

Reading the Bible as if my life depends on it

Rianna Isaak-Krauß

I need imagination to live.

I am a lover of fantasy. Dragons make me laugh, and I dream of castles filled with magic. My favorite fantasy is that which speaks truth through story. The Bible is a collection of stories, deep stories, true stories, stories

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that bring hope, stories that bring liberation—the story of Jesus becoming enfleshed in a body and telling strange and beautiful stories. We hear of a kingdom that has not a king but a kin. No ruler oppressive and mighty but rather a sibling and fellow child of God. We hear of mustard seeds growing and gardeners spreading compost on fig trees. A world beginning with a garden and ending with a city that looks like a garden. I read these stories to fill my imagination.


They fill my imagination so much that it overflows into the present. I can see the dribble and splash of Jesus stories all around me in the crumbling parts of this world longing for God’s kin-dom.

Reading the Bible with the little company of Jesus

One practice that has nurtured my imagination and freedom in playing with the stories in the Bible is praying the Anabaptist Prayer Book during my time as student at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.¹ Each week we would gather in Mary Schertz’s house as “the little company of Jesus” to pray the morning prayers, drink coffee, and then go about our day. The center of the prayer time was reading chunks of the Bible together, not just a nibble of a verse but a hunk that gave us

1 See *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*, vol. 1, *Ordinary Time* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2007), and *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*, vol. 2, *Advent through Pentecost* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010). See also the prayer book app at <https://www.ambs.edu/publishing/anabaptist-prayer-book>.

something to chew on and left us wanting more. We would sit with these words in our mouths, letting our saliva bring alive the taste, chewing slowly or quickly, and then swallowing these texts, allowing them to become a part of us. This word gave me energy throughout the day as I digested not only the text itself but also the insights, questions, connections, and frustrations of the little company. And, oh, how we played with our food! Sitting on that couch, those rocking chairs, and that piano bench in a circle pushing the text around on our metaphorical plates—*Do you think Paul*



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is being sarcastic here? Could this bit with the coin have been a joke? How does this connect with the passage we read before?—the words came alive, living in our bodies but also our minds and imaginations!

What I held close then and still hold close today is the hope in the biblical story. A hope that is bigger than just life “getting back to normal.” I need a hope bigger than normal. Normal may be life without COVID-19, but it is also a life where black humans are killed, women are raped, the poor are enslaved by debt,

queer people are abused, men are not allowed to feel or show emotions, and we are all addicted to sin. I need stories that help me imagine a different world—the kind of kin-dom Jesus proclaims.

I read the Bible because my life depends on it. And I don’t say that lightly—these past few years have been tough. As the disciples said to Jesus, “Where else can I go to?” (John 6:68). But I think it’s bigger than just my life that depends on the story we read in Scripture; *our* lives together depend on it.

Reading the Bible in face of climate change

When I look at climate change and see the massive changes that need to happen in our world, I know that individual habit shifts will not make enough of a difference. I spent a semester of seminary at Merry Lea, a Mennonite educational eco-village through Goshen College, looking straight in the face of the suffering of our Earth and creatures inhabiting it, the Earth God calls us to care for. Storms are getting more extreme, diseases are spreading easier and farther because of temperature changes,

crops are failing due to droughts, people are becoming overwhelmed with the fear of scarcity and hopelessness.

To whom shall we go? Only in the Bible do we have deep-rooted stories told and retold of a prophet going to a city calling for a change and the *entire* city repenting. Nineveh's collective response is astonishing! It is not just the leaders that changed their ways, but they called the whole city to communal grieving, fasting, and even to change what kind of clothing people wore. Repentance was not limited to the people; even the habits of

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animals made a radical U-turn! Without Nineveh, my imagination would be too small even to dream of what we need to do, to be, to attempt to prevent the disastrous effects of climate change. Without Nineveh, I would have been stuck in improving my own individual actions and judging everyone else for not doing so as well. Without Nineveh, I would not

have had the imagination to lead a worship service of grief and repentance for our climate. Without Nineveh, I would not have joined the ever-growing Wild Church movement where we worship Jesus outside in the woods like our early Anabaptist siblings of the 1500s.


And that is the thing with imagination. It moves within and bops around until it comes out in some very surprising actions. It makes possible what we had never before dreamed was possible, because we couldn't yet imagine it. Through imagination, the Holy Spirit leads us to places we would not have gone had we not dared to imagine a different world.

Reading the Bible in the Poor People's Campaign

The Holy Spirit began growing a seed of imagination in me when I heard about the Poor People's Campaign—A National Call for Moral Revival. I liked everything about it, from continuing what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began fifty years ago before his assassination to the calling out of the four systemic evils of poverty, racism, militarism, and environmental degradation. But I thought to myself, "I am not that radical; I am a 'good Christian.'" That would be crazy to do something that would possibly end up putting me in jail." Without imagination, that would have been my last thought about it.

But then I continued to read the Bible with the little company of Jesus, praying through the Anabaptist Prayer Book and chewing on the

text together. Studying and praying I slowly began to notice some patterns. First, the Bible talks a lot about being good. It says that no one is good but God alone! Why is it easier for me to say that I am a sinner and break God's rules than to say that I am a convict and break society's rules? Do I not believe that I am part of the kin-dom of God and not of this



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world? Second, as we imagined the stories, I noticed that a lot of people in the Bible spent time in jail: Joseph and Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and then John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul. When Easter came around, and I read through the Easter texts, it dawned on me that Jesus had also been to jail. So what more excuses did I have?

The one who I say that I follow agreed peacefully to be arrested for the sake of a larger system change—namely, the transformation of sin, evil, and death. This is why this radical book is banned in so many places. Because when we actually read what is in its pages, it changes our lives.

It changed my life. As I followed Jesus in the Poor People's Campaign, in a nonviolent moral action, I was arrested and spent 17 hours in a jail in Indianapolis. In jail I realized that this system of "security"—a system that I had been taught, as a white cis-woman, would protect me—only "protected" some by oppressing others. In jail, I was moved by the other women sharing their stories of pain—of poverty, of racism, of domestic abuse. It was there that I felt the Holy Spirit moving as people asked for prayer. As we prayed together, we imagined a different world, a world that looked like the stories of Jesus.

I read this Jesus story because my life depends on it. And I will never be the same again.

Reading the Bible because my life depends on it

I need the Bible—a collective remembering of who God is and how God's relationship with people has moved through the thousands of years. The Creator who formed human imagination also gives us these stories that allow us to see a whole city repent and live a different way. I need the Bible—a story of the past, present, and future where Jesus has fought with the powers of sin, evil, and death and has already won. The God who became human in Jesus enlarges our imagination through stories of a Kin-

dom in which the poor are blessed and sin is already conquered. I need the Bible—a story of the Holy Spirit dancing through the lives of the least, the lost, and the left out. The Holy Spirit creates space in each story for you and me, inviting us to claim these radical stories as our stories and to enter into the stories as siblings in God’s kin-dom.

About the author

Rianna Isaak-Krauß is a settler Canadian born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, on Treaty 1 territory, immigrated to Fresno, California, USA, on Yokuts territory, and now finds herself as the new pastor of the Frankfurt Mennonite Church in Germany. She received degrees in Peace and Conflict Transformation Studies at Canadian Mennonite University in 2013 and Christian Formation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2020. In her free time, she is reading fantasy books, trying to figure out the public transit system, and researching the best way to have worm composting in a small apartment.