

Will churches pay to use the resource?

Our thought is that this Lectionary Library resource will be available at no charge, though free will offerings will always be welcomed.



The NBSI Seminar has a robust and respected group of scholars. Will the scholars help develop this resource?

Phil Ruge-Jones, Ph.D.
NBSI Seminar Coordinator

We don't have a specific mechanism to assist those preparing the stories. However, we trust our members and their storytelling abilities.



We hope that the stories and other passages open up through the storytellers' engagement with each passage. I have found the seminar members to be generous and helpful when approached by dimensions that have perplexed me. I suspect others will find similar support.

How do you suggest members research the stories they are attracted to telling? What sources do you suggest ?

Begin with the passage itself. I love the appendices to Joanna Dewey and Dave Rhoads wonderful book *Mark*

as *Story* as I interpret a given passage. Google solid online resources like Working Preacher and Text This Week. They have indexes with commentary on all the RCL passages that come up each year and are a good reference to use AFTER you have done your own exploration of the passage at hand.

What are the nuts and bolts of how this project will come together?

Michele Rae Rizoli,
Library Director



It is very much being created as we go along. We have a YouTube channel that will go public once there is enough content and a dedicated email address: NBSILec-tionaryProject@gmail.com. Check the NBSI website for updated information, as the library is an ongoing work in progress.

Videos will be selected for quality and for a diversity of tellers.

To start out we will prioritize the texts for Advent 2020 (Year B), but all

lectionary passages are available for telling at this point.

We invite all NBSI members to participate and provide a video for the library!

It's really not a problem if we have more than one telling per passage. The goal is to serve the broader Christian church, so passages that are coming up soonest would be the most useful.

We have a YouTube channel that we will populate and when it goes public we will have a link on the NBSI website.

Members will submit their stories via a Google Form (link on the website) or they can email me (link below) and I'll send the link. There is no limit to how many scriptures one teller may submit at this point, but if we have too many duplicates we will favour a diversity of storytellers.

There are no submission deadlines. Members can submit their stories as they create the videos and they will be processed in due course. Of course, the sooner they are submitted the better. Contact Michele: NBSILec-tionaryProject@gmail.com



How To Record Your Lectionary Library Videos Like a Pro!

Advice from Jason Chesnut, ANKOS Films

Q. Not everyone runs a film company like you do, Jason! For our storytellers who are wanting to film their stories and put them on YouTube or contribute to the new NBSI Lectionary Library, what are ways they can record their video with what they may already own? (Cell phones, laptops, tablets.)

A. Everything has a camera in the year of our Lord 2020! You can shoot pretty clear footage from a phone, a tablet, even a laptop computer. It might feel overwhelming, but remember: the digital world (which didn't start in mid-March 2020, but long before!) can be your oyster. Patience and consistency are our allies.

Q. Do you gain quality by using an external camera? What brands or models would you recommend for our members and how would they add these to their recording device?

A. You do gain quality, but it comes at a price :). The easiest way is to get an external camera that connects directly

into your computer—Logitech has one for under \$50 that is actually not that bad. (You'll need a tripod or a way to attach it to your laptop.)

Now, an external camera can exponentially increase the overall quality of your videos for a very modest investment (plus, it will free up your cell-phone/laptop/tablet to use for something else!), but it's a larger and more expensive project.



Exhibit A: Video Camera on tripod with external microphone.

Often you get what you pay for—you know Canon and Nikon, but don't sleep on Panasonic or Sony.

Q. What about sound? Do you recommend an external microphone? If so,

what are some of the options available that you would suggest?

A. I would recommend an external microphone almost more than I'd recommend an external camera, to be entirely honest. Even a simple microphone that can connect to your computer via USB is worlds better than the tinny, ferociously sad sound that comes from most every computer or phone that has ever been made. You can get a good mic for around \$100 and then an adaptor that feeds it directly into your computer's USB port for another \$15.

Q. What do you recommend for lighting a video?

A. Get creative. Your desk lamp or even some candles

can light a subject (in this case, you!) extremely well.

A great place to film is in front of an open window to take advantage of natural light. (Often times I see people set

up behind an open window, which only works if you want to be someone in the Witness Protection Program™.)

You can also get a ring light relatively cheap (make sure to get a decent tripod on which to place it).

Q. What are some tips you suggest to help us move from live tellings to the virtual filming of storytelling?

A. Remember your audience—instead of a room full of people like you're used to, you have a single lens. At the same time, you only have one place to focus on!

I find that the camera lens invites an intimacy and vulnerability that doesn't always happen face-to-face.

Play around with what a camera can add to your telling (and, while you're at it, play around with your



Rev. Jason Chesnut



storytelling to optimize it for a digital audience).

I have found that storytelling in this new digital age can offer an experience that face-to-face tellings might struggle with.

Embrace this new age, storytellers of God!

The Rev. Jason Chesnut, ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), is a freelance filmmaker, itinerant pastor, and digital preacher, working on the edges of institutional Christianity. His films are committed to (a) (n)ew (k)ind (o)f (s)torytelling (ANKOSfilms.com), and his work extends into movements for justice and liberation. A native of Texas, Jason graduated from Texas Lutheran University and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He lives as close as possible to mountains, and in an alternate universe he would be a wildlife photographer

VIDEOTAPING TIPS

Be patient. Learning new technology takes time.

Consistency in lighting, sound, and visual quality is important.

If you can afford it, purchase an external microphone. It greatly increases your sound quality.

If you can afford it, purchase an external camera.

Use a tripod!

Get creative with lighting.

Film in front of an open window.

Use a desk lamp.

Even candlelight can be effective (and evocative!)

Remember your audience; speak directly to the camera!

Play around with what a camera can add to your storytelling!

Embrace the change! It's probably here to stay!

A Provocation: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

by Richard Swanson, Ph.D.

24 Another parable he put before them; he said: The dominion of the heavens was compared to a person who sows beautiful seeds in his field.

25 While the people were sleeping, this enemy came he sowed poisonous weeds in the midst of the grain and went away.

26 When the grass sprouted and made fruit, then appeared also the poisonous weeds.

27 When the slaves of the master of the house came they said to him: haShem, didn't you sow beautiful seed in your field? Where did it get poisonous weeds from?

28 He said to them: An enemy, a person did this. The slaves are saying to him: So, do you want us to go out and gather them?

29 He said: No lest in gathering the poisonous weeds you should uproot with them the grain.

30 Let both grow together up until the harvest: in the time of the harvest I will say to the harvesters: Gather first the poisonous weeds; bind them into bundles to burn them up. Then grain gather into my barn.

36 Then leaving the crowds, he came into his house. They came to him, the disciples did, they said: Make quite clear to us the parable of the poisonous weeds of the field.

37 He answered; he said: The one who sowed the beautiful seed is the son of adam. 38 The field is the beautiful world. The beautiful seed, these are the sons of the dominion. The poisonous weeds are the sons of the worthless one.

39 The enemy, the enemy who sowed them is the prosecutor. The harvest is the completion of the aeon. The harvesters are messengers.

40 So just as the poisonous weeds are gathered and in fire burnt up, thus it will be in

the completion of the aeon:

41 the son of Adam will send out his messengers; they will gather out of his dominion all scandals and those undermining Torah;

42 they will throw them into the fiery furnace. There there will be wailing and the gnashing of teeth.

43 Then the strictly observant will shine like the sun in the dominion of their father. The one who has ears should hear.

