

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

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Proper 24 (C): Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18: 1-8

“What is The Bible?” This was my opening question this year to both our Middle School Youth Group and our Confirmation Class. I was met with mostly silence, but that’s okay, when I was their age, I couldn’t have told you much about the Bible either. That’s why we have those classes, so they can learn. What concerns me more is how we might answer that question.

Episcopalians have a bit of tricky relationship with the Bible. We are very clear that we are not fundamentalists; we don’t believe in a literal interpretation. Yet we read four selections from it every week, which means, thanks to our lectionary cycle, we get through the majority of it every few years. We are clearly Biblically grounded. We call it The Word of the Lord, we revere it, proclaim it, lift it up-- heck I even kiss it. But do we know what we’re dealing with, when we’re dealing with The Bible? How many of us feel comfortable reading it on our own outside of Sunday morning? And when we listen to it on Sunday morning, do we understand what we are hearing?

There are more than a few reasons for this ignorance of our Holy Scriptures. In the first place, the Bible is unlike anything else we read. It is unlike it in size, construction and most importantly in aim. You may revere the Harry Potter Books but they are not claiming to reveal the truth of the universe. We don’t read the Bible the same way we read the newspaper, or a novel. We are supposed to interact with it in a unique way, but we often feel ill-equipped to undertake such a reading so we don’t.

Another part of the problem is that the Bible has been coopted by people who read it and use it as a tool of oppression, judgment and violence. As the saying goes, the Bible in one man’s hand is worse than the sword in another’s. When you’ve got a text you think is divinely inspired, it becomes a pretty effective trump card to be played in any situation you want to appear justified and right.

This, in and of itself, is unfortunate but just as unfortunate is the way such misuse of the Bible causes others to turn away from it. If the Bible says those things they say it does, then opening up that thick book with the gold-flecked pages and tiny font may just sour us on the whole thing. And this fear allows the Bible to be misread and misused without any opposition. Rather than fight for our sacred text, we hand it over to those who would commit sacrilege with it.

And then there are other traditions that teach us to revere The Bible so completely that we are unworthy to approach it ourselves. One must be trained, and ordained to understand the words in those pages. So the one or two Bibles we have around the house become more like museum pieces than books. They are symbols of our faith but we are ignorant of their substance.

Those are a lot of powerful reasons not to read the Bible. And yet, and yet, if we neglect it, if we are satisfied with a certain level of ignorance about it, or if we sacrifice it to those who would misread it, we miss out on the riches of its wisdom and spiritual guidance. In the letter to Timothy that we read this morning, the author says that these sacred writings are able to instruct us for salvation through faith in

Jesus Christ and that the texts in this book are inspired by God such that they can be used for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness. That's a lot of good stuff! It would be a shame to miss out on it.

So in the spirit of helping us all feel emboldened enough to approach the Bible ourselves, to reclaim it from the fundamentalists, let me see if I can respond to some of these concerns. First of all, in this church you are worthy enough to read The Bible. It is a source of personal as well as communal grounding and strength; inspiration and revelation. This is the Word of God and it is for you as much as it is for me.

As far as ignorance goes, I can't give you the whole Bible 101 class, but I can give you the highlights. The Bible is not a book. It is 66 books, split into the Old Testament which tells the story of the people of Israel and their relationship with God, from the beginning of creation to their exile from the Promised Land under the Babylonians—and the New Testament. Within the Old Testament we have books of law, history, prophecy, and poetry all written by different people in different contexts with different agendas and goals. The author of Job was not going about making his point the same way the author of Judges was. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) which agree in some areas, but not all. There are also stories of the early church and a number of letters most of them written by a guy named Paul, but not all of them. And most of those letters actually predate the composition of the Gospels, even though they come after them in the book. As with the Old Testament, all these books were written in and for a particular cultural, historical and geographical context. So don't think of the Bible as a book, think of it as a shelf of books on a general topic—the relationship of God to Man and Man to God—but written in different genres, by different people, for different reasons, and stitched together into a portable, if somewhat daunting folio.

As far as what it talks about, you need to know is that The Bible is written by humans about God. People who have had experiences of the divine in their lives as individuals and as communities writing out of those experiences and trying to make sense of them. The Bible is the Word of God in that God can and does speak through humans, but by virtue of the fundamental reality that human beings are not God, we cannot escape a certain tainting of the message when filtered through the imperfect sieves of our human mind, language, culture and sin. God is in there, God inspired the writers, I have no doubt, but he's also been unavoidably overlaid by our own agendas.

So how should we go about reading such a complicated, but potentially life-changing text? *Carefully and persistently.* As I said before, the Bible is unique and thus demands a unique approach. So rather than reading it as an instruction manual, or a strictly historical account, or a book of mythological stories, think of reading the Bible like a wrestling match with an angel. In our story from Genesis this morning, Jacob spends the night locked in a bout with a mysterious angel of God. He knows the Angel holds a blessing for him and he will not let go until he gets it. I love this scene because it is so emblematic of our spiritual life. Times of struggle in the name of securing a drop of divine grace. This is what reading the Bible is like. Like Jacob, sprung upon at Peniel, the Bible comes to us as a revelation of God, but we must struggle with it to get its blessing. To read it not at all is to miss out. To read it superficially is to miss out. But to sit with it, pray with it, read it, question it, meditate on it and learn from it, is to go digging for its message and to be blessed by it, to be changed by it, to bear the marks of your battles proudly such that your life, your name, your future may be shaped by it.

But if we're going to engage in this struggle, if we are going to wrestle with The Bible in search of its blessing, we've got to have a clear idea of WHY. It's not enough just to know how it's structured, or who wrote it, or even how to read it. We have to know why we should engage in this struggle at all. You have to care enough to put up a fight. And it's not a good enough answer to say, "Well, we should read The Bible because it is The Bible." That's the logic that gives the book pride of place on our book shelves, gathering dust on its leather cover.

So why read the Bible at all? Because the Bible is making a profound claim on you, it has a vision for you and for this world that is deserving of your attention, at the very least, and your devotion, at the very best. Buried within those pages lie deep truths about the human condition; deep truths about us, deep truths about God. Hidden like treasures waiting for you to discover them. These truths have resonated with billions of people, across millennia. They have changed the world. Those pages possess glimpses of God that, when collected give an imperfect, but compelling picture of the One who created and sustains this world. The clearest glimpse of this God is in the person of Jesus Christ—crucified and risen. And in those pages we can find everything we need to know to set us on the path to reunion with the One from whence we came and the One to whom we will return. The Bible isn't perfect, but it is promising, promising in the vision it outlines for what the world could be and how we could help make it so. Promising in what we have to look forward to for all eternity. Promising in how blessed our lives can be until then. It may not lay out a smooth, paved path; it may have divots and roots and all kinds of things that make it difficult for us to secure its blessings, but that's the work, that's what the struggle is for: to find and stick to the path of righteousness we find there because we know in our heart that this is what matters. That is why we read the Bible. And that is what allows us to say, without irony or restraint, that this is the Word of The Lord. Thanks be to God.