

Winter 2020

THE BIBLICAL STORYTELLER

A Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. Publication



The Power of Silence in Storytelling
Biblical Storytelling as Spiritual Discipline
Navigating Difficult Stories

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Find Deep Renewal

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2020 Festival Gathering
of Biblical Storytelling

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Pre-Conference Event July 28:
"A Widows Tale" Retreat



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THE BIBLICAL
STORYTELLER

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

The Biblical Storyteller is a benefit of NBSI membership. Memberships may be purchased online:

www.nbsint.org

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7 Reasons You Should Commit to Using Biblical Storytelling

Reason One

Because Jesus did it.

Seriously. That's a pretty compelling reason. He was a master storyteller and you've probably paid lip service to that at some point in your ministry (privately or in the pulpit) but now it's time to actually try it in your home church because...

Reason Two

It brings the Bible to life.

Really, it does! When you watch a Bible story told by heart you enter that story. And when you enter that story, real flesh and blood people living real lives appear before you. These people have problems and joys and passions and sin just like the people in your pews. When you tell a Bible story by heart, people can see themselves. You hold a mirror up to your congregation. That's pretty powerful.

Reason Three

It's not boring.

Hearing the Bible read from the lectern like a) last week's grocery list or b) some epic poem is either 1) boring or 2) preachy.

Reason Four Storytelling Has Action

We expect action these days. The presence of television and computers in every aspect of our daily lives has addicted us to action and emotion! The news is built on tragedy and emotional response. We're living in gladiator times again. Watched any NFL or World Wrestling lately? Biblical storytelling puts action, movement, and



emotion into your worship and Christian education.

Reason Five

Youth Love It!

Those kids in your youth group? Guess what? They play video games that let them interact with powerful story lines and grab a character and participate. Oooo! Wait! If you teach them biblical storytelling they can do that at church, too!

Reason Six

Kids Love It!

Why aren't kids coming to Sunday School anymore? Can you say BORING? (Yep. There's that word again.) Not relevant? Our kids are going to school knowing that other kids died at a school that week. If you think our kids don't know the dangers of our society you are kidding yourself. The Bible's stories are filled with dangerous situations and God's powerful interventions.

Reason Seven

It Will Make Church More Meaningful

Biblical storytelling can impact and enhance almost every aspect of your church's worship, education, and outreach. Recommit to bringing the Bible to life in your congregation!

The Power of Silence in Storytelling

by NBSI Seminar Member and Storyteller Pam Faro



Oxambigshort@unsplash.com

A few years back, folks started telling me I should teach a workshop on using silence in storytelling. For a long time I've received positive comments from audiences on how effective they find pauses and silences that are often a part of my storytelling...and I have for many years taught workshops on different aspects and applications of the art...but to teach silence in storytelling? My initial reaction was, "I have no earthly idea how to teach that! It just happens."

So let me tell you a little story: About 20 years ago I was considering (yet again) going to seminary. As part of my discernment process, my then-pastor invited me to our area's weekly text study in which the Lutheran pastors meet to discuss the coming Sunday's lectionary texts (Lutherans generally follow the Revised Common Lectionary for weekly worship). I gratefully became a regular attendee, diving into the exploration of the biblical texts, discussing theology, applications, stories, current events, relationships, and more, all with the hope of clarifying my thoughts and plans regarding seminary.

And then...there I met Keith, the man who is now my husband! That was an unsought, unexpected, yet entirely welcome unintended consequence of my having committed myself to participating in the pastors' text study. And that's a pretty good analogy for how and

sat myself down to see if I could figure out how. As I reflected on my stories, I focused on places in certain stories that had evolved to pretty much always include a notable pause, and I sought to analyze what it is I do that leads to not only "silence," but what I understand from others to be truly effective silence – that draws in, or delights, or otherwise moves listeners.

I eventually discerned that I develop and draw upon three foundational elements that combine to create those commented-upon effective pauses in my storytelling, each element as important as the legs of a three-legged stool.

