

# ONE



## THERE'S A STORY

*"But..." Harry raised his hand instinctively toward the lightning scar. It did not seem to be there. "But I should have died—I didn't defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!"*

*"And that," said Dumbledore, "will, I think, have made all the difference."<sup>1</sup>*

**W**e never could understand those groups of Christians who were filled with vitriol against the Harry Potter series. For one thing, the books are awesome and everyone should read them. For another, they're blatant Christian allegory. J.K. Rowling didn't speak much on the Christian parallels (even when she was being attacked for encouraging witchcraft by people who couldn't distinguish fantasy from reality) because she didn't want to spoil the direction of the series for those who hadn't already caught on. A story about a boy who's special, who fights an evil that wishes to put others down and subjugate the world, who finds strength in friendship and who ultimately (spoiler alert) sacrifices his own life for the sake of his world, and then comes back from the dead in triumph: how do Christians read that and not go, "that sounds familiar"?

Rowling is drawing on the sacred story of Jesus, and she's in good company. The messiah figure gets reimaged as Aslan of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Frodo from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman, Joss Whedon's Buffy, and even Steven Spielberg's

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1. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 703.

*E.T.* Why does this story get retold and remade so many times and ways? Simple: it's a really good story.

The story of Jesus' life and ministry, combined with the mystery of his death and resurrection, has provided the powerful narrative foundation of many stories for the past two millennia. Jesus himself was shaped by the story of the Hebrew people from creation to kingdom to exile to looking forward for hope in the future. And of course he told stories all the time to get his message across—that's all parables are: stories. As our professional storytelling friends say, the story form is one of the oldest and best ways to communicate meaning.

We are drawn to sacred stories because they tell us about God *and* about ourselves—who we are and why we are here. When we engage the stories from our faith traditions, we discover what our ancestors in the faith had to say about the big questions of life. We also dare to believe we can see a glimpse of what God has to say about those questions. This is true of every tradition's sacred text. While we talk about the Bible, including both the Old and New Testaments, the practices and the ideas behind them apply to most scripture, whether you read the Quran, the Vedas, or the Torah. Because the text is sacred (and in our Reformed Christian tradition, because we believe the Holy Spirit is a part of our reading, interpreting, and understanding), when we read or hear the stories of our faith, we might be blessed with an “aha” moment, a moment where it feels as though the Holy One has reached out and whispered “psst, this part is for you.” Suddenly, our life is woven into the narrative of God and God's people. The joys feel brighter and the sorrows are accompanied by a compassionate community, and because it's sacred, because the living God is at work through this tapestry of heroes and heroines, failures and triumphs, lessons and mysteries, there's always another thread we can follow. Any given story can speak to you in myriad ways, depending on where you are and how the Holy is reaching out to you.

The simplest way to engage the sacred stories is to read. Yup, read. But remember, while we said it was simple, it's certainly not easy. Let's be honest: as much as we love scripture (and we do; we're big Bible dorks), we get bored or distracted or even fall asleep while trying to read about all those things God told the Israelites via Moses. Sometimes it feels like we're reading a classic book that everyone says is good, and we know it probably *is* good, but the language and the pace and whatever else just makes us want to put it down and head for the nearest guilty pleasure. In many ways, our sacred scripture is a classic; but it is also more. *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Canterbury Tales* all have meaning to convey, just like the Bible (and all have made people fall asleep while trying to read them, just like

the Bible). But such classics have not had hundreds of millions of people throughout time and across cultures coming to their pages seeking direction, understanding, and hope. We believe that while the Holy certainly can and does speak through secular material, there is something unique about our sacred texts. As such, the scriptures of our faith traditions deserve our attention and our open spirits, even if they can occasionally induce either yawns or horrified glares!

Part of the challenge in reading sacred texts is that they're usually so *long*. Many people think of the Bible as one book, but it's not; it's a library of books. You've got history, mythology, poetry, allegory, genealogy, wisdom sayings, letters, and gospels, plus rewrites and sequels. You have stories that have gone from oral tradition to written word, and many are words the authors wouldn't have expected to be read, let alone considered holy, thousands of years later. You have blood and guts, betrayal and heroics, politics and sex. You've got tragedy, and yes, even comedy.

