

Sermon-St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
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A number of years ago our when our family was on vacation, we got to our hotel room and I did my usual survey of the room and the amenities. In the bedside table drawer were two books: one was the Gideon's Bible, the other was one called The Teachings of Buddha.

If was first time I ever saw a book of a different tradition in my hotel drawer. I was fond of some of the quotes of Buddha and was curious about the book. It took about 10 minutes for me to decide that I really didn't know where to start reading in this book, and how long it would take me to get to those inspirational and pragmatic quotes.

It did give me pause to think what people must think when arriving at a hotel, perhaps having very little or no exposure to Christianity, to open a Bible, and not knowing where to begin. Genesis is a good place to start, but a few hundred pages later you end wallowing in pages and pages of Hebrew law.

Some of us including me, have played a game of Bible Roulette, where you place the Bible on it spine, let it fall open and point to a scripture God might want you to ponder today.

Bible texts can be very difficult to understand. If one were to randomly stumble on the texts of Exodus where Moses' brother Aaron leads the people to create a statue out of gold and God in their anger threatens to destroy all the people, one might be alarmed at how quickly God's the wrath leveled at their people. What if you randomly landed on the parable in Matthew, where the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a wedding banquet that in its preparation to invite guests, turns into a bloodbath.

How we address the Bible can have a profound effect on how we interpret scripture. My goal today is to review these thorny texts from a couple of perspectives. And finally share a few tools to reading scripture that may engage our curiosity of scripture.

Addressing the Bible - 5 minutes

Until the 16th Century, the Bible was interpreted according to belief and traditions. The original translation was in Latin, and interpretation was presented by priests. Little or no attempt was made to determine origins of Scriptures.

A major conflict occurred when Copernicus, a Polish Mathematician and astronomer, formulated a model in 1510 that placed the Sun , rather than Earth at its center. One hundred years later the astronomer Galileo, found evidence to support his theory. Church officials were alarmed because the Copernican theory seemed to contradict the Bible about the center of the universe. Galileo was repeatedly called on by the church to abandon his findings. Finally, he was accused of heresy of defending the nature of the universe that was declared contrary to scriptures. He was sentenced to house arrest, under which he remained for the rest of his life.

By the nineteenth century, most Christians had come to accept the Copernican theory of the universe because of overwhelming scientific evidence. But a new crisis arose with the publication of English naturalist Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin proposed that species of plants and

animals evolved through a process of natural selection a theory that left little room for Divine guidance or design.

This prompted a renewed study of the origins and history of the Bible as well as its literary forms. This led to a Bible interpretation known as *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics addresses the Bible in its original historic and cultural setting and then apply those lessons to life in the present era. The Bible came to be viewed as a divinely inspired book of spiritual and ethical guidance, but not intended as authoritative on matters of history and science.

The *fundamentalist* movement began around 1900 in reaction to the newer understanding of the Bible.

The Fundamentalist approach believes the Holy Spirit dictated the Bible to its human authors word-for-word. They reasoned that "inerrancy of Scripture" meant that everything in the Bible must be absolutely, literally, scientifically, and historically true.

Gallup poll in 2022 shows that of all adults living in the United States, 20% believe in the literal word God, 49% believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, and another 29% believe the Bible is a book of stories and fables. Among Christians 40% believe in the literal word of God

The parable in Matthew, from a literal point of view, suggests all people can only enter the kingdom of God through his son Jesus. God's judgement is swift and sure. The lesson? Many are called, few are chosen. Some translations use the word "elect" in verse 14 instead of the word chosen. The strictest interpretation of this verse is the basis for the doctrine of predestination, that everyone who is saved was chosen by God before the foundation of the world Ephesians 1:4-5, 11-12. Many Christians conclude that no one can know of sure whether one is saved and will go to heaven.