For developing "effective use of silence" in storytelling, these are the ingredients:

- **Internal imagery:** The more detailed, more abundant, and richer internal imagery you can develop for any given story will invite and enable you to live and communicate your story the best that you can; it will be more engaging for you and for your audience. Whether you do the basic exercise of imagining each of the five physical



why "silence" shows up in my storytelling!

To be honest, I don't "plan to put in silence" – it happens as a result of pursuing other story-preparation concerns; but the encouragement to teach it kept coming, so I finally

senses into a given story, or delve more deeply into full and detailed imagery work, this is crucial for enabling and welcoming effective pauses in a story.

- **Physicality:** Preparation and confident use of your body (the storyteller's instrument) seems so basic. It is! Even just some stretching and a bit of deep breathing before you rehearse, and before you perform, provides benefits in terms of having your telling instrument ready. You might think that your voice is your instrument—but it's your whole body, actually. Your body produces your voice and also carries the myriad of non-voiced oral language nuances that are part of human communication. Whatever you can do to develop comfort and confidence in your physical expression will contribute to your ability to embody and communicate the internal imagery you carry for any story. When your words are paused, your body carries the story in the silence – whether grand gestures and movement around the room, or subtleties like the lift of an eyebrow or the tensing of your posture.

- **Awareness of your audience:** Paradoxically, the more you enter into your story's imagery, the more you must also keep an awareness of your audience. Otherwise, you're in danger of just giving a monologue – whereas storytelling is a reciprocal experience. This becomes important in regard to "silence" in your storytelling as you learn to sense how the audience is responding to that silent part of the story – and you can develop the sense in some cases of how long it's effective to perhaps stretch the silence before returning to voicing the words of the story. Or, particularly if it's a potentially humorous

moment, you might engage the audience with additional gesture or direct eye contact. It all comes from the combination of story imagery, willingness to embody, and sense of your audience.

As I tell my students/coachees: Our responsibility is to share the story with our listeners, not just recite it for ourselves. This impacts everything from how we position ourselves (can they see us?), to making sure we're articulate and loud enough for them to actually hear/understand the words we speak, to working with the silences that may appear in a story so that the audience can enter into them with us. (This can also keep listeners from growing anxious thinking that you may have forgotten what's next and that's why you're pausing, by having your physicality engaged so that they can see – consciously or subconsciously – that the silence is carrying the story and is part of it, rather than an intrusion because the teller forgot something!) Don't be afraid of having pause, as long as you use it for the benefit of audience and story.

I once had some serious criticism from a workshop participant who was thoroughly disappointed that I didn't teach more specific "how-to's" such as identifying spots in a story to put in some silence.

Sorry, but that really is putting the cart before the horse. Effective silence in storytelling – at least that which I practice and that folks ask me to teach – comes organically from spending effort and time with the foundational practices.

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PRE-CONFERENCE EVENT

July 28, 2020

9:30-4:30

A Widows Tale Retreat



fun, food, laughter,
fellowship, and stories

A unique healing retreat for
women who have lost
their spouse



with Donna Marie Todd,
Certified Grief Recovery Specialist®
and author of
Navigating Loss

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\$197 includes lunch
and take-home workbook

It's true that when I coach, yes, I've at times said "take some time, pause there," but we've likely been working with the foundations, and some reasons in a coaching situation have been:

- to give listeners time for transition, as the teller transitions (e.g., a passage of time; changing and/or dwelling in the emotion; a shift in scene or attitude)
- allowing the teller to mime some aspect of the action/character
- driven by the emotion of the moment, from the imagery of the story.

All of this is born from the story's action and imagery, not because one should "put in silence." It's always born from the story: to serve the story, and the listeners, and the teller.

Some examples from my own storytelling:

Ruth 3

When Ruth goes to the threshing floor to meet up with Boaz, when I tell it, there is quite a long pause of silence as I almost mime/act out the scene, embodying the character of Ruth as she waits and watches and then moves stealthily.

Mark 15

"And then...they crucified him." I look up, and my head gesture, eye direction, breathing, and expression on my face all invite the audience to envision the terrible scene as well. At that point I'm the storyteller, not one of the story's charac-

ters: it is my own perspective into which I invite the audience, giving them time for their own imagery and emotions.