Jesus was a storyteller. That's not too surprising: Jesus is Jewish, and the Jewish faith has its roots sunk deep in the stories that make up Scripture. We call them parables, which sounds somehow religious, but they are stories. In some important ways, all stories are parables. They are always up to something, something more than you might first think.

Joachim Jeremias, the finest parables scholar of his generation, listened hard to the parables. Jeremias took seriously the durability of stories: he knew that for all of the ways we put our individual stamp on the stories we tell (or the jokes), still the structure of the original story persists. This mattered for Jeremias because he was not listening just to a little anecdote with a religious message. Jeremias was listening to a story that had its origin in the mouth of Jesus. He expected to hear the ipsissima vox Jesu, the actual living voice of Jesus still telling these

old, lovely stories. Scholars are a little less optimistic about "original forms" or original voices, but it's still worth reflecting: when you listen to one of these stories that Jesus told, you are being drawn into a narrative web that he first spun.



Adolf Jülicher, a half-century earlier, also listened closely to these old stories. He was also the finest parable scholar of his generation, and his listening is fascinating because, in some ways, he listens the way narrative scholars listen these days. Jülicher listened to the way the story opened itself to its hearers, the way it worked on people who listened to it.

Traditional scholarship read the parables as allegories, as extended coded similes. That handed interpreters the task of linking each element of the little story with elements in the world of the audience, whether ancient or contemporary, depending on the interpreter. You can see why: that process starts already in the gospels themselves, which present Jesus as the first allegorizer. "The one who sowed the beautiful seed is the son of adam," he says, and we are off to the allegorical races.

Jülicher listened just to the stories themselves and let them shape how he heard them. He argued that stories have a single, central impact on their audiences. They have ONE point, not a whole roster of allegorical applications. I find this way of listening to the stories endlessly productive. Jülicher (and most interpreters, truth be told) may imagine that the ONE point of a parable is forever the same, once it is found. I don't think that.

I find the moment that I hear a story to generate the ONE point fully as much as the story itself. WHEN you hear is as powerful as WHAT you hear.

And so I listen to this story about wheat and poisonous weeds again this time. I appreciate all the ways I have heard this story in past moments of listening. And this year I find myself struck by the idea that there are people in the world who are poisonous weeds. I could name some if you asked me. I could probably name quite a few.

But I find myself struck by the way the end of Matthew's gospel undercuts this divisive assumption. At the end of the parable, the weed-people are separated out and burned. At the end of Matthew's gospel, there are people who see Jesus raised from the dead, but still doubt (a weedy behavior in Matthew's story up to that point). But at the end

of Matthew's gospel the weed-people who doubt are not gathered and burned; they are sent out to baptize and teach.

What if this little story has among its collection of SINGLE points the effect of calling out our love of being the GOOD SEED among all the weeds? What if the effect of the story is to call us on our tendency to imagine that problems could be solved if only we could burn the weed-people who cause us so much trouble? What if the weedy problem that needs solving is our willingness to identify those who ought to be burned?

That'd be awkward.

I do not imagine that every idea is as good as every other one, nor every ideology, nor every person. But what if ONE point of the parable is that we are stuck with each other until a point outside of any imaginable time. There will never be a congregation without people who are certain that we are wrong (even as we return that favor). There will never be a workplace that does not require us to work toward a shared goal in the company of people with whom we share nothing else. We will never have the option of first selecting the perfect partners, the perfect congregants, the perfect candidate or boss or set of friends.

We are stuck with each other. And we share the same set of problems that must be solved, even if we understand those problems differently. It's time we got on with solving those problems, I think.

Richard Swanson, Ph.D., teaches at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD. He is the director of the *Provoking the Gospel Storytelling Project* and the author of five books about provoking biblical texts. An NBSI Seminar scholar, this piece is reprinted from his blog: <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com>

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

Please
include the
Network of Biblical
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in your will or
estate planning.