What about the hermeneutical approach to scripture? The book of Matthew was written following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. It put into play a political and spiritual crisis as to who inherits the mantle of authority to carry on the Jewish traditions. In this historical backdrop, Jesus authority is questioned. In Matthew 21:23. We read "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority"? Jesus responds with a series of three parables. Any treatment of this passage comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a King who throws a wedding for his son, needs to include all three parables. Jesus addresses the Jewish leaders of his time. It is not intended as a universal lesson about salvation for all.

We can see that the two approaches produce two very different interpretations.

Let's look at the story of Moses.

From a literal point of view. Moses has gone up the mountain. He left the Israelites to the authority of his brother Aaron. The people are miserable. Aaron arranges to collect their gold and casts a golden calf. The people said "these are your gods that brought out of the land of Egypt. When Aaron hears this, he quickly builds an altar and declares that a festival the next day to honor the Lord.

From a literal standpoint, any depiction of a statue that may be an image of a god from another faith, is considered idol worship. God's wrath is swift. It takes all of Moses' energy and use of persuasion to

convince God to not destroy the people. Again, God's wrath being swift and sure. A warning that anything people use to replace the worship of God will surely lead to eternal destruction.

The hermeneutical lens invites us to visit the culture and history of the era, to imagine yourself as a character to draw out some context or meaning. Perhaps Moses was an introvert, so he goes on long walks for days at a time to regroup and think about how to wrangle the Israelites to keep going. He is coming up with rules and laws for a new nation. Maybe Moses gets depressed and to feel better he imagines a beautiful new temple; it takes him to a happy place. He is slapped back into reality by God and is informed that the people have run amok. "The people whom you brought out of Egypt have acted perversely.," says God. God is ready to smite them and consume them with fire and start over. But Moses, quite incredulously says, the people I brought out of Egypt? You told me to bring them out of Egypt. And Moses must remind God that promised Abraham and Isaac and Israel that God would multiply their descendants like the stars of heaven. Then the Lord changed his mind about the disaster he had planned to bring to the people. Some translations even say that the Lord "repented" about the disaster they had planned.

Sometimes the hermeneutic approach doesn't reach a different conclusion than the literal approach, such as this story in Exodus. Instead, hermeneutics, as it should, gives us the freedom to use our questions as a springboard for further study. Is God irrational? Does God need to repent of their anger they thought to do. Can we change God's mind by prayer? Is Jesus the only intercessory that can speak to God on our behalf, as Moses did for the Israelites??

My goal today was to review these troublesome texts from a couple of perspectives. And finally I will share a few tools to reading scripture that I hope will encourage you, and engage curiosity of scripture.

1. Don't avoid the hard texts. A faithful reading of scripture is not about defending the difficult parts of the Bible either by dismissing them or downplaying them. A faithful reading entails wrestling with troubling texts the way the prophets and as Jesus did.
2. Second, read the Bible on the assumption that the experiences recorded are basically of the same type as ours would have been if we had been there. Dallas Willard, in his book *Hearing God*, says that if we are to understand the Bible, those who lived through those experiences felt very much as we would if we had been in their place. Failure to read the Bible in a realistic manner continues Willard, reduces the bible a book of doctrine, of abstract truth about God, which one can search endlessly without encountering God, or hearing God's voice. If we do not understand the experience of bible characters in terms of our experience, we simply quit reading the Bible altogether.
3. Third, welcome scripture as a springboard to other topics. At least 1x/week or even a few times a month, talk about what you're reading with someone else. Tell them what you like or, dislike, confused by, questioning, etc. Like a good book club or going to a class, so too does Bible reading come alive when discussed with others.
4. Fourth, as a faith community, commit to creating a space that invites the difficult questions, one that is willing to wrestle with scripture in a public setting. We have our Centering Prayer, Bible Study, Adult Education and Stephen's Ministers to help us on our journey.. Commit and hold with care the stories that are shared with each other. Do so without judgement or shaming, taking to heart the words we read earlier from the book of Philippians: Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.