Matthew 2

I use a long silence and body language that's difficult to capture with written words, for the heart-rending transition between Rachel weeping and "When Herod had died, an angel appeared to Joseph in Egypt." When telling the story, I myself am unable to just move along with those next words, having just expressed my internalization of mothers shrieking for their children because they have been slaughtered... I need the time/pause to gather myself, and the audience needs it as well, and I give it to them. But I am not just pausing—I am raising my index finger...how you might do when you have something to say but are not yet ready or capable of speaking it...swallowing and slowly raising my head, perhaps shaking it, with incredulity, from side to side... gathering my thoughts, emotions, the physical ability to speak... It's a long, needed pause to gather myself—and to allow the audience to do so.

Immersion in your story's imagery—sights, sounds, emotions, textures, scents, etc.—will deepen your telling. Combined with embodying that imagery and attending to the audience, periods of effective silence may organically become part of a given story.

A closing analogy: Imagine you have acquired a wooden table that needs some work to look good. You could choose a favorite paint color and brush it on, and that might be sufficient and pleasing enough for



you. Or, you could go through the longer process of refinishing—the work of stripping, sanding, staining (there are additional intermediate steps, but this list will work for us), and so end up with an arguably more deeply beautiful piece.

Not unlike committing to a refinishing process to bring out the true beauty of the wood, committing to the three-way foundation of 1) developing your internal imagery of a story, 2) embracing and developing your physicality, and 3) being attuned to your audience, can produce a truly fine result. It will sometimes translate into the presence of effective silence in your story—silence that is not just absence of sound and passage of time, but silence that truly carries the story for your audience.

Pam Faro (MDiv) has performed and taught storytelling across the US and beyond for 32 years. She believes that more than ever before we need the sharing of stories that can cross divides, and the sharing of the storytelling experience that creates relationship and forms community.

Biblical Storytelling as Spiritual Pilgrimage

An NBSI International Contribution by
Jeffrey Lawrence, Australia

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Alan Alda once said that to listen “is to allow the other person in, and to allow yourself to be changed by the other.” To tell someone’s story you must first listen to their story, listen to their heart and for the heart of their story. To tell the Triune God’s story one must listen to God, for the heart of God and the heart of God’s story as our Triune God tells you God’s own story.

I think that to listen to God in the heart is to allow the Triune God in and to be changed (inside out-metanoia) by God. As the prayer “Original Light” of David Morrison evokes; “O Lord, no one can see your face and live, but none of us can live unless we see your face. Let me see your face and die; and it will no longer be I who live, but Christ Jesus who lives in me.”

The piety and skill in learning and telling a story of God from the Bible is a blessing. The purifying process (Is 6:7) of learning and telling God’s story, such that our listeners know the heart and presence of God, and can touch the word made flesh (Mt 9:20) is profound. I remember Dennis Dewey’s formative words early in my storytelling service; “Biblical Storytelling

is a spiritual discipline that entails engagement with the stories of the scriptures by first committing them to the deep memory of the heart and then embodying them in a lively telling as a sacred performance ... and deeply internalized, remembranced, and embodied.”

The spiritual disciplines and preparation we do to learn a biblical story are a spiritual pilgrimage deep into that scripture. The storytelling craft can make us good practitioners, but only by living out the sacred disciplines of the spiritual life, of pilgrimage and prayer, in the Holy Spirit, can it become holy. The compelling sacred work that takes us on pilgrimage into the heart of our Triune God, i.e., into the Holy of Holies is in living with and linking personally with the story, and the God of the story.

Near the end of his life John wrote his epistles and he starts by remembering someone that “He has heard, seen with his own eyes, watched and touched, the word who is life, this is my story, I want to tell you his story to make my own joy complete so you can join in the same life I have in union with God!” These words form a foundation of

my service as one of God’s apprenticed storytellers.