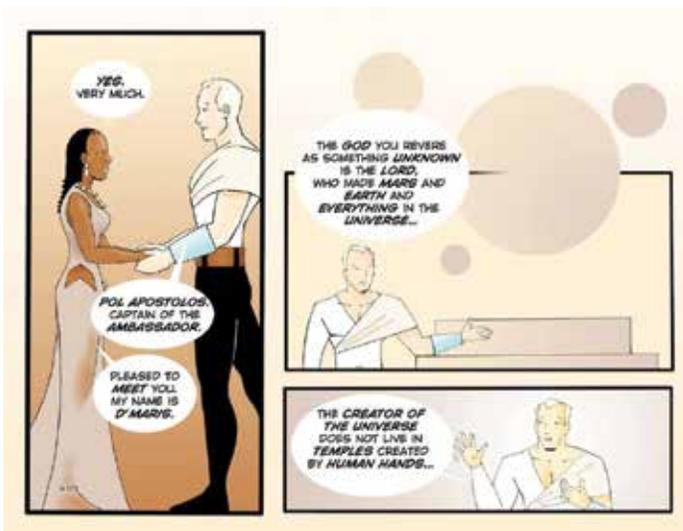
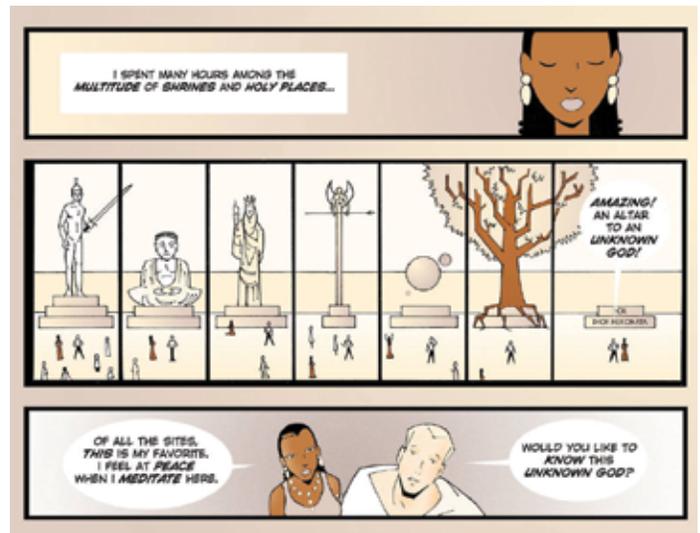
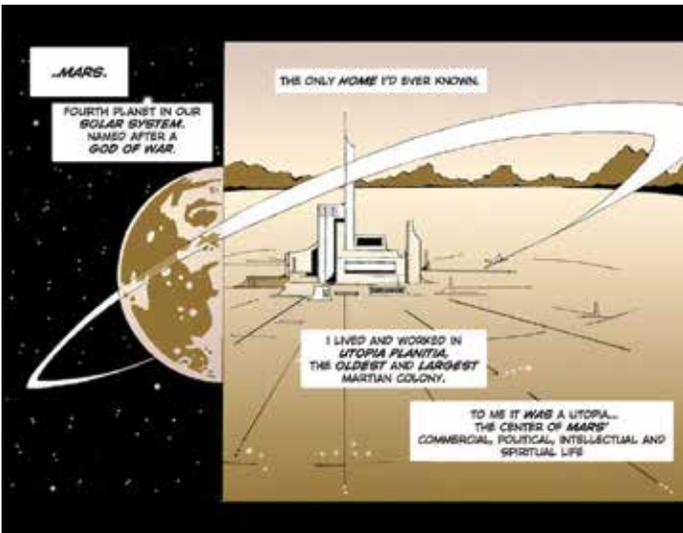
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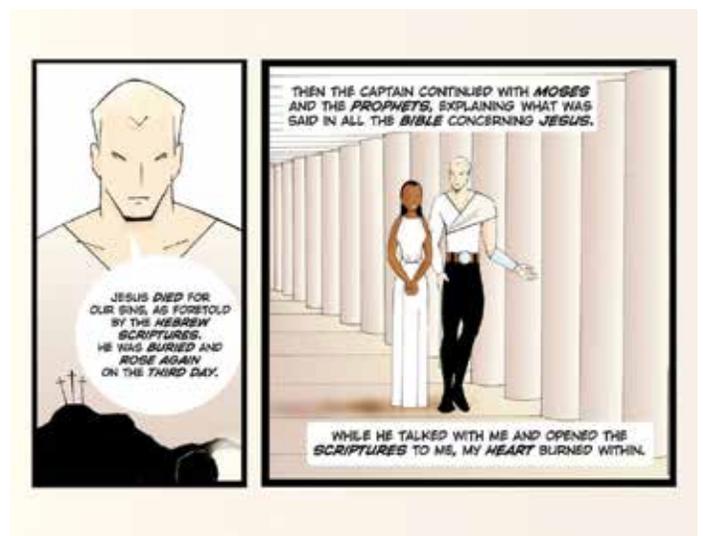
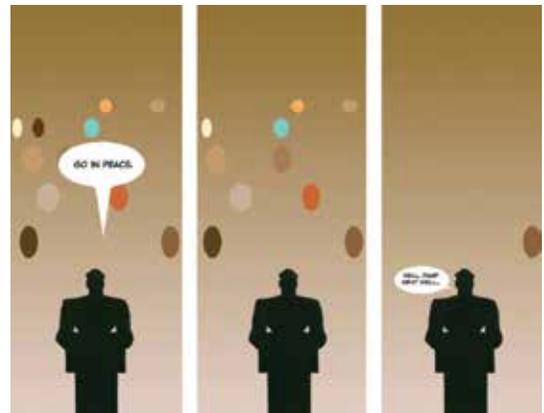
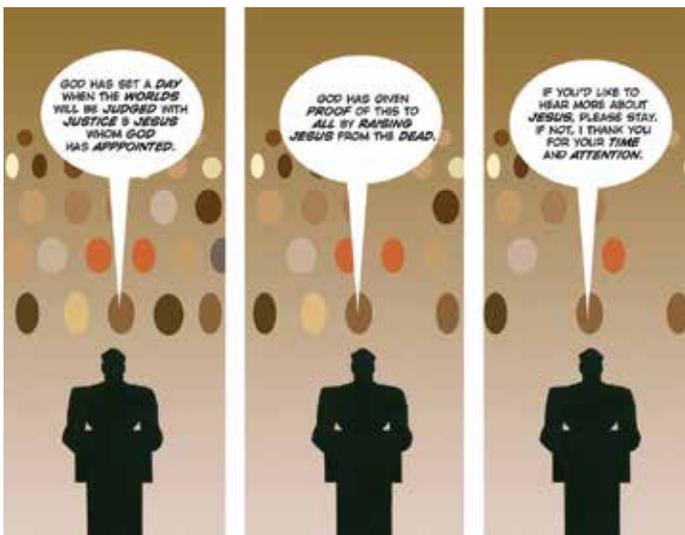
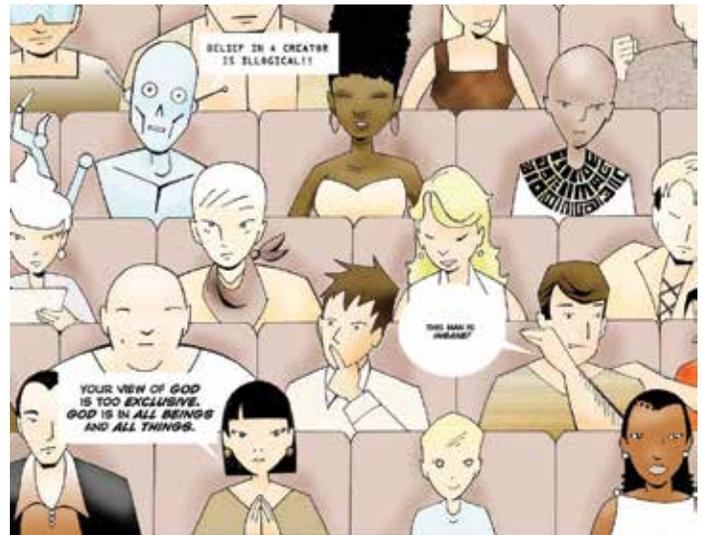
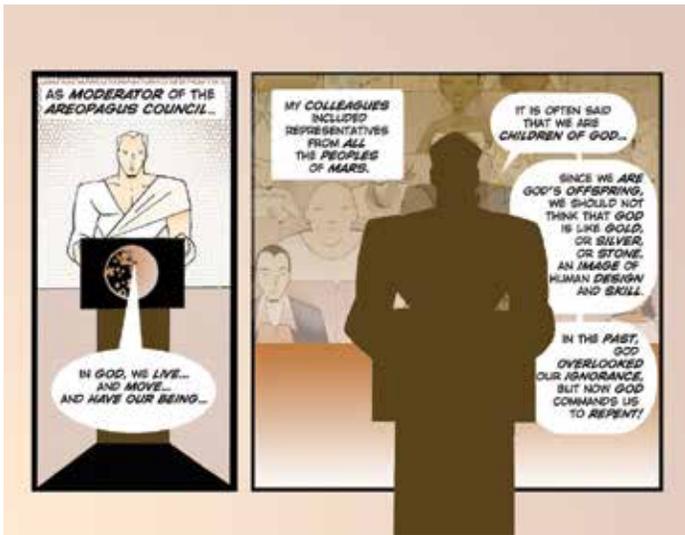
Photo by Quano Al on Unsplash



SHARING THE WORD IN A PANDEMIC TIME

Cartoons by Rev. Tom Pairan





Tom Pairan is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, currently serving a congregation in Chillicothe, Ohio. He is husband to Anne and father to son Jon and triplets Nick, Noelle, and Abbie. In his spare time, he illustrates projects on a freelance and "just for fun" basis, including "MissionTrek 2820," a futuristic, comic book retelling of the Acts of the Apostles.





THE STORY DOCUMENTATION FORM

A Free Tool for Documenting Your Stories

from ABS Master Certified Biblical Storyteller Ellen Patton

I learned Luke 14:15-24, the parable of the great banquet, for a storytelling concert entitled “Dinner With Jesus.” Later, I found myself with another opportunity to tell it, this time for a ladies’ study. As I delved into the story for a second round of performance preparation, I decided to keep the same focus as the first time, since it was relevant to this particular study. Fortunately, I still had most of my notes from the previous year, including how I had formatted the story, what I had told and how I had told it. But, they were scattered over various papers and I wished they had been better organized.

Also, when first learning this story, I spent some time on the phrase “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” because the handicapped are looked at much differently today than they were in Jesus’ time. I wanted to speak to today, but retain the same ideas that Jesus may have been conveying with his words. So, I chose to use the words “the poor, the disreputable, the brokenhearted and the disillusioned.”

