

*When You Want to Write a Different Ending*

Genesis 7:11-24, Genesis 19:12-26

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I'm not a big fan of a formulaic story. I love to read books or watch movies in which I have no idea where we are going and how it will end. I like movies like *The Sixth Sense*, in which the ending surprised me so much I had to immediately re-watch the movie just to see where the clues were that I missed the first time. But when the movie isn't formulaic, I sometimes feel so sad for the characters in it that I yearn for a formulaic ending. I wish Thelma and Louise didn't feel they had to drive off a cliff. I wish John Coffey in *The Green Mile* would have been understood as a hero instead of strapped to an electric chair and executed for a murder he didn't do. I wish the wife in *Gone Girl* would have gotten her comeuppance.

I have the same experience with Bible stories. There are so many Bible stories for which I wish I could change the ending. I chose two of them for today. They both came from the Book of Genesis but don't think I only want to change endings from that book.

The first one you heard today is the story of Noah and his life-saving ark...well life-saving for a few...a very select few. The story of Noah is actually a horrible tale. God doesn't look very good in this story. So, what do we do with it? We take images from this horrendous tale and decorate our children's nurseries with it. I did. Come on, it has a big boat with giraffes and rhinos and elephants and cockatoos on it. It is such an intriguing image.

But it becomes problematic when our children begin wanting to hear this story about why there is a boat floating in the sea with a menagerie of animals on it and a gorgeous rainbow that curves right over the ark. They think this has to be a beautiful story. None of us wants to say, "Well, once upon a time God was like an angry, alcoholic parent. God was sick and tired of people not doing what was right, so God decided to wipe out all the humans and the animals. But there was this one man who was really righteous and good, and his name was Noah. So, God had Noah build a really big boat. Noah was supposed to take his family and at least two of every kind of animal onto the boat. Then God caused it to rain and rain until all humans and all animals were gone, except for those on the ark. When Noah and his family and all the animals on the ark finally were able to find dry land and get off the boat, God realized that punitive, righteous anger was not the best way to related to creation. So, to make up, God sent a rainbow and said, "I'm sorry I acted like that. I promise it will never happen again." I didn't want to tell my children this story.

Somehow, Noah and his family are supposed to be overjoyed by God's promise. It just feels like too little compared to the enormity of death and destruction. I want to change this ending. It just doesn't preach. When I crawl around inside this story I have to

witness, Noah collecting the animals and realizing that the ones he doesn't choose are going to die. Watching Noah pull up the gangplank when the rain starts breaks my heart. He knows what is going to happen to his neighbors and friends. These are the people he worshipped alongside. The ones at the other end of the gangplank are his extended family, his in-laws, his best friend since grammar school. How traumatizing! Then when the rain finally stops and the land finally dries up enough to get off the boat that was at once their salvation and their hell, they have to create everything anew surrounded by mud. They are filled with survivors' guilt and so many questions about who God is. If I could write new endings to Bible stories, I would start with this one.

Once I was able to sanitize the story of Noah and the ark and tie it up into a neat little bow with a loving God, then I would move on and tackle the story of Lot's wife. Once again, in this story God is angry enough to destroy humanity but this time focuses in on two cities, Sodom and Gommorah. Abraham steps in and talks God into saving his relative, Lot and Lot's family. Abraham makes the case that Lot is a righteous man. I'm surprised by that because there are several stories about Lot that I find problematic. But God tells Abraham he will save Lot and his family. God sends down two angels to help the family get out of town before it goes up in smoke. As the family is fleeing, one of the angels says, "Run for your lives and don't look back, lest you be consumed." It sounds like a commonsense warning to me, not a threat. Like, say you are running from a burning building and the firefighter says, "Keep moving. Don't look back. Get out of here as fast as you can." Sounds like sage advice.

Lot's wife looked back. She had grown up in Sodom. Her in-laws were back there as were her parents and her beloved Aunt Edith. She can't believe she is being rushed away from all she has ever known. She briefly looks back to see what is happening to those she has loved her whole life and the Bible tells us she turned into a pillar of salt. Why? For the horrible sin of glancing backwards? And salt? Why salt? I hate that ending. Luckily, it isn't considered beautiful and whimsical enough to adorn our children's nursery rooms with it. At least there is that.