So, when I began telling and praying Jesus’ prayer of John 17, my preparation, my pilgrimage had to include asking Jesus to “teach me to pray” his prayer from the heart as he prayed it, and asking the Holy Spirit to remind me of Jesus’ heart and mind. I know of no other way to internalize the story and embody it in a sacred telling it from the heart. When I work internally with Isaiah (6:5) and Jeremiah (20:7) I must accept being “seduced,” “overpowered,” and “ruined” if others are to meet this same exquisite lover and Lord in my telling of God’s story, so that they feel the desert pilgrimage of the heart into the cloud of God’s presence and the heart of God’s story. Each time I prepare a story I must first ask God to tell me God’s story, “Lord, let it be your story, not mine.”



Jeff, “The Storycatcher,” is a member of NBS Australia and has served as a biblical storyteller since 1999. He is a pastor and spiritual director.



GOD'S STORY: It's Ours for the Telling

An Interview with the 2020 Festival Gathering Keynote Speaker
Australia's Rev. Sarah Agnew, PhD

AN INTRODUCTION

Rev. Sarah Agnew, PhD a storyteller-poet-minister, has been Minister in placement with Canberra Central Parish on Ngunnawal land, in the Uniting Church in Australia since January 2018. Before this, she lived in Edinburgh, Scotland, for three years while undertaking a PhD in New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology. Sarah lived all her life before that in Adelaide, Australia, on Kuarna land. Sarah has published several poetry collections, the latest *Hold Them Close* with Resource Publications in 2018; she has also published liturgy with Wild Goose Publications, *Seasons of the Spirit*, and her blog, *praythestory.blogspot.com*. Sarah has been a member of the NBS Scholars Seminar since 2015, and particularly enjoys the work we are doing with translations for performance in recent years. She also blogs at *sarahtellsstories.blogspot.com*.

Q. Sarah, your three-part keynote will lead us through a process as biblical storytellers of entering the story, praying the story, and living the story. Your poetic voice is already present in the theme (God's Story: It's Ours for the Telling) and in each keynote's title. The first keynote, entering the story, will focus on Embodied Performance Analysis, a

new method for biblical scholarship. This work was undertaken during your PhD thesis at the University of Edinburgh, in Scotland. Tell us a bit about this method and how you came to develop it.

A. Thank you, Donna Marie, for your affirmation of my poetic voice. I am very much a poet, as a storyteller. I had noticed that when I was internalizing the biblical stories to tell them, as is our way in the Network, my emotional responses, my body's movements, and my relationship with my audience (or congregation) were showing me meaning in the compositions. I was intrigued, and wanted to learn more. So I became my own subject for research as I chose a portion to embody and perform (the letter to the Romans), and paid attention to each step in my process in order to understand. I undertook interdisciplinary research in such areas as philosophy, social psychology, and theatre studies, among other fields, to understand how humans make meaning, how we interpret our surroundings and the events of our lives. A lot of biblical interpretation demands of the interpreter a certain distance, and objectivity

and rationality that to some extent are helpful; but in light of the fullness of human meaning-making this approach is incomplete. We—usefully and accurately—interpret the world with our physical, sensory self, with our emotional, intuitive instincts, and as part of the complex systems of our relationships and communities. So why do we ignore these processes of meaning-making when we engage with the biblical story, the foundational stories of our faith that shape our whole lives? I hope that the method I have developed will take an interpreter from hearing and responding to the Bible, to bringing those responses into conversation with more objective scholarly engagement, then to embodied performance and reflection on the performed interpretation so as to provide more complete engagement and meaning-making with the Bible.

Q. Sarah, you call entering the story an "invitation." Will you say more about how you feel God calls us into stories as biblical storytellers?

A. I think it is more fundamentally that God calls us into stories, into

God's story, as disciples. And just as our clergy are set apart within many of our Christian traditions for their giftedness and calling to preside for the community, care with the community, remind the community of who God is and who we are, storytellers are particularly gifted at embodying the stories and communicating them faithfully, creatively, in order to extend God's invitation to us all. In the Uniting Church in Australia we celebrate that we are all, clergy and lay, together the priesthood of all believers. We are likewise, all tellers of the stories, storytellers of the art form and everyday storytellers alike. The invitation is woven throughout the biblical story to individuals like Abraham and Sarah who are incredulous and faithful, and to the people set apart to be holy because their God is holy, and they are to remind the rest of the world of who God is. Jesus the Christ embodies the invitation with Wisdom-esque hospitality, seeking out the lost and weaving them back into the story in a way that invites all the "insiders" to follow and repeat.

