

Stories are everywhere. We love stories. We most often speak in stories (ie. “You’ll never guess what happened in gym class yesterday!”) Stories can do all kinds of things like shape our imaginations, animate us to live a certain way, leave us with fear and anxiety, intrigue us with mystery and suspense, help us make sense of the messy parts of our lives. Some stories are small and local. Some are large, expanding centuries.

We tell stories through movies, music, theater, poetry, books, art and news. We literally have a “story” feature on our Instagram accounts! It’s something human beings have been doing for thousands of years to help make sense of our world and our experiences. There are cave paintings, stained glass windows in ancient cathedrals and stories passed down through oral traditions.

1. What are some of your favorite stories? (ex. Books, movies, TV shows, poems, art, etc)

The Bible is also an example of a story or narrative. In fact, the Bible isn’t even just one story, it’s a library of different books, written by different people over thousands of years, and compiled together to make what we call the Bible. The Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures are the stories about the Jewish people, Jesus’s ancestors. These stories have helped shaped and guide the Jewish people for thousands of years. And because Christianity is kind of like a cousin to Judaism, these ancient stories are also formative for Christians as well.

There’s also the New Testament, which tells the stories of Jesus’s life as well as the formation of the early Christian church. While “old” and “new” may make it sound like one is outdated, it’s actually quite the contrary! The Old Testament is constantly quoted throughout the New Testament. In fact, at one point Jesus even says that he hasn’t come to do away with the Law and the Prophets (ie. the Old Testament) but to fulfill them.

2. What are some of your favorite stories from the Bible? Why?
3. Do you ever find reading the Bible to be difficult? What are some of the Bible stories that have stirred up questions in your mind?

So while the Bible is a library that has two distinct testaments, there’s also a continuity between them. You could even say the entire Bible is telling a large over arching story: the story of God’s past, present, and on-going activity in the world that, for Christians, centers on the life, death and resurrection of the person of Jesus.

At this point you might be thinking, “If the Bible is just made of stories, doesn’t that mean it’s not true?”

Lot’s of people have spent endless amounts of time and energy either trying to prove or disprove the historical validity of stories in the Bible – as you’d guess, those people don’t often get along. But they may kind of be missing the point.

For example, people have feuded over the creation stories in Genesis 1-3. Some arguing that the world was literally created in 7 days and saying otherwise is heresy. Others tearing apart that story using scientific fact and theory. Both are missing the point. Pastor and author Brian McLaren says it well: that this story of Creation not so much about what *happened* as about what *happens*. Humans are good. Things like trees, rocks, animals, water, air, sky are good. But humans also have a tendency toward the temptation to deceive, act out of greed, or define good and evil how we want. So we can argue all day about whether or not a story in the Bible literally happened, but we may be missing the truth being communicated about what it means to be human and what God is like.

4. Read Genesis 1-3. Whether or not you read it literally, notice what the stories in these three chapters say about the earth, what it means to be human, who God is, etc.

5. What happens when you read these stories in a more poetic way? Does it change what the stories mean to you? What truths do you see in the text?

The stories of the Bible also help shape and form our view of God – as they are intended to. But our perception of God can also be shaped by our life experiences and by the people who are most important to us. Sometimes people will talk about how they do not believe in God. Then you ask them to describe the God they reject and we may find that we too do not believe in this kind of God. Here are some examples people may have of God.

Drill Sergeant: demanding, angry and vicious God who speaks very loudly, maybe using some hurtful words to describe us.

Nagging Parent: we can never please him, and is always upset about something and places ridiculous expectations on us.

Benevolent Grandpa: doesn't care much, simply sits around and acknowledges us every now and then, not really in touch with our pain and suffering.

Mad Scientist: creatively pursuing ways to test us and make us miserable

Courtroom Judge: always aware of our sins and eagerly awaiting to cast judgment on us.

6. What about these “images” of God seems odd? How do these images compare to the pictures that you have of God in your own mind?

The Bible uses all kinds of metaphors to describe God. A metaphor is a way of describing something or someone by using characteristics of something else. So what comes to mind when you read the God is like...

...a rock

...a father

...a mother

...a spirit

...Dumbledore

...a king

Jesus often used the word Father throughout the Gospels to describe God. For some people this might be a great metaphor, as you have a strong relationship with your own father. For others this may be difficult as they have a broken, painful or non-existent relationship with their father. It may cause some people to draw closer to God and others to distance themselves from God. The word Jesus actually used was an Aramaic word: Abba. While our English word “father” is much more formal, this word Abba was a much more intimate word. It was more akin to something like a personal nickname you have for your parent: papa, dad, daddy.

Maybe we can hold on to the metaphor of father more loosely. Maybe what's most important is the idea of a parental or guardian figure – could be an actual parent, or it could be a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or whomever you see as a close parental figure. What Jesus did by using that intimate word for a parent is show a relationship with a God who isn't distant but very present, loving, protective and compassionate.

7. Why do you think Jesus chose to use such intimate language for God over any other language or metaphor (ex. Almighty, king, etc)?
8. Do you find yourself more comforted or more uncomfortable at the idea of God as an intimately loving, faithful divine parent?

The Bible also talks of Jesus as the firstborn over all creation, image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15-20). God as father speaks not only of God's identity, but also ours, children of our Heavenly Parent who share a common relationship with our brother Jesus. As God's children, we are to imitate who God is in the person and work of Jesus.

God as Divine Parent reminds us that we are a part of a larger community and are to invite others to join this pursuit of living into who God is and called us to be. God is not only my God, but our father. In our Heavenly Parent we have a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves. God as Father or Mother reminds us that despite, or because of God's position as Creator of all things, God longs to be in close relationship with people – even you and me.

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