Although I had a rough draft of the words and the focus I wanted for the story, the body language chosen for the poor, the disreputable, the bro-

kenhearted and the disillusioned had not been noted anywhere. I couldn’t remember what I’d done to communicate these realities. Had they been documented somewhere, I could have started by asking myself if they fit the circumstances of the new telling and

Because storytellers never tell the exact same story twice.

modified or changed them from there, instead of wracking my brain trying to remember what I had done or come up with new ones all the while wondering what I had done in the past.

It was similar experiences and listening to other tellers that made me realize that a resource to aid in documenting a story would be helpful. Thus, the Story Documentation Form was born for my resource project for the Masters of Biblical Storytelling Certificate.

The topics included for possible documentation were taken from personal experience, various readings, performances, and discussions with tellers. A survey of tellers produced a few items most keep and a widely scattered variety of others. This emphasized that what you choose to save for future reference is a personal choice, but will also be influenced by how critical the information is to the story and your telling.

Although the Story Documentation Form is one page front and back to make it simple and easy to use, some items will not fit into a single sheet format and need to be saved in addition to the form. These include formatted words with markings relevant to the telling, music choices, movement maps, drawings and outlines.

For both, the form and attachments checklists are included in the resource. It is hoped these will help you as a teller better document the stories you tell. Storytellers never tell the exact same story twice. Changes happen, not just because of a new focus for the story but because of changes in you, the audience, the amount of time you have to tell, and your knowledge of the story and the environment.

The purpose of this form is not so you can tell the same story in the same way another time, but to give you a step forward in your preparing to tell again, by remembering what you did.

It is my hope that this Story Documentation Form will help give you a framework upon which to hang your story and will prove useful to you in organizing and processing your thoughts, research, and performance choices for future reference so as to streamline and make more efficient your prep time for a future telling.

I am grateful for the opportunity I had to participate in the Academy for Biblical Storytelling. It challenged me and helped me grow in storytelling. I would encourage you to also choose to participate. Who knows where God might take you through it?!

The Documentation Form Captures These Important Details:

Biblical Reference, Translation, Source

This information is important for locating the story again and, if necessary, giving credit to the original source.

Theological Big Idea (TBI) Most Important Thing (MIT)

Both give a framework and focus to your telling.

Companion or Similar Stories

It can be helpful to know about, and possibly use, other versions of your given story or other stories that shed light on your story. The Bible often has multiple versions of the same story.

Words

The Bible, especially, is full of important but often unfamiliar and difficult-to-pronounce words. Be informed, inspired and prepared!



Included in this section is research into individual word meanings, pronunciations, and variations in spellings or names.

Connections

It's always good to help the audience link their lives with the biblical stories, making the sacred texts relevant for now. Using a point of identification helps make the story more personal to the listener and may help them to better remember parts of the story.

Title

This is for quick, easy story identification and focus. For instance, Luke 15:11-32 is commonly known as "The Prodigal Son."

Historical Context

None of these stories happened in a vacuum. It's important to understand the original context if integrity is to be maintained in the telling of them.

Research Notes

Biblical commentaries are full of helpful information for filling in the gaps and painting a clearer picture of the realities and potential impact of each story.

Tellings and Audience Notes

Practical notations for each telling to help with repeat performances in the future. Recording when, where, why, and to whom you have already told the story could be important if you are

choosing to tell that story again or are working with the same audience at a different time.

Story Analysis and Story Documentation

A summary of the basic plot and narrative arc such as problems or crises and resolutions, characters and their actions and motivations, tone, twists, setting ... the classic who, what, where, when, why, and how.

What I Don't Know or Understand

Notes for further research or frank confession/discussion when performing.

Special Considerations or Cautions

These are things to remember or take into account for particular audiences, as well as critical points for all audiences and performances.

My Personal Experience

This is a journal of sorts to document where you were (emotionally, spiritually, physically, psychologically, intellectually, etc.) when you previously worked on this story.

Attachments

- **Written Narrative**
- **Accompanying Media** (Knowing what you combined with a story and where you found it can prevent a lot of headaches in the future!)
- **Visual reminders** (Illustrations, storyboard, pictographs)
- **Outline, story analysis, maps and research notes**
- **Recordings: Video or Audio**

The Story Documentation Form can be downloaded for free at: www.pattons.org. Look for the link to "Documenting the Stories You Tell" on the first page.

Into Their Hearts.com

A website about biblical storytelling with children by ABS Master Certified Biblical Storyteller Kathy Smedley

PatrickFore@Unsplash.com



I have been teaching children and adults the stories of the Bible for over thirty years, but it wasn't until I attended the Festival Gathering for the first



time in 2017 that I saw the potential of doing biblical storytelling in Christian Education and said to myself, "What if my kids saw the stories I am seeing at the Festival Gathering, I wonder how it would change them?"

When I enrolled in the 2019 Master Level ABS I wondered what sort of educational resource I could create. I had to fall back on the only thing I really knew—teaching children. So I created a website/blog called www.intotheirhearts.com. I used Weebly.com and it was very easy! My goal was to get God's good stories off of the page and into the hearts of the kids.

The name of my blog and YouTube channel is Off the Page and Into Their Hearts. I think this is the core of how biblical storytelling is transformational;

in the process of learning it by heart, you get it off the page and it becomes interiorized, the story is infused with life and the child is drawn into the story, is touched by God and is transformed.

Into Their Hearts.com is a repository for my videos of me telling with children combined with a blog talking about what I am experiencing along the way and how others can learn from my successes and failures as I tell biblical stories to children and also teach them to tell to each other. Biblical storytelling

is a spiritual practice and a powerful way to do spiritual formation with children.

There were many challenges to overcome when I started the blog. First, I had to come up with a parental consent form (you can download the form from my blog), and then I had to learn the regulations and restrictions of working with children and the internet (Child Online Privacy Protection Act).

I learned the ins and outs of YouTube and set up a YouTube channel with my own videos of biblical storytelling



as well as the ones involving children. That channel is just under my own name, Kathy Smedley.

In January of 2020 YouTube changed their labeling of videos and because of a lawsuit involving C.O.P.P.A, any videos labeled made for children would be treated differently. For example, you can no longer have personalized ads on this content or support features such as comments, live chat, notifica-



tion bells, stories, and save to playlist. Searching for videos made for children on YouTube is now harder but important for the children's safety.

I teach third grade in a large church. We have 30 children on the roster, but there was an unfortunate inconsistency in the children's attendance on Sunday morning (due to illness or travel or sports). I may have 15 any given week and each week I may have different children.

Then came the very unfortunate challenge of Covid-19 shutting down everything in March. I am no longer working with children in person and things are on a long pause. I have had

to learn to do Sunday school and my storytelling as well through the Zoom platform.

What originally was intended to be a website to showcase teaching children to tell biblical stories and show how children can indeed learn a story and take great pleasure from telling to other children is now temporarily a site to just share videos of me telling a story.

I am grateful that during the pandemic I at least have this and can share it with other churches so they can send the link of the storytelling to their families. Several churches and friends have asked me for permission to show my videos to their Sunday school classes and I of course am thrilled and encourage them to do so.

Children are copy cats and they learn best by watching other kids. They are also little hams and so many of my students have begged, "Will you put this on YouTube?"



Tom Boomershine in his book *Story Journey* wrote, "There is a particular joy and delight when the storyteller is someone no one expects to be able to tell a story."

I have experienced that joy and delight in my work teaching biblical storytelling to children! Click on my blog (IntoTheirHearts.com) and see it for yourselves.