Q. Now in your second keynote you're focusing on "response." What do you hope happens when we respond to a story?

A. You all know what happens when we respond to a story, any story that is told with integrity: we are changed. The important thing about the stories we tell of God is that we do so hoping to be changed by the Holy One, to be touched by the Sacred, to find within the spark of the Divine—and that leads us towards healing, towards hope, towards life. So at the very least, I hope we respond to the stories

as a seed responds to the nurturing earth, unfolding towards our fullness of life. I hope we respond by loving the stories and immersing ourselves in them even deeper. I hope we respond by allowing the stories to shape us according to Wisdom. I hope we respond by living the stories of hope and justice and welcome so as to spread peace in our world.

Q. How does this response lead us to develop worship and devotionals?

A. This response of living the stories is a response of worship—the kind of worship we see in the stories of ancient Israel, where each moment, each act, of the day was undertaken in an attitude of love and honor for (or glorifying of) God.

As we respond to the stories, we shape our prayers by the stories and their non-violent resistance to injustice; their resilient insistence on hope; their generous welcome of the other. And as we pray, we change our hearts. As our hearts are changed, our behavior, our living will change, and in small ways, will change the world.

Q. The third session moves to "commissioning." Do you see this a commissioning of the storyteller or the audience?

A. The commission to live the story is for audience and storyteller alike, for we, together, are invited into the story, and expected by the story to respond. We tell stories to know who we are, understanding where we've come from, and imagining with hope a future to reach for. The imperative within the stories told in the Bible and through the bodies of

storytellers is for those stories to be taken by all who have ears to hear, and lived: for the Story of God who loves, to be the story we live, for the sake of the world.

Q. How would you like to see Festival attendees live out what they learn about Embodied Performance Analysis in their work with local churches?

A. I hope Festival attendees will be equipped and encouraged to attend to their emotional and physical responses to the biblical stories as good and useful tools for interpretation. I hope they will likewise be equipped and encouraged to attend to the stories their communities are living, in order to hear meaning in the biblical stories that will resonate, challenge, and move them ever forward into hope and life.

I hope they might be inspired to explore alternative ways of shaping prayer and worship in response to the biblical story and the story of their community. I hope Festival attendees might return to their churches, seminaries, schools, preaching and reading groups and encourage others to listen to the fullness of their human responding to the Bible. As followers of Jesus, surely we believe him

when he tells us he came that we might enjoy fullness of life. Why, then, would we leave so much of the fullness of our being out of our engagement with the stories that invite us into that life?



The Problem with Difficult Stories

Reflections on
Telling Hosea
by NBSI Seminar Scholars

Peter Forster@Unsplash.com

Reflections on Telling Hosea by Cynthia Park, LPC, PhD

Internalizing biblical text has become a spiritual practice for me since joining the NBSI. I believe this is holy work.



It requires solitude—which refreshes my soul—and voice and movement—activities and resources that ground me emotionally and spiritually. But, the plain truth is that two co-existing realities compete with this holy work. The first is that the hours of internalizing occur in the context of the rest of my life, sandwiched between the banal and the effervescent moments of my day.

The second is that Hebrew language is my work, to the point that I sometimes become desensitized to the trauma of some parts of the narrative. Both of these competing factors figured into my preparing to tell Hosea in the Scholars' Seminar. The combination of a crowded schedule and a reduced sensitivity to traumatic stories confined the passage to a technical rather than a spiritual location within me.

Then came the actual moment of the telling. My portion was Hosea 2. Repeatedly, from God's mouth, Israel is called a "whore" and her children the "offspring of whoring" on whom God will show "no pity." The prophet declares that the whore will be stripped naked and her shame laid bare. "Harsh" hardly describes the overall tone.

Every storyteller knows the phenomenon that is "random" memories triggered through the process of learning and telling biblical stories. The triggered memory for me as I was telling the chapter was a scene from my adolescence, a confrontation between my mother and me in my bedroom. She had discovered evidence of my sexual activity, traces of my frantic research into how to avoid an unwanted pregnancy.