The first step in reading the Bible is getting a translation that works for you. You may have grown up believing there's only one version of the Bible: that good ol' King James. The King James translation has some merit, but mostly because it sounds pretty and Shakespeare-esque. Most of us don't use *thees* and *thous* anymore, so reading stories from another time and culture in a version of our language we don't speak anymore seems to us to be more of a barrier than anything else. What translation do we recommend, then? It depends on what you're looking for.

The New Revised Standard Version, which is what we're using in this book, is your best basic translation. The translators tried to be faithful to the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic while making some adjustments for a modern audience. This translation is also a good one to choose because you can get it in a few fantastic study editions. The Harper Collins, the New Interpreters', and the New Oxford study Bible all have great introductions to give you the context for each book, and commentaries for the text that help to clarify confusing bits. The newly translated Common English Bible is another great basic translation with a bit more of a modern spin than the NRSV. Other folks we know enjoy Today's New International Version, the New Jerusalem Bible, and the New American Bible, Revised Edition (lots of new in there!). If you're interested in paraphrases, check out *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. It's an easy read and sticks fairly close to the original meaning of the texts. If you're willing to go out even further, you can pick up *Word on the Street* by Rob Lacey. This paraphrase doesn't cover the whole Bible (Lacey skips over big chunks), and it definitely includes some artistic license in its interpretation. Still, it's a gorgeous piece of literature and makes the text come alive. If you do pick out a paraphrase,

we also encourage you to have one of the basic translations nearby. Read a story in the standard translation and then in the paraphrase.

Got a translation you like? Excellent. Now get to reading. Look for the voice of God in the text. Maybe you've been reading the Bible for years. Maybe you have favorite stories from childhood you'll pick up and read every now and again. Maybe your familiarity with this sacred text goes no further than Googling John 3:16 after seeing it plastered on an

Get to reading!

NFL player's face or on the bumper of a car that just cut you off in traffic. Wherever you find yourself, from biblical neophyte to scholar, we hope the following offers some ways to enhance your reading.

You can do what Amy did as a kid, start at Genesis and read until you get tired, then pick up where you left off the next day. If you do decide to start at the beginning and work your way through until the end, be forewarned: parts of Exodus get really, really dull. So dull that Amy never quite made it past those sections and rather than skipping over to something more interesting, she went back to *In the beginning* and started the whole process over.

A friend of ours also tried to start at the beginning and work her way through, and got bored at that same section of Exodus. Instead of returning to the beginning, she skipped ahead, and then just skipped around until she found herself in the Psalms. She wanted to read the Bible "right" but wasn't sure if she was...and then she came to Psalm 139. Something about this psalm was right for her in that moment. She felt God's presence with her as she read, a presence so wonderful and powerful it moved her to tears. That was the only time she read scripture during that week, thanks to life's busyness and all, but she kept going back to that moment and that feeling during her hectic week. She knew peace and she knew God. Sounds to us like she got this reading the Bible thing "right" after all.

If you need something a little more disciplined than skipping around and a little less daunting than starting at the beginning and reading until the end, try picking a book of the Bible and reading a chapter a day. Just one chapter from one book. That way, when the boring parts get particularly dull, you know you've only got a little bit to read that day. There are also books and websites dedicated to dividing scripture into sections so you can read the whole bible in a year, three months, and even 30 days. If you'd like to read the entirety of the Bible, following a set guide would probably help your discipline.

Another great tool for becoming exposed to all the wonderful and (sometimes) weird things the Bible has to offer is the lectionary. *The what?* you ask. The lectionary is a listing of different scriptures that have been

appointed for certain days. There's the Revised Common Lectionary, which many Protestant denominations follow. It sets a three-year cycle of scripture readings for each Sunday and festival day. Take it upon yourself to read the scripture appointed for each Sunday during the week, and over the course of three years, you'll be exposed to a great deal of the biblical text. You can also follow the daily lectionary, which is just what it sounds like: texts for each day. There's not one particular daily lectionary most denominations follow; pick one and just stick with it. Where do you find these lectionary lists? You can buy a lectionary book or calendar, or you can just do what we do—Google the word *lectionary*. Different options will pop up, and you can decide which you want to use. Some church or denomination websites also list the day's lectionary readings, often along with prayers or meditations to help you as you read.

