

How to Read the Bible

A sermon preached on Genesis 32:22-32 and Mark 4:35-41 by Emily Hull McGee at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on June 24, 2018

I.

As the legend goes, it was 1503 when Martin Luther first stumbled upon a copy of the Holy Bible. Barely 20 years old and halfway through his studies at the University of Erfurt, Luther was where most college students find themselves to be during their courses of study – in the library. There while browsing, Luther’s hands for the first time brushed across the scripture in its entirety. But the Bible was chained!

Later in his life, Luther shared about his delight in finding the book and discovering stories he’d never heard in his church’s weekly worship.”How fortunate I would be if I were to possess such a book!” he once said. But the irony of that first encounter writes itself, doesn’t it? This one who arguably did more than any mortal in the history of humankind to unbind the stories and lessons and songs and transformation captured in these very pages, found it first locked up in literal chains.

Some hypothesize that the Bible Luther found was dusty and forgotten. Others embellished the story to say that the Bible was disallowed and forbidden in such hands. Neither were true. The Bible – like other books at the time – was chained because of its value, a preventative measure to keep it from being stolen.¹

Nonetheless, this image of a “chained Bible,” fettered not by actual metal links by preconceived notions and opinions and assumptions and

¹ As told by Robison B. James in the Introduction to *The Unfettered Word: Southern Baptists Confront the Authority-Inerrancy Question*, p17.

expectations can sometimes be how we the modern readers encounter it, right? And so we must ask ourselves, how might we liberate these holy words from the trappings in which we so often contain them, so that the incarnate Word of God might lift off the page and into our very lives? Or put more plainly, *does it matter how we read the Bible?*

II.

If we're going to be about the work of engaging scripture, two stories – one from the Old Testament, one from the New – highlight for me the way in which we might do so.

First, the story of Jacob, whose name means 'the supplanter,' or the one who does by whatever means necessary that which gets him ahead.² You remember Jacob – that wily one who tricked his hungry brother Esau into trading his birthright for a bowl of soup, tricked his blind father Isaac into giving him the family blessing instead of the firstborn Esau, tricked his father-in-law Laban out of his herd of animals and stole his religious icons, and after all this deception of Esau and Laban, Jacob had gathered up his family, flock, and spoils and ran plumb away. For it seems that Jacob's deceit was finally catching up with him: Esau, enraged, had assembled an army and was advancing upon Jacob. Jacob couldn't have really thought that the gifts he sent ahead to meet Esau's army would have softened his brother's lifetime of anger. But in the darkness of his desperation, Jacob who had sent his family on ahead of him, found himself alone at night by the river Jabbok,

² My reading of Jacob and his wrestling match with God at the River Jabbok is substantially informed by my Granddaddy Bill's brilliant sermon on the same text, entitled "Wrestling With God," from his book, *Harbingers of Hope*.

frantic with fear, finally facing that dead end that his lifetime of running and lying and cheating had been trying to avoid.

There at the edge of who he knew himself to be, our high and holy God came to lowly and lying Jacob, “wrestling with him until daybreak.” God came not to lift him out of the crisis or let him run away from it like he always had, but rather to wrestle with him through it. God did not to make easy Jacob’s fording of that literal and metaphorical river but to rather leave him forever marked because of it. And as Jacob limped away into the dawn, you could almost imagine that the experience and the blessing he gained that night meant more to him than any favor he had once acquired through his wily ways. For the God who laid bare Jacob’s life, who saw through the darkness and the deceit to the human person under it all, who gave Jacob the option to bet it all on a blessing — that is the God who rose with him in the morning, lamed, renamed, and reconciled anew.

Then from today’s lectionary gospel reading, that great story of the disciples, Jesus, a boat, and a storm. Another story set in the evening, again by the water, again leaving others behind, and again the nudge came for the faithful to cross to the other side. The text says that the disciples took Jesus with them in that boat, “just as he was.” After a long day of preaching and teaching, healing and being with, it seems Jesus was ready for his equivalent of a Sunday afternoon nap! Neither the wind nor the waves awoke him from his weary slumber; only awakened when his disciples — sick with fear, scurrying around the deck, hand-wringing and apocalyptic — shook him and cried out, “do you not care that we are dying here?!” Tossed to and fro, the distraught disciples were sure they were to capsize, sure that was to be the

end, sure that all was lost. What they wanted him to actually *do* was unclear, but what we can read between these lines is a strong sense of panic: “fix it, Jesus!” they seem to scream into the storm.³

Seemingly untroubled, Jesus rises and calms the chaos — chaos beneath him in the water and chaos beside him in the boat: “Peace, be still!” he says. The storm settles down as Jesus turns to his seafaring companions, perhaps with a touch of frustration, a bit of bemusement, a hint of incredulity, and a heap of grace. “Why are you so afraid?” he asks. “Have you still no faith?” Awe came upon them, we learn, as they wonder who this One might be such that even the winds and the waves obey him.

III.

There are many of you here today who have read the Bible far longer and greater than I have in my almost-37 years of life. And no matter how each of us have engaged our holy texts, wrestling and hand-wringing as we do from time to time, I’m certain we don’t all do it the same — each of us read differently, appreciating the nuances of scripture in ways unique to our particular lives and leanings. That said, in my years as a follower of Jesus and as a minister, I have found there to be three practices of Bible-reading that seem to me to be universal to the practicing Christian.