ACADEMY FOR BIBLICAL STORYTELLING



Dr. Tracy Radosevic, Dean

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Telling Difficult Stories in Difficult Times

An NBSI Scholar and Storyteller
Discussion on

Habakkuk

With Seminar Scholar Peter Perry, Ph.D.
and ABS Mini-Epic Habakkuk Storytellers

Editor's Note: Habakkuk was the Mini-Epic at the 2020 Virtual Festival Gathering. It was chosen before we knew this would be the year of a pandemic, but its references and challenges to us as the people of God are as timely today as they were then.

Q. For a short book of the Bible, Habakkuk provides a lot of punch! Criticism of existing culture and empires abounds. God's perceived goals and choices are scrutinized. It's not one of those "feel good" texts exactly and that makes it a challenge to analyze and perform. You've researched this piece, internalized it, performed it, and written about it. How do you approach learning a powerful book like this one?

A. I agree that Habakkuk is powerful for all the reasons you've listed. I'm partial to it, in part because I've invested time in it. But, to be honest, once I start to invest in almost any book in the Bible, I discover powerful stories that change lives. For me, the approach begins by seeing every book as stories about people's experiences of God and the joys and struggles of their lives.

I started studying Habakkuk because a colleague and friend, Dr. Jeanette Mathews, wrote a fine book called *Performing Habakkuk*, and I wanted to try to perform it and see what I could

learn from the preparation, internalization, and performance. Preparation means listening closely to the text and the stories it tells as well as listening to my audience and their stories. Next, I internalized the translation I prepared until I could share it naturally. Finally, I performed it for several different audiences. I included what I learned in my book *Insights from Performance Criticism*.

like and unlike other prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Like other prophets, he cries out about Judah's leaders perverting God's Instruction (Torah) and abusing the vulnerable.

More in a class with Job than other prophets, he also is angry with God, in this case for choosing the Babylonians to correct Judah's injustice (Chapter 1).



Q. Habakkuk isn't exactly a household name like Elijah or Jeremiah. What have you discerned about him from your scholarship?

A. Habakkuk trusts God, but not in stereotypically pious ways. He is

He shows us that faith is getting angry and not walking away. Habakkuk is angry and stands waiting for God's response, yet is open to hear what God has to say (Chapter 2). More like a composer for the Jerusalem Temple than a prophet, he sings a psalm

(Chapter 3) with a choir and instrumental accompaniment (!?) that calls on God as victorious cosmic warrior but also a protector of the vulnerable (3:13).

*You came forth to save your people,
to save your anointed.
You crushed the head of the
wicked house,
laying it bare
from foundation to roof.*

The ending is heartbreaking yet hopeful. As crops fail and the people face starvation (likely a result of both local leadership decisions as well as the Babylonian invaders), Habakkuk utters one of the most poignant expressions of trust (3:18-19).

*Though the fig tree
does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock
is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God
of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet
like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread
upon the heights.*

Q. Do you think there are connection points in this text between the “sins” present in the ancient world and situations we’re facing today?

A. One of the hardest aspects I found in trying to perform Habakkuk was to help modern audiences understand that there were two sets of injustices: local and international.

Most audiences hear “Chaldeans” and “the Man” (the Babylonians and their king, if the audience makes that connection) as the primary cause of injustice because they are explicitly

named (1:6). But the prophet begins with the failure of local Judean leaders tasked to do justice (1:2-4).

*O LORD,
how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence
are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment
comes forth perverted.*

God’s response to Habakkuk’s prayer is announcement of five woes, mostly against local leaders. These are familiar to us today: loan sharking, building luxury homes while people riot for lack of food and housing, using violence and threats of violence to keep order, encouraging drunken excess and blackmail, and idol worship.

I think once we more fully describe the ancient situation (the details of which are assumed by the author), the connection with our situation becomes obvious. Human nature and the tendency for the strong to exploit the weak hasn’t changed.

Q. Do you believe difficult texts like this benefit from a pre-performance explanation? If so, how would you handle that and what introduction would you use?

A. I think an introduction is essential to performing any Biblical traditions in all but a few cases. Two reasons: first, my experience is that most



audiences don’t deeply process the content as much as the emotion of a performance. An introduction helps frame central issues and trigger deeper processing.

Second, most audiences can benefit from an introduction even for familiar passages. Maybe an audience is familiar enough with the Sermon on the Mount that it needs no introduction, but I would guess that even a knowledgeable audience should be reminded that the Sermon on the Mount is presented as a typical teaching of Jesus given during a time that Jewish factions argued about how to remain distinctively and faithfully God’s people while pressured by the Romans. That larger context helps to explain the choices Matthew made (e.g., carrying a pack an extra mile). In contrast, most audiences won’t even know how to pronounce “Habakkuk” let alone know what the word “Chaldean” refers to. To overstate the point, I think to perform Habakkuk without an introduction guarantees an audience will miss the power of the book at best and misinterpret it at worst.

continued on page 18

In *Insights from Performance Criticism*, I suggested the following introduction. I have expanded it for some audiences, but still think it provides a good framework:

“I will be performing the book of the prophet Habakkuk, which is a small book in a collection of 12 prophetic writings at the end of what we call the Old Testament. Habakkuk was



a prophet around 600 BCE during a time of prosperity in Judah, which was the southern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Jerusalem. In this time of prosperity, the rich were becoming richer—and sometimes by using violence and threats of violence against each other. In the meantime, a tribe called the Chaldeans were gaining power in what is now modern Iraq. These Chaldeans would become the

leaders of the Babylonian empire that destroyed Jerusalem and its temple about 20 years after gaining power. So, imagine with me the prophet Habakkuk talking to God.”

Q. What ancient performance practices do you suggest modern storytellers be aware of and utilize as they perform this piece?

A. I’m not sure there’s one set of performance practices to know, but many. I think it is helpful to think of Roman, Greek, and Jewish practices as distinct but related, and perhaps think about embodiment and memory in each.

For example, it’s helpful to know that teachers in Jesus’ time stood while reading but sat while teaching (see Luke 4:20). Greeks and Romans stood while speaking in public places (see Acts 17:22).

Romans like Cicero and Quintilian taught that you shouldn’t be too emotional in your performance of a speech or text (“It’s not the theater!” they’d say), but it seems from the evidence that they really were emotional. (Roman men liked to think of themselves as self-controlled.)

Greeks and Romans had various ways to internalize a text, from the “memory palace” method of assigning sections of a text to rooms in an imaginary (or real) palace to the sheer repetition of a work until it could be repeated.

While it may seem daunting to learn about each culture’s performance practices, it is a good habit to remember

that performance is always embedded in a particular culture and learn about new cultures piece by piece. It’s a life-long adventure!

Q. Performing a piece like this is like handing the audience an atom bomb. Any closing thoughts on how to help the audience process what they’ve heard?

A. I think any performance of Biblical traditions will explode an audience’s preconceptions about that tradition, but you are right: the particular mix that is Habakkuk is volatile. Post-performance audience discussion is my preference, but not always possible. If there’s not time for an audience discussion, perhaps a handout or website could be given to prompt further questions and processing.

I think it’s interesting to ask these types of questions in whatever way you are able to connect with the audience after the performance:

CONTENT QUESTIONS:

- What was the situation in Habakkuk’s world?
- There were many people and kinds of people mentioned in the performance, not just Habakkuk and God! What other kinds of people were mentioned in the performance? Who did you identify with?
- What was God’s solution?
- What was Habakkuk’s response?
- How was the situation resolved (or not) in your mind?