While you're reading scripture, take note of particular verses that stand out to you. Ignore what librarians everywhere have told you, and go ahead and underline verses or passages that grab your attention (as long as you're using a Bible that belongs to you). You might even take to memorizing your favorite lines. Yes, that does seem a little old-school, even to us, but it also makes sense. Many of us have favorite song lyrics or movie quotes available for instant recall; why not favorite Bible verses? No, we are not advocating having different parts of scripture memorized so you can transform into a bible-quoting, holier-than-thou pain in the neck. Don't ever use sacred stories to put someone else down; use them to build yourself and your community up. Having a really crappy day, week, year? Maybe knowing by heart the words "weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Ps. 30:5) will help you get through the tougher moments. Feeling like nothing you do is good enough and failure is your middle name? Call to mind the words of Paul: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39). Okay, that one's kinda long, but it's also really good. We all need that reminder every now and again that nothing and no one can separate us from the love of God.

## LEARNING HOW TO READ

Thanks to the massive amounts of homework and assigned reading most of us have been given over our school years, many of us have had to become masters of the art of speed reading: skim a section for its main ideas, and if anything looks particularly interesting or involved, spend time reading each word and sentence. Otherwise, just keep skimming while you

absorb the main message/meaning of the piece. Sure, you miss out on clever turns of phrase and interesting tidbits, but you get the thing read in time to write your essay or pass the test. The trouble comes when we read our sacred stories the same way we learned how to read for school. Much meaning is found in those turns of phrase and tidbits. When we skim our scriptures, we may miss out on the conversation God is trying to have with us through the text.

We need to learn to read again if we're going to enjoy a sacred text to its fullest. It may take a little longer than skimming, but it's worth the investment. Enter *Lectio Divina*. While the four stages of this practice were formally written by John of the Cross in the 16th century, variations on divine or spiritual reading (which is what *Lectio Divina* means in Latin) have popped up in writings since the time of Origen in the 3rd century. In other words, this practice has been going on way longer than speed reading. The resurgence of its use today can probably be attributed to a variety of reasons, from frustration over all the historical and literary criticism encouraged in biblical reading, to a countercultural desire to slow down. By reading or hearing scripture without an agenda other than to be open to the Spirit, we free ourselves up for the movement of the Spirit and the surprises she may have in store for us.

The four stages of *Lectio Divina* are fairly simple. You read, meditate, express yourself to God, and rest in the Spirit. The passage you read should probably be a short one, no more than a few verses long. You might use part of a psalm or even just a line of Jesus' teachings. Once you have your passage, take a few centering breaths, and then begin.

*LECTIO* (READ). Read the passage slowly. Do not rush to get to the end. Take the time to read each and every word, letting each word sink down deep into your bones. Do not try to discern a meaning; don't worry about historical or literary context. Just read. Once you've read the passage through, pause for a moment, and then read it again. This time, read the words and note which word or phrase speaks to you. Is there a word that bothers you, a phrase that resonates with you?

*MEDITATIO* (MEDITATE). Let your mind ruminate over your word or phrase. Do images come to mind? Stories? What about memories? Sit for a while and let the Spirit move through the word or phrase. What might she be trying to say to you? What might this word mean for you in this moment, in this place? What might God be asking of you?

*ORATIO* (SPEAK). As you come to a sense of understanding, as the meaning this passage holds for you in this moment becomes clear (or even just a bit more in focus), lift your thoughts up to God. What do you want to express? Do you have any positive or negative reactions to what you've heard through your reading and meditating? Whether you wish to praise or pick a fight, be honest with God.

*CONTEMPLATIO* (CONTEMPLATE). Once you've offered your thoughts and feelings to the divine, rest. Simply be in God's presence for a while. Perhaps the divine voice will speak to you; perhaps you'll just enjoy the silence.