Do you have Bible stories for which you want to write different endings? I'm guessing that most of us do. We have a deep need...a profound desire to take these stories and sanitize them so that they fit into our narrative of who God is and how the people of God are to behave. I fully agree with that need. That is where I'm at. But I know there are some who just opt to leave out the parts they don't like. And there are some who just ignore the whole Bible. After all, it just feels so archaic and problematic. Why even bother with it at all? I want to make a case for why none of these three options is a good answer to the challenge of difficult Bible stories.

This book is unique to our modern way of thinking. It does not have one author. In fact, even most of the different books in the Bible don't just have one author. This is especially true of the Old Testament. These are stories and songs and poetry that were told orally, adapted, retold, adapted, told again and again and again and handed down from one generation to another until they were finally written down. The story of Noah

and the story of Lot's wife were formed and touched and shaped and molded by community. They are collective stories with many, many voices in them.

The New Testament does not have the same long oral history as the books of the Hebrew Bible but the stories in the four gospels were not written right after they happened. I remember sitting in a church sanctuary that had stained-glass windows of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Each one depicted a man sitting at a desk with quill poised in hand looking upward. These windows conveyed the idea that the gospels were dictated by a heavenly voice and these four men simply acted as scribes. But the gospels tell well-worn tales of Jesus' life. The feeding of the multitude is found six times in the four gospels. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have written down the oral tradition about Jesus and each one puts a different theological spin on the stories they tell.

The Bible is a book of weighty complexities. In it we find texts of terror, unknowable mysteries, beautiful poetry, deep longings, tragic endings, hopeful beginnings, the ugliness of human nature, the gift of sacrificial love, prejudice, calls for justice, awe, bravery, music, love stories, narcissism, suffering, hope, promise, resurrection....just to name a few.

The Bible is the grand story of God and God's relationship with us. This is not a book about morality. If you are looking for a list of rights and wrongs, just read Leviticus and be done with it but you won't like what you read. The Bible is story and like Jacob it requires that we step into the story and wrestle with God as we read it. Actually, when these stories got written down and then brought together into this sacred book, we call the Bible, the beauty, adaption and fluidity of these stories got frozen in time. We Christians have forgotten how to interact with them...how to let them live. These grand stories of God require us to be in relationship to them, just as God wants relationship with us. So the answer isn't to write new endings or leave out the stories that are problematic or to just ignore the Bible altogether.

Instead, we need to hear these stories. Then need to ask ourselves: "Why did the people of Israel choose to tell this story? Was there a flood and they needed to make sense of it? Were Sodom and Gommorah destroyed, and they had to put it into some context? Did they need to encourage people to move from mourning the past to living into the future? What do these stories have to say to me about God? What do they have to say about our relationship with God as we live these problematic and beautiful and complex lives, with which we have been blessed?"

If this book were just stories in which everything gets tied up beautifully in the end by a God who steps in and intervenes with love and justice, we wouldn't be able to relate to them because we don't have lives in which everything gets tied up in a neat bow...in which the wife in *Gone Girl* gets her comeuppance; in which the Christ-like John Coffey in *The Green Miles* is freed and a parade given in his honor...in which Thelma and Louise drive off into the sunset alive and free.

I want us to wander through the stories of the Bible in hopes in search of a wisdom born of centuries of telling and retelling. We won't always find it right away, but I promise we will always brush up against something bigger than our own lives and our own experiences. Sometimes these stories will give us peace and sometimes we will end up in a wrestling match with God; and, like Jacob, we will walk away with a blessing and limp.

Let us trust each other and God enough to wander together through the Bible's pages together searching for new truths, new calls to action and a deeper relationship with the God she describes in her pages. And as we are on that journey together, I believe that it will bring us to a new awareness of how we might create new endings together for our own stories. I pray that our struggle will lead us to the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.