

Story time: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16;  
Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

by [Jennifer M. Ginn](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

It was Christmas afternoon. The living room was littered with spent wrapping paper, while gifts were scattered willy-nilly under the tree. Christmas dinner dishes crowded the counter, one daughter-in-law was assembling yet another batch of cookies, and teenagers were picking at Christmas goodies and sampling the dinner ham. Then my mother-in-law began a story.

“When I was little,” she said, “my mother took my sister Lela and me to the school Christmas party. Around a sparkling tree were gifts for the children. But when Santa handed them out, there was nothing for us. On the way back home, Lela and I cried, and Mama said, ‘Santa needs money to buy gifts, and I didn’t have any money to give him. I won’t bring you back here next year.’” Her story—of being the child of a widowed mother who did everything in her power and beyond to give her family a life worth remembering—helped her come to terms with the scene of Christmas excess that was before her on an afternoon years later. Telling it brought her life back into balance.

She often recounts the stories of her childhood. We, her family, sometimes tire of them but understand that we need to listen as much as she needs to tell. We know that the stories steady her and help her remember who she is. In turn, they remind us who we are.

The Hebrews’ stories brought their lives into balance. Moses believed that remembering where they’d been, how they’d come into the land God promised, and what God had done for them would keep them faithful. So he said that in offering the first fruits of harvest, “You shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.’” Their story was a confession of faith, a community story that cast their thanksgiving into a framework that provided boundary and purpose to their lives together. It was a creed. Tell it again and again, Moses urged.

It is not such a stretch to hear Paul's words to the believers in Rome as the same plea. Contrasting the righteousness that comes from the law (practicing the law) with the righteousness that comes from faith (relying on Christ's righteousness), Paul calls on the story, the word. The "word of faith" is near them, on their lips and in their hearts. It is the story of Jesus, confessed by believers as a way of grounding their lives in Christ. They remember and recite that word in community, as did the people of God when they first entered the land promised to them. Without that remembering in the company of like-minded others, they could easily forget who they are and to whom they belong.

Writer Eudora Welty often sets her characters outside of their communities, in situations that cloud their remembering and put their identities to the test. In "A Visit of Charity," 14-year-old Marian pays a visit to an "Old Ladies' Home" to fulfill her Campfire Girl requirements. Alone in a room with two elderly women, she becomes disoriented and tongue-tied; she is completely out of her element. "Did you come to be our little girl for a while?" one old woman asks. And when the other woman asks her, "Who are you?," Marian cannot remember. Her story is lost, and so is she.

Out in the wilderness with the devil, Jesus risks losing himself too. All the devil's questions have the same core challenge: Who are you? No matter that in the preceding chapter Luke has had Jesus baptized and identified by a voice from heaven as the Son, the Beloved. No matter that Luke's "orderly account" (1:3) has just traced the genealogy of Jesus through David, Jacob, Noah, Adam and Adam's creator, the one God. In these 40 days with the devil Jesus is alone, out of place, weakened by hunger. But once filled with the Holy Spirit, he finds his stockpile of stories richly intact and available. The proclaimed word is near him, on his lips and in his heart.

And tell the story he does. In a most seductive voice, the devil says, "If you are the Son of God," make yourself a feast from this stone. Or better yet, take a dive from the temple heights. After all, he croons, the angels will "bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Jesus quotes the stories and claims his identity within them, standing his ground. Luke cautions us, however, that the devil will be back.

Now we enter the wilderness of Lent once again—wandering but expectant, knowing what is to come yet still on edge, anticipating the lonely walk. The journey can be disorienting. Its needful contrast to the bounty and briskness of our lives proves

distasteful to many. We go with the Spirit in us, as Jesus did. But the devil continues to watch for an opportune time. When he reminds us of our power to put behind us the way of contemplation and to cast our eyes away from the starkness of the cross, the real question is “Who are you?” May the stories of the faith refresh us along the way, for they are the word that is near us, on our lips and in our hearts. May the Spirit make us certain of the resurrection and new life that await us, and may that certainty strip the tempter of his power.