If you'd like to try this practice with a group of friends (it's a great practice for a small group), start by having one person read the passage out loud. Once you've read it through, have another person read the same passage. Listen as a group for the words or phrases that touch you individually. Reflect for a moment or two, and then share what you've each heard. As you share and listen, do not try to correct what anyone hears. Remember, the Holy One can speak through the same words in a variety of ways. Read the passage out loud again, and give yourself another few moments of reflection. Now share with each other your reactions to what you've personally heard from God. Once you've shared, spend time in individual contemplation. The person who first read may close with a small prayer after a few minutes of rest.

### MEANT FOR THE STAGE

Not all of us are actors. We don't all particularly enjoy the limelight. So for those of us who dread the thought of lines and costumes and marks, this next practice may be a stretch—but hopefully, it'll be a good one. At the very least, it'll help you appreciate how the early Hebrew people and the first followers of Christ knew the sacred stories we share. The literacy rate in the ancient world was never high, and many of our written stories were first communicated orally. Even the works that were written down would have been read aloud. This suggests to us that if we only ever read scripture silently, never hearing it or even acting it out, then we're missing something.

To start out, simply grab a friend and take turns reading out loud to each other. That may sound a little strange, and it is at first. But once

you get past the “this is sorta weird” self-conscious stuff, you’re open to a rich experience. You can read any sacred text out loud, but the stories are probably the best place to start. Read from one of the Gospels or from the histories of Israel. Have one person read out loud while the other throws in appropriate sound effects. Just know, as you read through scripture this way, you might come across stories you’ve never noticed before (even if you think you’ve read the whole Bible).

Remember that story about Amy getting stuck in the book of Exodus? Turns out she never quite read through the whole thing until much, much later. It was spring semester, our third year of seminary. Graduation was mere weeks away. The assignment was to read the entire book of Acts in one sitting, so your intrepid authors took a seat on Teri’s couch and proceeded to read aloud just as we’ve described, taking turns reading and providing sound effects. When we reached chapter 10, Teri began to read of Peter’s vision of a sheet covered in animals. She soon noticed, however, that no appropriate sound effects were forthcoming, but she continued to read. About halfway through the story, Amy grabbed the Bible from Teri’s hands and loudly proclaimed, “You are making that up! That is *not* in the Bible.” Then she looked down to find that it was, in fact, in the Bible, at which point she sheepishly handed the book back and continued her sound-effects job.

Even though she could have sworn she’d read the whole dang thing by that point in her life, Amy discovered that some things hadn’t registered during her reading (she was probably speed-reading, after all). It took hearing the Bible out loud to both learn and appreciate that story (which has since become a favorite).

If you don’t have a friend that you think would be up for this practice, you can look into audiobook Bibles. Try *The Bible Experience* published by Zondervan; among other stellar actors, Samuel L. Jackson joins the project as the voice of God. Yeah, you read that right. Samuel L. mother-bleeping Jackson as God. That’s just worth a listen, spiritual practice or not!

If you’ve tried reading out loud, experiment next with acting. Grab some props, costumes, and whatever else you think will enhance your fun and focus. We’ve acted out sacred stories several times, and were highly entertained each and every time. When you’re going for the whole enchilada, it helps to pick a passage that will make you laugh (so the passion of Christ is probably out; the bloody fight scenes from Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings are particularly good). Because, let’s face it, you’re being a teeny bit silly. And that’s awesome. One friend of ours, dressed up with sword and crown, noted the similarities to this practice

and some of the more ridiculous things he'd done as a church kid, stating, "Holy Youth Group Flashback, Batman!"<sup>2</sup> We were acting out the story of Jezebel and Ahab wherein the royal couple steal some land by murdering the rightful owner, and get a serious comeuppance (dogs licking up blood is involved—rather gross, but really amusing when the dog in your dramatized version is a fluffy toy poodle).<sup>3</sup> Some people might say that by engaging scripture in such a way, you remove its gravitas. We're fine with that. People have made Scripture feel so far removed from us, and from the entertaining and the silly, it's as though it can only be read or spoken in a very serious voice. If acting out stories and laughing while you do makes the sacred stories just a little more relatable and real, then we say it's a worthwhile spiritual practice.

### EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED, AND EVERYONE CAN TELL A STORY

Back in the day (that'd be a pre-Gutenberg press day), biblical manuscripts wouldn't be as plain and text-centric as they are now. You'd have decorated borders, illustrations, and symbols everywhere. Letters at the beginning of paragraphs and sentences would be enlarged and embellished. The *Book of Kells* is one of the most well-known and well-preserved examples of an illuminated manuscript, and its art seems to influence tattoo designs all over. Monks who spent much of their lives copying holy words added these illustrations and flourishes, not just out of boredom or demand, but as a way to artistically reflect on the sacred stories being written. When we got the printing press, we gained access to the written word but we lost this spiritual practice.

To begin exploring the connection between art and sacred words, pick a passage and read through it a few times. In a similar vein to the *Lectio Divina* process, note which verse, phrase, or even just one word stands out to you the most. Take that verse and write it out on a piece of paper. Now, start doodling. Yes, doodling. Add flourish to the letters, if you like. Let your pen or pencil dance across the paper; feel what the scripture may be inspiring you to draw. You don't have to be an artist, or even an art-lover, to find this practice enriching. Neither of your authors can draw her way out of a paper bag, and yet we both enjoy a good doodle. Try writing your verse again, this time with artistic intent. What happens when you let each word find its own space and structure? What calls out to you from each

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2. Joshua Dubinsky-Nabor. Staunton, Virginia. 9/8/08.

3. 1 Kings 21-22

word, each phrase? You may find as you draw that you discern deep meaning through your doodles. Or at the very least, you may find that you sense a connection to the artist God whose strange and wonderful creations include the okapi and the platypus.

Another creative way to engage scripture stems from ancient Jewish practice. While it may be seen as sacrilegious by some today, over the ages it has been a common practice to embellish on the sacred stories passed down to us. Fleshing out stories in our biblical canon, or even adding stories to fill in

Try writing  
some biblical  
fan fiction.

gaps, is known as *midrash* in the Jewish tradition. The writer of a *midrash* is trying to understand a sacred story better by imagining fuller background for a briefly-mentioned character, or a piece of action that seems to be missing in the story as written. A few lines of scripture can become a long dialogue; a nameless woman can get both a name and a story of her own. That's right, *midrash* is the most ancient form of fan fiction!

Try writing your own form of *midrash*, (or biblical fan fiction if you prefer). Find a story in the Bible you enjoy, one that's perhaps even very familiar to you. Now examine that story. Where might you expand? Is there a brief exchange between characters you could lengthen? What would they say? Or imagine yourself to be a character in that story (mentioned by name or just as a member of the faceless crowd). Reflect on the story from your character's perspective. What do you learn? What comes alive for you? Now think about what you've written. How might the Spirit be speaking to you through your own words as you have reflected on these sacred words?

*"I love to tell the story;  
'tis pleasant to repeat  
what seems, each time I tell it,  
more wonderfully sweet."*

—FROM THE HYMN I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY,  
WORDS BY KATHERINE HANKEY

We are a story people. We bond over stories. We weep over them. We laugh over them. We live in and through them. We are shaped by them even as we shape them. The sacred stories we have been given are rich with meaning to be discovered and lived out. We have been given a really, really good narrative about God and the unfailing, uncompromising love the Divine One has for us. So go, live these stories out. Spend time with them.

Be encouraged and even challenged by them. Whatever you do, however you choose to engage scripture, do not let it remain only words on a page. Let the Spirit bring you to life even as she brings the scriptures to life for you and in you.



### *GOING TO PRACTICE*

Pick a scripture passage. A favorite, one from the lectionary, something from a randomly-opened page, it doesn't matter. Write the passage out with colored markers. Use one color for people, one for places, one for verbs, one for inanimate objects, one for adjectives and adverbs. Does anything stand out to you? Is the passage verb-heavy, noun-heavy, object-heavy? If words are repeated, circle them. Now read the passage, one part of speech at a time. Does anything new stand out? Anything you hadn't noticed before?

### *SEE MORE...*

The Bible. Really. Go read/listen to one.