First: we read the Bible personally, meaning that we always, always read these ancient words in light of our own unique situations. For example, when I felt God calling me and my family to leave our home and follow God to Winston-Salem, I read the story of Abraham and Sarah with new appreciation for the obedience shown when God says “go from your kindred

³ Helpful commentary from the Westminster Bible Companion’s *Mark*, by Douglas R. A. Hare, p60-62, and *Lent for Everyone: Mark, Year B*, by N. T. Wright, p30-32.

to the land that I will show you.” When I was pregnant with each of my children, I read in the words of Mary words that I newly recognized with the gift of a child stirring within me, “my soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” In seasons of my life when I have felt overwhelmed with anxiety, or like the wall of grief or fear or control or pride I’d carefully built suddenly threatened to fracture and drown me, I’ve found comfort that wasn’t my own, hearing God speak through Isaiah right to me: “when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; the rivers will not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you will not be burned, and the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord your God.”

So too with each one of us, who bring with us to our reading of scripture every worry, every situation, every role, every opinion, every expectation, and every bit of baggage we carry. We cannot set these things aside before we open the Bible, somehow hoping for an unfiltered, unbiased, pure reading of God’s words to us. No — the wars we’ve fought, the losses we’ve endured, the darkest corners of our lives that we hope never see the light of day, the doubts that threaten to unravel it all — they’re all *right there*, right behind our eyes, silently and subconsciously serving as a sieve through which we read and interpret the words on a page.

Next: we read the Bible relationally, meaning that, consciously or not, we are looking to the Bible to inform the way we relate to those and the things around us. We read to determine the posture we should hold towards those who have wronged us, or what we should say to God in times of gut-wrenching anger when all we feel is abandoned, or how we might love another with love that is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant

or rude. We read to find direction amidst conflict, learning that Jesus instructs us to go not to another and gossip but rather to go first to the one with whom we are angry. We read to discern how we might relate to a wayward child, or a powerful ruler, or an enemy in the ditch, or to one another as the body of Christ. We read about the relationships we should have with our work, our stuff, our convictions, even our very lives.

Sometimes the lessons contained within are too much for us to handle at the time, and we just ignore the truth that spills from the page. And other times, that very same truth is the truth that sets us free.

In all our personal wrestling and relational navigating, what we may not realize is that no matter *how* we read the Bible, whatever lenses we have on when opening scripture to make sense of the words within, whatever relationships — with ourselves, with loved ones, with enemies, with God — we are trying to better understand, **finally and most importantly that why we read the Bible is to discover the heart of God.** For when we wrestle and wrangle with these odd and wondrous words, poring over them to make sense of ancient words ever true, desiring them to inform our living, what we find on the other side of the wrestling in those dark and stormy nights... what we find is that the very character and nature of God revealed in fullest expression in Jesus of Nazareth as enlivened by the Spirit is a ***God of profound and unconditional love for all creation.***

We hear that unconditional love from God's first words of speaking and spiriting all life into being and then pronouncing it good. We taste and see that unconditional love alongside the Psalmist, catching the flavor of the Lord who is good, whose mercy endures forever. We see that unconditional

love on the cross where Jesus “emptied himself... and became obedient to the point of death.” We feel that unconditional love in the damp but empty tomb, where all death lost its sting. We press into that unconditional love alongside the great cloud of witnesses gone before, our hands in the wounds alongside Thomas, our beautiful feet running with those who bring the gospel of peace, our hair wiping the oil we’ve poured lavishly on the toes of our Lord. For in our reading, we catch a glimpse of the way things should be, we are reminded of who and whose we are, we feel the wideness of God’s mercy as wide as the sea, and we hear again the promise that echoes from age to age: “Do not fear! I am with you. You belong to each other. You belong to me. You are beloved.”

It’s so important to name not just how we read scripture, but why we read scripture, why we go to these holy pages to be reminded of this profound and unconditional love of God. Because if you’ve kept up with the news this past week, I don’t have to tell you that this really matters. It *matters* how we read the Bible, what posture we bring to our experience of it, what we seek to find within, how we read for the whole and not just the part, because too often the Christian witness of scripture in the world looks like plucking verses out of context, verses like Romans 13:1, and applying them to justify an opinion or behavior *on behalf of God*. When that happens, it’s akin to missing the glorious forest for the trees — the glorious forest, alive with fertile soil and fresh dew on the grass and birdsong and rays of sunlight and squirrels scampering up towering trees and all of God’s profound and unconditional love at work — missing all of this because one’s eyes fixate on a single piece of bark on a single tree in a million.

For we must remember that right up next to Paul's commendation from Romans 13:1 to "be subject to the governing authorities," is Romans 12:9 ("hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection."), Romans 12:13 ("extend hospitality to strangers"), Romans 12:16 ("live in harmony with one another"), Romans 12:20 ("if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink"), Romans 12:21 ("do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"), Romans 13:8-10 ("[all] other commandments [can be] summed up in this word, 'love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.'")

This is but one example of why it matters how we read the Bible. Because when we read that all humankind was created in God's image, we who love and have experienced the profound and unconditional love of God must do so! When we read the story of Cain and Abel and hear the reminder that we are our brother's and our sister's keeper echoing throughout all time and space, we who have experienced the profound and unconditional love of God must do so! When we hear the commandment from Leviticus to lawyers in the New Testament that says to "love your neighbor," we who have been redeemed in Christ and sent forth by the Spirit must do so! When Jesus says "let the children come to me," and "whatever you do for the least of these, you did so to me," we who proclaim God our creator, Christ our redeemer, and Spirit our sustainer, all in One with profound and unconditional love for all creation must do so!

We must do so, we must wrestle with the text, we must let it inform the storms of our lives, because our proclamation of God's profound and

unconditional love is a matter of life and death. We must do so, because in the wrestling matches and storms of our dark nights, God in God's profound and unconditional love for each and every one of us asks us why often we have such little faith. For nothing short of blessing awaits. So brothers and sisters, might we release the chains enough to liberate this Word, such that we can cross over to the other side.

May it be so! Amen.