EMOTION QUESTIONS:

- What emotions did you feel during the performance?
- How did you feel about Habakkuk’s feelings towards God?
- How did you feel about God’s response to Habakkuk?
- Was the ending of Habakkuk satisfying or not? Why or why not?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- What did you experience that fits our world today?
- How has this performance of Habakkuk changed how you think about God?
- How has this performance changed how you think about what's going on in the world?
- If national disaster was happening, could you say with Habakkuk, "yet I will rejoice in the Lord..." (3:18)? What for you makes that statement difficult?



Dr. Peter Perry is Pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church in Glendale, AZ, and Affiliate Assistant Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Phoenix, AZ. He is administrator for www.BiblicalPerformanceCriticism.org and a member of the steering committees of Performance Criticism of the Bible and Other Ancient Texts and the Biblical Performance Criticism Networking Group for Annual Society of Biblical Literature Meetings. He is author of *The Rhetoric of Digressions: Revelation 7:1-17 and 10:1-11:13 and Ancient Communication* (2009), *Brushing Up English to Learn Greek* (2014), and *Insights from Performance Criticism* (2016).

From the Storytellers in the Mini-Epic of Habakkuk

"I could so resonate with the prophet wondering aloud how God could use those who are perceived to be evil as a solution to an issue or problem he has with us or the world. I wondered who "the Chaldeans" of our day might be? Who seems to run roughshod over others in some pretty brutal ways and why does God allow them to triumph over "those more righteous than they are?" The list was long: Antifa, white supremacist factions, violent destructive looters of no particular affiliation, Boko Haram and other blatantly terrorist entities, leaders who use their power to crush their people such as the Jung family of Korea, computer hackers who steal identities and lives, the coronavirus, and the list went on.

I was working on the pericope in the early days after George Floyd's death when the news was showing righteous indignation turned ugly and hateful. Innocent business owners (regardless of their skin color) terrorized and traumatized as they saw their life's work go up in flames. Good police smeared with the same spittle and injured by the same rocks meant for the bad ones (not that I think that is a good way to seek reform or justice). Anyway, it was easy to imagine Habakkuk's horror. And it was easy to judge the perpetrators of these and other heinous acts and cry "foul" as Habakkuk did about the Chaldeans. I wept as I saw these images in my mind and cried out to God, WHY????"

Holly Younghans

In preparing to tell the opening chapter of Habakkuk, I spent some time reflecting on how we respond to threats. The first verses are the prophet pleading to God for help in the midst of threat, but when God replies it isn't comfort, but the threat now seems to come from God! There is a range of

emotions possible, not only among different people but also within a single person. I tried to capture some of this range in my telling, rather than having a consistent posture (pleading, fearful, angry, desperate, entitled, coaxing). I created space and time for a variety of things to be felt.

In these times when we feel the threats around us, it is good to be reminded that we might not always be in the right, and even so, to trust that God is in our midst; and to remember the path from despair to hope, from accusation to confession, found so often in prophets and psalms."

Lori Ruge-Jones

"With so many dark things going on in the world now, I felt Habakkuk's prayer on a deep, personal level: how in the world can I still praise God when all this is going on?

I can see Habakkuk being used in congregations, especially in a Bible study setting, where we look at what the prophet was seeing and see how the injustices he was calling out are very similar to what is going on today. I can see it also being used in a storytelling performance with a discussion afterwards to get ideas on what the congregation can do to work for justice in their community."

Tonya Eza

"When I think about how the text mirrored life today, I found myself reflecting a great deal on the ways in which injustice is timeless. For me, it was incredibly meaningful to meditate on the ways in which the faithful response of God's people has always been to pay attention to how God is at work redeeming and repairing the world. I take heart from the knowledge that we have been where we are now before, and that God has and always will be with God's people, especially with the suffering, and that their voices are not silent in the scriptural witness, but cry out (then and now) to be heard."

Sarah Weisiger

NBSI Author Spotlight

NBSI Member, 2020 Keynote Speaker, and Seminar Scholar Sarah Agnew

The title of my book, *Embodied Performance*, relates to Embodied Performance Analysis, the new method for interpreting the Bible that I introduce, and more generally to our practice as biblical storytellers and the people of God, embodying the Story of God with our lived enactment of it.

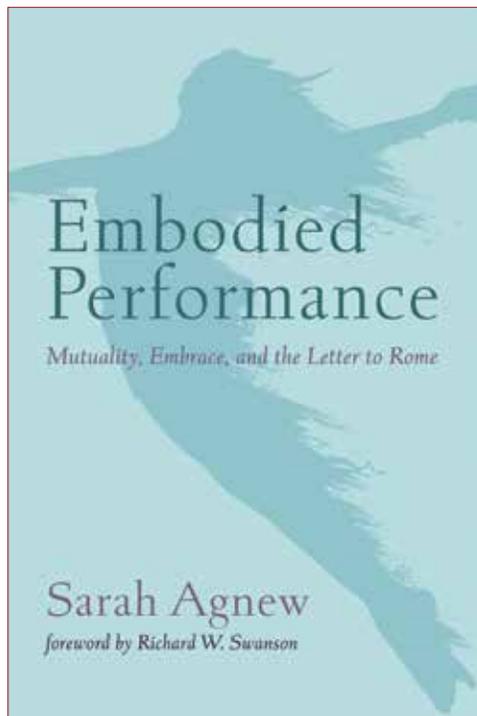
Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) has a goal of recovering the performance elements of biblical compositions, inherent in them from their formation. That means scholars in the field are most often interested in understanding the earliest audiences and performers of the biblical compositions. Scholars may or may not use performance today, their own or another's, and even when seeking to bring the compositions alive for audiences today, are usually doing so with a keen eye back to what that tells us of the history.

My practice as a storyteller was showing me that when I inhabited the compositions, something profound was happening in interpretation. As a ministry practitioner, my pastoral focus is always what does this mean for you, my people, and the stories you are living? So I wanted to pay attention to what the act of performing the Bible gives us as a means of interpretation.

Much of the methodology I saw in BPC was an adaptation of an existing method, most often Narrative Criticism, to understand the meaning, and then using performance to communicate the interpretation. As a scholar, as I had observed the act of internalising or embodying and performing a composition as a means of interpreting it, I wanted to explore the possibility of a methodology that put the embodying and performing of the Bible first, to

take seriously the impact that has on an interpreter who makes meaning as an integrated, holistic, human being with emotion, physicality, spirituality, and relationships.

I inherited a scholarly reticence to allow my self to be visible and impactful on the work of interpretation. There's a practice of naming our "bias" at the



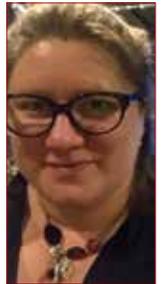
outset of interpretive work. For instance, I would state that I am a white, Australian, educated, clergy, female, so that people understand the lenses that might prohibit me from seeing and naming other perspectives—then put that to the side as much as possible to claim a rational and objective commentary.

It will take some time for scholars to accept and embrace the value of their embodied interpretations, and to allow those insights to speak as much as the archeological, historical, analytical insights. Mine is not the first method

that seeks to hear from the interpreter: Reader Response is reasonably established now, as is auto-ethnography. One discovery I made was the profound way that silence can speak—which paradoxically we then fill in by describing what we "heard" in the silence! Embodied Performance not only gives voice, but allows for the framing and experiencing of silence.

