

The way to change history is to live out your story

When seismic shifts unseat us, it's the ordinary that puts us back together again.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue



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Reading history sometimes feels like reading fiction. We read the direct quotes. We know the people are real, had families, woke up each day. But they are so far away from us, these accounts and timelines of brave people, horrible people, or disasters so big we can't quite comprehend them. These events can't be real, especially when you read about them from the ordinariness of a typical Tuesday after dinner, with the glow of your 13-year-old's screen in the chair next to you.

Until the news breaks and you see the ticker "Russian troops have crossed the Ukrainian border" or "Confirmed cases have risen to 2,000 per day." Or you watch reports of overflowing hospitals or of the violent retrenchment of laws that seem more a part of the world we read about in textbooks than of the world we should be living in now.

Then you turn off the TV or put down your phone, because the dog has to go out.

Whether such moments impact us directly or we watch from afar, it is oftentimes difficult to know what they mean for us or, especially, for those who will come after

us. What would you have written down if you had met Barack Obama in the months after his election? What would you have told your children about the time the towers fell? What are the stories we will tell about living through a pandemic or, as William Barber reminds us, a new post-Reconstruction moment?

As a new academic year begins, I am welcoming students called to some form of Christian leadership: pastors, chaplains, nonprofit leaders. I'm introducing them to histories but even more to the particular history and the tangle of beliefs that led to and derived from Scripture—itsself a book of descriptions passed on, written and rewritten for the sake of the people the writers were walking with.

But I often wonder about the people Jesus walked with, those he healed or challenged. How did they perceive him or their moment? Did they see history unfolding?

More than likely they simply told their story. They shared what happened to them or their sister or the man they always passed on the corner on the way to buy bread. They shared the stories they heard repeated from town to town. And then the stories begin to accumulate, build up one on top of the other, maybe even bend or twist, depending who was doing the telling.

But before the creeds, the accusations of heresy, the theses, and the systematic tomes there were always stories of people living, trying to reach for something, and finding God was there. As my students work their way through these texts—in a contemporary moment that feels flooded with significance and consequence—I hope we can begin to see the power of such voices, and not only in condensed timelines or even in the compilations we call scripture. Any time we see big, historic moments mingling with the ordinary of our everyday life, perhaps then we might be able to live the story more faithfully. There's no life-changing moment without making dinner, without playing with children and letting them see the joy in the world, maybe even right after you bury your brother.

When the seismic shifts unseat us, it's the ordinary that puts us back together again. When it feels like the force of evil has been unfurled around us, sometimes it's a bath that reminds us that life should be lived.

And it's in the ordinary that we begin to see the measure of the extraordinary, the groundswell of danger, the signs that this law or that fire is not just a fleeting moment but something we must wake to. When we attend to the ordinary we can

begin to see the patterns of violence that move beyond an individual bad apple or a terrible run of luck. We can begin to see how systems limit choices, justify violence, and breed abuse.

We can also see mended legs and full bellies and words of comfort. We can begin to see how these are not always dropped from the sky but seep out of us and into the world, and we can say “praise God” not only because a person is well but also because we were invited to participate in the revelation of God in that moment.

I find myself trying to tell my sons about the significance of the time we are living in. There is no way for them to know; they will only be able to see it when they look back. But the way I love them will shape what they see when they do. As for my students, they don't need to be the ones who “change history.” I just hope they know that history has as much to do with dirty diapers as it does with legislation and declarations—and that if they attend to the tiny contours of everyday life, they will also begin to see the movement of God and the possibilities of their own lives in new ways.