"You, slut," she spat as she walked out of the room, leaving me there wondering whether there would be any chance of us ever discussing what had happened before what happened, happened. Terror and shame competed within my soul.

Here's the thing: I adored my

mother, and she adored me. That wasn't our best moment. She was as frightened as I was. Her palpable outrage was not the full picture of our relationship, not by half. It was the reflection of her feelings of helplessness and fear at what my choices would mean for her life as well as for my life. But, there is no denying that her response at the time wounded me to my core and that, to this day, a part of me limps around feelings of worth and value.

That pitiless moment so many years ago surfaced with a vengeance during the NBS Seminar, and I struggled to see how telling Hosea publicly would glorify God or be a winsome witness to the love of God. For me, the decision to remove it from the menu was grounded in the ethics of biblical storytelling.

I believe we have a duty to hold in our consciousness the knowledge of human psychology and social reality. The structure of the annual Festival Gathering simply does not allow for intensive emotional support for all attendees for whom this biblical story, in particular, might trigger memories of past trauma.

Reflections on Hosea by
Cliff Barbarick, PhD

I agree with Cynthia that Hosea would be inappropriate as an NBSI Epic Telling. Our current structure does not include space for communal debriefing. I think it would be harmful to expose our community to the violence and raw pain of Hosea and then simply dismiss everyone for the evening to go their separate ways. I also worried about the storytellers for the Epic. We would be inviting them into some dark places by assigning them to internalize and tell sections of Hosea. They might be living with these passages for months, maybe in isolation, before connecting with the nurturing community at the Festival Gathering.

My passage was Hosea 10:1–15. It opens with the metaphor of a fruitful vineyard. “Israel is a growing vine that yields its fruit,” sings the prophet. But that hopeful image crumbles almost as soon as it’s introduced. “The more his fruit increased . . . the more altars he built” (CEB). And from this turning point, the prophet pours out an (almost) unrelenting flood of invective that crescendos throughout the rest of the chapter. God’s tender care for his people, like a vine-dresser’s careful cultivation of her vine, is met with abandonment. Those he loves have chosen to love someone else. The images of punishment that follow, therefore, find their root in the pain of abandonment. God expresses anger but anger isn’t the primary emotion. The spring that feeds the rising flood is woundedness.

The prophet expresses an intense and raw pain masked as anger. The

steady beat of the pain takes a heavy toll on a listener, but occasional cracks in the mask of anger create achingly tender moments. As God lists the things for which Israel, his bride, should be punished, finally—after 13 verses of angry venting—he reveals the wound: “She forgot me.”

The major tension I felt in Hosea is between the anger of a jilted lover and the more hidden, but also deeper, pain and woundedness that undergirds that anger. The pain is always there, throbbing underneath the surface.

This raised questions for me about how to interpret the entire book. Am I meant to understand the visions of Hosea as punishment? Or, am I meant to understand them primarily as expressions of pain rooted in deep love? If that’s case, these aren’t visions of what God would ever do to his chosen people—these are the pain of his own hurt at the hands of his beloved people—poetic revelations of God’s heart, expressed in the terms of broken human relationships (which, unfortunately, we understand all too well).

I think a study of Hosea would work best in a small group setting in a community that is willing to honestly wrestle with unsettling images of God. In his *Opening the Bible*, Thomas Merton warns that, “It is the very nature of the Bible to affront, perplex and astonish the human mind.” Hosea can certainly evoke those kinds of responses! Those who really hear it are likely to be horrified, frightened, and puzzled. This can be good, but it won’t be easy. And it shouldn’t be done alone.

ZOOM in and WARM UP

When you register for the Festival Gathering in 2020, you’ll be invited to attend a new virtual gathering! Get your heart and mind prepared for this year’s Festival. Dive into our theme stories, connect with the tribe, and get in that biblical storytelling groove!
Saturday, July 18 at 10 a.m. EST



GOD’S STORY: It’s Ours for the Telling

INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

FREE WEBINAR

with Dr. Tracy Radosevic
Dean of the NBSI Academy for Biblical Storytelling

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now it’s time to share.

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