Story by Naomi Lawson Jacobs for the Telling Encounters conference

Where are the stories of the disabled people of God?

I have three little stories to tell you about my search for the stories of people like me.

Story one takes place about fifteen years ago. It’s a sunny Sunday morning and I’m looking at the noticeboard outside my local church, looking for the Bible passages that will be read today. And I’m sure a lot of people listening will know that feeling when you look up the readings and realise that a healing narrative is about to be preached on. Well, I go into the church anyway, and the story of the paralysed man lowered through the roof is read to me by a non-disabled minister who says “...and Jesus forgave his sins first because the sin in his life was probably what led to his paralysis.” And I really want to say “It was probably something like falling off a horse that led to his paralysis” but I won’t. Because, even though I feel bad after that service, I’m pretty sure that the problem is not that minister, but me.

As a child, I believed there was something fundamentally wrong with me, that I just had to identify and fix and then I would be okay.

And I went to a church where people shared stories of what God had done in their lives. And they all went something like this. “I was a bad person, or sick, or addicted, or disabled, or gay, or a criminal. And then, Jesus. And now I’m better.” The last part was really important.

And I never heard a different kind of story. Growing up, I didn’t have any of the language I have to now, to tell my own story - I didn’t have words like autistic, or Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, or disabled, or bisexual or nonbinary. My story was just wrong. And that must mean I needed fixing, in mind, and body, and soul. And one day maybe I would work out what was wrong with me, and then I might find out how to be just about acceptable enough... to be loved. And I lay in the dark and asked Jesus to save me from myself.

So on this sunny Sunday I‘m trying really hard to get out of this church, and across the room I see the minister spot me. Because I’m using a wheelchair, which in some churches is like having a flashing light above your head saying fix me! And he comes over to talk to me, and after some friendly preamble he says, “Jesus never met a single disabled person he didn’t heal. You should have hope!” And I just look at him for a minute. And I want to ask, “Can Jesus give me hope that my disability benefits application won’t be turned down for the third time? Can he give me hope that people will stop yelling insults at me in the street? Can he give me hope that you will ramp the steps to your altar so that I can get to communion with everyone else?” But I say none of this. I say thank you and then I wheel out of there as fast as I can, thanking God for power-assisted wheelchairs. And I spent a lot of time thinking about whose story that minister was telling. Because I had been trying to find out if there are other stories you can tell about God and disabled people. But all I ever heard in church were non-disabled people singing, “The deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance, the blind shall see.” Thank you, Jesus, but I don’t want to dance. I want to hear the stories of my people. But I didn’t know where to find them.

Story two takes place about ten years ago, when I’m at the Greenbelt festival. And I’m camping in the interestingly-named ‘accessible camping area’. And a huge pipe has been put across the one path out of the accessible camping area into the rest of the festival. And my wheelchair won’t go over this pipe. So I’m stuck on the outside of the festival. And I have to find a staff member to beg for access - to a Christian festival, that has a great focus on social justice, and that I have paid for - and the staff member says, “We’ve got a lot of things to do on site. Why should we prioritise you?” And I realise 2 things. The first is that I can’t do this anymore. Every church door is closed to me, and every altar is a flight of steps away from me, and most of my experiences in churches are painful. So why am I putting myself through this Sunday after Sunday, when I could choose to go for a walk in the forest or watch a superhero movie? And the second thing I realise is that I don’t know if this just my story. I don’t know if every church door is closed to other disabled people too. Maybe I am just wrong, and I really do need fixing. Or maybe out there are the stories of the disabled people of God, and maybe those stories needed finding and sharing. And I started arguing with God in my head about how I really wasn’t qualified to find these stories. Okay, I was studying sociology, but this was research that needed to be done by a really pious person. Probably a priest, or at least someone who actually believed in God all the time! And definitely not by someone who’s wrong and needs fixing.

So God won that argument, as God does, and I went out to find the stories.

And, as Donald Eadie says, that was the moment when my world cracked open and light broke through. I heard so many important stories of people pushed to the edges of churches that didn’t know how to make space for them, and it was like a light was being shone on my own story. Like, I remembered all the times I’d been prayed for as a teenager, that God would heal me of the family curse that I was told was responsible for what I now call neurodivergence. And I remembered that when I first tried to speak out about my experiences, a church leader turned to me and said, “Naomi, all you talk about is disability” as if telling our stories is wrong.

And it was painful. And I ran away and joined the Pagans for a while, and I found God in the forest. It’s quiet in the forest. And I spent eight years listening to the stories of the disabled people of God, but... at a distance.

Story Three. It’s about a year ago, and I’m on a retreat. It’s at a place that I know quite well, and I mostly know the RULES there. I’e spent my life knowing that no one ever tells you the rules, which I think is an experience I share with a lot of neurodivergent people. Rules like: we make casual conversation in the coffee lounge, but we speak solemnly of religious things in the chapel. And at the dinner table that night, someone asks me, “Naomi, what do you do?” And my brain starts firing off in all directions, trying to figure out the rules here. Is this a real question, or one of those strange fake questions that neurotypical people sometimes ask that they don’t really want the answer to. I don’t know why they do this, but they keep doing it. And I answer the question. I infodump my special interest on this poor woman for probably 10 minutes, because my special interest is disability and church, and it seems quite relevant for this Christian retreat.

Across from us at the other side of the table sits a nun. And when I start to realise that I’ve been talking too much, I try to rush to make up for it, by asking her a lot of questions about the retreat centre. And I think maybe this time I’ve got away with it. Maybe this time, my neurodivergent style of communication hasn't offended anyone.

But the next day, I meet that nun for spiritual direction, and she tells me I need to be fixed from a sin of selfishness. I think she said healed, but I heard fixed. Because I’m pretty sure she’s talking about my autistic style of communication. And a part of me still desperately wants to be cured and fixed and made neurotypical, and never bother anyone again with my special interests and my talking too much.

And as I’m on the train home from this retreat, having run away and left early, I’m thinking about how of course I struggle with selfishness, probably more than most people, and I need healing from that and so many other things. But what if I don’t need fixing? What if my tendency to infodump and my special interests are gifts from God? What if my wheelchair is a gift from God - and also the NHS. And I’m thinking about what Reverend Tim Goode says, based on the line from the psalms, about how we are all fearfully and wonderfully made, our whole selves, our disabled selves, our neurodivergent selves. And how this is one story of the disabled people of God.

I met Tim at this conference. And I’ve met so many people here who’ve told me a piece of this bigger story. For about eight years, this conference was my church, and I found God in the people of God, and slowly, all of us together, on the edge, we started to make one space for the disabled people of God to tell our stories. (And there are more and more spaces where this is happening.)

But so many of the people I talk to are reluctant to tell their stories. They say, “I’m not a theologian, so I don’t know if this is the right thing to say…” And then they come out with unbelievably beautiful stories that have taught me more about God and the people of God than any priest preaching about the healing narratives ever could.

And, the more I hear these stories of the disabled people of God, the more I can have an encounter like I did with the nun at the retreat centre, and come out of it still believing that maybe I don’t need fixing. I am disabled, and neurodivergent, and bisexual, and nonbinary, and I love stories and cats and superheroes, and God looked upon me and saw that I was good. And with every new story I hear of the disabled people of God I think, “And God looked upon us all, and saw that we were good.”

I want every one of us to have that experience - every single disabled, Deaf, neurodivergent, learning disabled and chronically ill person. So please keep telling your story. It probably won’t end with you being fixed and that’s why it matters. It’s our stories that have shown me that we are loved, exactly as we are. We each hold a piece of a bigger story of God, and it matters.

So. Where are the stories of my people?