The book presents the story of why I sought to develop a new method, and takes two chapters to overview the field of Biblical Performance Criticism as I found it, and what I did not find that I was looking for. I present inter-disciplinary insights into how we interpret or make meaning through our physicality, emotions, and with our audiences/communities. I introduce body, emotion, and audience as the three tools of the method, and how I employ them in the work of interpretation. I also introduce the process of Embodied Performance Analysis as Preparation, Performance, and Critical Reflection and include an application of the process with an Embodied Performance Analysis of Romans, including the Performed Interpretation as a recording available on my website.

I want storytellers to be encouraged to pay attention to the way they are making meaning of biblical compositions through their internalising and performing of them. Readers will gain an overview of the field of Biblical Performance Criticism, and some new insights into the letter to Rome through my embodied performance and reflection of it.



The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Storytelling

By Joyce Elaine Gill Johnson

After telling a long biblical story, followed by performance of a creative parallel story during the Proclamation of the Word, I was asked during a talk-back session to describe my stated importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in my story-preparation, story-learning, and story-performance process.

Scripture reveals the gifted role of the Spirit in inspiring and engaging storied episodes. As early as the Genesis creation story, “a wind [ruah] from God [spirit of God] swept over the face of the waters” (1:2). Then using the image of “inbreathing” [napah], the gift of breath was given that we may actually voice and live out God’s story. When Jesus said in John 6:63, “It is the spirit that gives life; . . .” he renewed the eternal essence of this gift of breath.

To begin his storied life of ministry, Jesus receives an immersing spiritual identity. As Jesus came up out of the baptismal water, the booming voice of God sounded, identifying him as the Beloved Son. With the Spirit descending upon him like a heavenly dove, there is a sense of being anointed to perform the transforming works of his call to ministry.

I envision my calling as a performer of biblical stories in a setting similar to that with Jesus and the disciples after Jesus’ glorious resurrection. Jesus comes in a quiet hour of the day with a sincere and gentle greeting of peace. Jesus’ voice is reassuring, as one is sent with purpose only after receiving the warm breath of the Holy Spirit. A purpose underlying receiving such power is being sent to “proclaim,” to proclaim stories of the mighty acts of God.

Proclamation is a manifested gift of the Spirit. With Christ’s breathed Spirit within, I am empowered to incarnate or embody and share vocally from memory the living and active Word of God to pierce the minds and hearts of listeners.

The promise to be baptized with the Spirit is fulfilled on that Pentecostal day in Acts. The believers gathered and were jolted by tongues of fire and the sound of a rushing violent wind. This “blew them away” with awe, as they “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” We have the assurance of the presence of the Spirit of truth.

Biblical stories speak to us in other languages. Therefore, I begin with hearing the chosen story in my English language. I am moved by feelings deep within the internal human heart based on sounds. As I voice the diverse sounds of a story repeatedly, there is an opportunity to play with the use of volume, tempo, pitch, and tone and to allow an imaginative visualization of time and place. As I tune in to counseling from the inner spirit, I open to what the story is saying on its own terms. The gift of the secret and hidden wisdom of God is active in this process. It is comforting and reassuring to know that the mind of Christ is at work in demonstration of the Spirit’s power in me as an agent of the Word.

When the Spirit led Jesus into a wilderness experience of intense prayer and fasting, He responded to the challenges with recitation of internalized and heartfelt words of Scripture. The Holy Spirit still leads in unlocking the mysteries of a biblical story when we

are consistent in praise and worship, prayer, meditation, and in-depth study.

There are multiple possibilities for interpretation of an ancient story and these help answer the question of how to tell the story in ways that grab the attention and creative imagination of a contemporary cultural audience looking for meaning in their own lives. Also important is an understanding of how the story was heard and experienced as it was performed in an ancient setting. As our spiritual comforter, counselor, and teacher, the Holy Spirit is the influential power in the use of performance criticism and experiential exegesis to discern cultural differences and similarities. Storytellers then make appropriate applications of how to tell the story in real time.

My in-depth learning and engaging performance of a biblical story from memory is based on my dependence on the role of the Holy Spirit. Prayerfully, I open a performance silently with “Come Holy Spirit!” I am led by the Spirit, immersed in the spiritual fruit of faithfulness to my love of God’s story and patience with the biblical storytelling process that becomes a mirror of visions into the heart of my own personal life story.

Joyce is a Master Certified Biblical Storyteller. She leads Scripture-by-Heart with her congregation in Indianapolis and is co-presenter of Biblical Storytelling workshops at Indiana Women’s Prison. Joyce has a DMin and is author of *Sowing Stories Deep in the Soul: Biblical Storytelling with Adolescent Women*.



Story Squares: A Biblical Storytelling Game

by Master Certified Biblical Storyteller Janice Kim

This game wakes up the biblical stories that sleep in our hearts.

Nine word cards are displayed in front of approx 6-12 players and a game leader. All of these words are included in the stories of the four Gospel books (NRSV). Players come up with one story using two word cards among the displayed nine word cards. When a

player recalls a story which includes two of the nine words, that player shouts their name to answer. This player then tells a rough plot of the story using the two words, and says the related Bible book name. The game leader verifies their answer using the 'Answer Book'. If the said answer is right, then, the player can get those two cards. The game leader fills in two new word cards as long as there are any remaining cards until the game ends. The game package includes the following: 50 word cards packed in a box, "Story Squares Answer Book," and "Playing Guide and Rules." To play this game with your friends contact Janicekim2010@gmail.com.



American Sign Language and Biblical Storytelling

A new website by Master Certified Biblical Storyteller Liz Bidgood

Growing up, I attended a school that was a magnet for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. To communicate with kids at lunch and recess, I learned some basic American Sign Language (ASL). Since then, I have continued to learn and grow in understanding and fluency. Now, I have a website with videos, written commentaries, and tips for those who want to explore incorporating ASL into their storytelling: <https://pastor515.wixsite.com/website>. It will help you learn about connections between ASL and biblical storytelling, develop skills for storytelling based on ASL (including learning some signs), and reflect on how a person's storytelling is affected by the intentional physical choices he or she makes.

Like learning other languages, understanding connections between signs

is a way to explore deeper meanings within the text. For example, in ASL, the sign for clean is nearly identical to signs for holy, forgive, excuse, and apology. When preparing to use one of these words to tell a story, these signs challenge me to consider how they are related and where subtleties create differences.

It is important to note that sign languages are specific to countries. ASL signs may not be similar to what deaf people in other areas may use. In addition, just as there are regional differences in the ways people speak, there are variations of ASL signs.

My posts on the website explore the connections and contrasts between biblical storytelling with traditions of ASL storytelling. Those who tell in spoken forms are invited to learn from

the wisdom of deaf storytellers who have used stories to entertain, educate, and transmit culture. Signing involves far more than conveying words or concepts with one's hands. Nonverbal communication reveals emotion, subtleties, humor, contradictions, and other nuances that give life to a story. Visual vernacular is a particular way of telling a story using iconic signs, drama, strong movement, and intentional visual complexity.

The website will teach you a little ASL and help you develop awareness and inclusion of broader audiences such as those who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, or not fluent in English.



“Refusing to Pretend”

Book Review by Cynthia Park, LPC, PhD

Reviewer’s Note: A six-part video companion is also available as an in-home bereavement resource. References to the video series in this review are indicated “V.1 — V.6”.

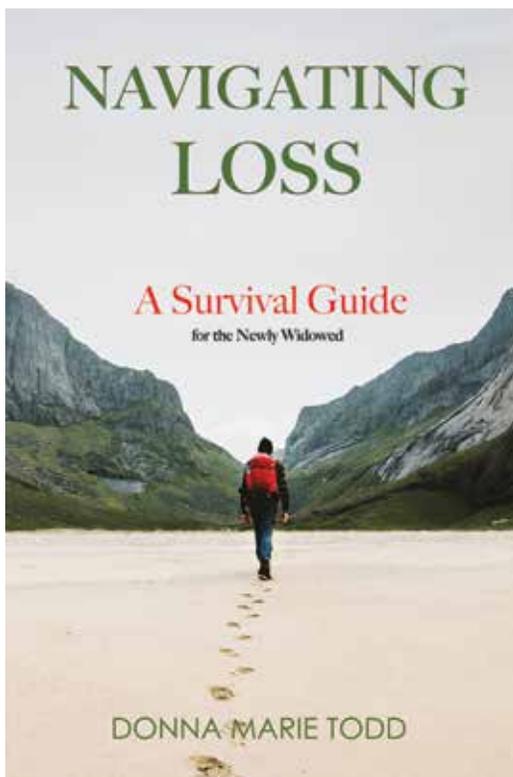
Anthropologist Margaret Mead observed:

“When a person is born we rejoice, and when they’re married we jubilate, but when they die we try to pretend nothing has happened.”

Mead’s observation fails to provide an interpretation. We aren’t denying something has happened, as much as we are aware of the frailty death exposes in us, and fearful that one more “real” moment might suffocate us.

Todd recognizes this vulnerability. She writes, “When my husband died, my brains fell out. I found myself in a vast, desolate inner landscape I now call ‘gone’...a dark constant quiet moved into our house and refused to leave (15, 16).” Her candid description of her emotional and mental states when her husband Perrin died resonated deeply. So, I borrowed her words to comfort others, and to allow grief’s literal dead weight to crack the cara-

paces that loss had formed over my own heart. Her compassion extends to offering short chapter lengths with discrete responses to death’s trigger.



The accompanying videos offer her personal encouragement and the soothing addition of soft vocals and guided meditations (V.1, V.6).

All are part of shaping the new identity of a suddenly single person who just moments before had been inextricably partnered to another. New patterns are difficult to make, but essential to rebuilding one’s life (V. 6).

Besides the practical domestic aspects are the practical social truths confronting the bereaved. “No matter how hard your partner’s death was or how much they suffered, it’s not about them now. They

had their life, and they had their death (71).” In “A Guaranteed Way to Make Good Decisions”, Todd suggests we “... identify the goal you want to reach with each choice (77)” — essential for everything from how to spend money to how to find new hobbies.



She acknowledges the “both/and” aspect of widowhood. Though many moments are solely dedicated to memorializing the dead, many more must be about recovering a future for the survivor from the remains of previously shared plans. Todd’s crumbs-trail offers a clear promise that, although we will never be the same, we will live. The “gone” that moved in and refused to leave will eventually be reabsorbed into our wellness ecosystem where heartache is balanced by proximity to joy and hope.

Todd realistically observes that only we can initiate this journey. “Caring for your grief is a lot like cleaning your house. If you wait for your home to clean itself, you’ll soon be living in filth (96).”

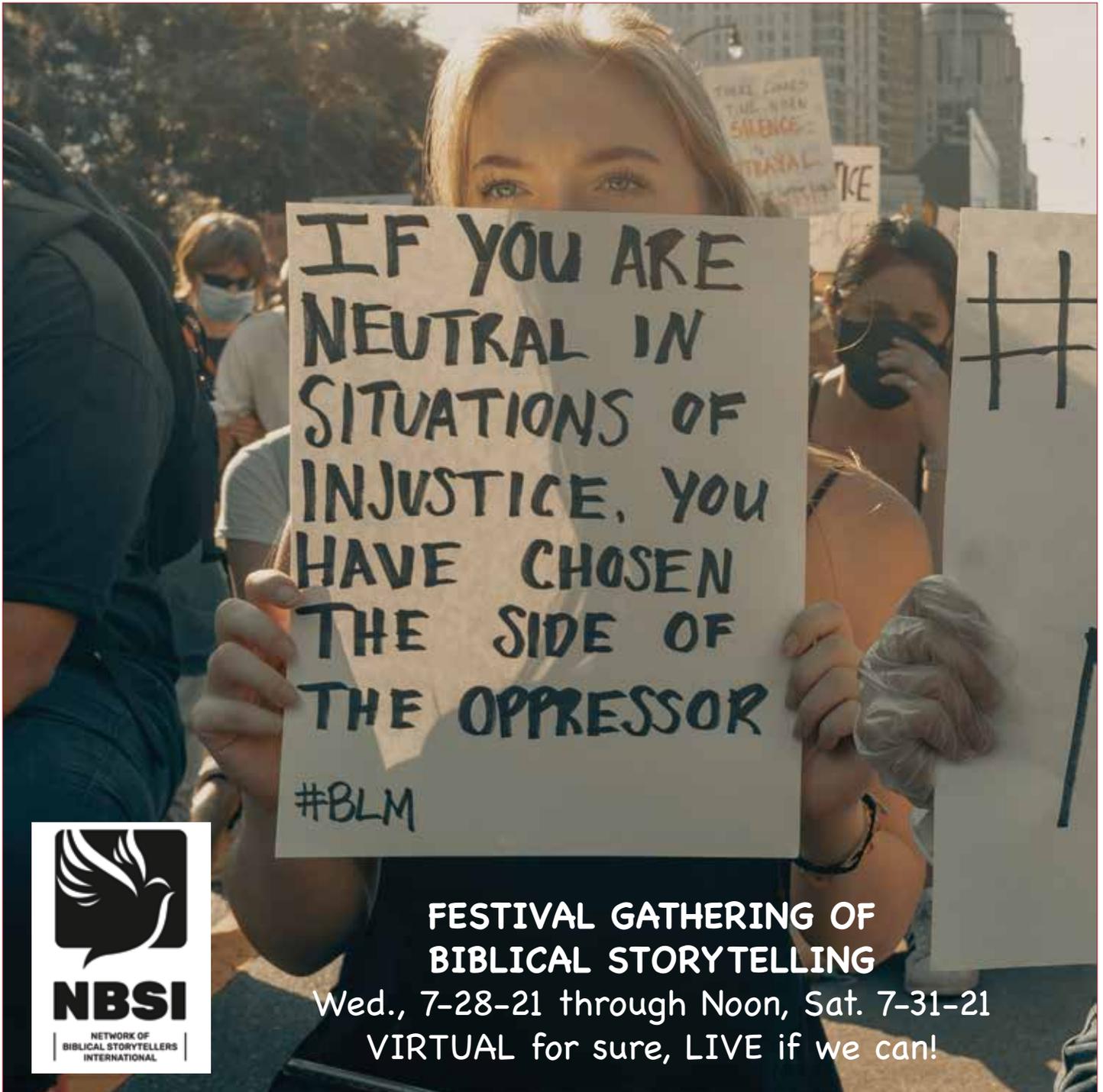
For widowed persons, having this book and companion videos at hand is like opening the door to someone who has arrived to help, armed with a bucket and a mop.

To order the Navigating Loss in-home bereavement resource (book and video program), visit www.AWidowsTale.com. The book is available from your local bookseller or Amazon.



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