

Reading the Word; Hearing the Story

Psalm 119:1-16

Good Morning Friends, it's good to be gathered together this morning to worship the Lord, here in this room and online.

When I was a kid, singing was always a part of Sunday School. Before we were ushered off to our classrooms (and closets that had to double as classrooms), Linda, the cheerful vocal leader, would guide us through the classic Sunday School songs. One that sticks out to me is "read your bible, pray everyday, pray everyday, read your bible, pray everyday and you'll grow, grow, grow!" With each round of the verse, we'd grow taller and taller, standing on tiptoes and arms stretched towards the sky, showing just how much we'd grow as we practiced the disciplines of reading the scriptures and praying everyday. Conversely, sometimes the song would be sung the other way, neglect your bible, forget to pray, and you'll shrink, shrink, until 40 kids are lying prone on the floors, mushing their little faces into the carpet.

Most people of faith would say that reading one's Bible is important. The Holy Scriptures do indeed play a significant role in our discipleship journeys. Sometimes there is a temptation to see reading our Bibles as something akin to taking our vitamins or

brushing our teeth. It's how we stay spiritually healthy. It's an item to check off the to-do list.

Yet, when we read how authors like David speak about the word of the Lord, as in Psalm 119, it's clear that Scripture is the vehicle in which; the laws, commandments, precepts, and truths about God are revealed, it's much more than a daily strengthening medicine. In fact, in the 176 verses that make up Psalm 119, Every verse exalts the Word of God and the God of Word. This psalm has been called the "Mount Everest of the Psalms" and every verse mentions and exalts God. In these one hundred seventy-six verses, all but five verses reference the Word of God. Further, in the new Testament, the Apostle Paul charges Timothy, a young leader in the early church to not lose sight of the importance of the scriptures, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is [b] useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

As disciples of Jesus Christ, how can we grow in our love and reverence for the scriptures? How do we as Anabaptists conceive of scripture? And what are some practices that we can incorporate in our personal and communal lives to help us connect with scripture in new ways? That's what we're going to talk about this morning.

First, we need to resist the temptation to see scripture as a prescription for godliness. Last week, I had mentioned that in upper elementary school, our Sunday school curriculum was an Old Testament survey. We would read aloud together large portions of the first five books of the OT-Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. I'll just say there is a lot of material in those books that is...not rated G. And our very dear Sunday School Teacher, Mrs. Swenson, didn't seem quite sure what to do with all the questions from these curious kids about murders, assaults, strange mosaic laws, and violent consequences brought by God. Often the answer was, that was a long time ago, things are different now, or sometimes, even, I don't know why. I'm sure Mrs. Swenson was doing her best, and was probably nervous about offering a response that would satisfy kids' questions and also not ruffle the feathers of many conservative parents. The reality is that the Bible is not a how-to manual, instead the Scriptures show us about life as it is. Not all of scripture is prescriptive, nor can stories of God and work in the lives of real, messy, complicated people be reduced to a simple morality tale, as much as those Children's Storybook Bibles may try.

Meghan Good, in her book *The Bible Unwrapped*, talks about the Bible in this way. "But if the shape of the Bible does not neatly conform to the paradigm of Human Life for Dummies, what does its unique combination of ancient laws, harrowing tales, private letters, and epic poetry actually add up to? What kind of book is this really?...perhaps the best place to begin exploring the Bible's nature is with what seems the most obvious: whatever else we may have in the Bible, at the broadest level what we find there is a story. The Bible tells the story of a series of encounters between God and

humanity. From the dawn of human existence, long before the Bible's first pages were penned, God has been reaching towards human beings, and human beings back towards God. Humans have struggled to comprehend God's character and being, God's good desires for them, and God's dream for the whole created order. God has struggled to get humans to listen to the revelation of these things. Whatever else it does, the Bible witnesses this bi-directional pursuit. Not every story in the Bible reflects what ought to be. Not everything that happens in the pages of the Bible does so because it should. Not every word spoken by someone in the Bible comes stamped with a divine endorsement. This is no fairy-tale or snow-globe world. The Bible tells the story of what is. It's the true story of a world where hearing is imperfect, where motives are mixed, where evil exists, where bias lingers, where good intentions can go wildly astray. And where God persists in showing up."

I'd like us to zero in on this idea of the Bible as Story for a minute. Of course, we're not talking about Story as a fairy tale or a work of fiction, we're talking about Story as the Grand Narrative, the way we make sense of our world. Now, Like a lot of people her age, my mom is very big into genealogy; into finding out the stories of her ancestors, where they came from, where they lived, what they achieved in their lives, what legacies they left, and so on. Often she likes to tell me about some ancestors' famous achievements, like building the first church in a certain town, or being the mayor of such a place, rubbing shoulders with some more famous person. And while those things are interesting to me, what really fascinates me are the more ordinary things...How did my ancestors spend their days? Why did they leave their home country? Why did my

grandmother's oldest sister look nothing like the rest of her many siblings? How did my ancestors make sense of who they were?

Char recently told me about a study in a book she had read from the library here at church called the Power of Story, by Mark Yackonelli. In the book, Yackonilla cites a study done by two American Sociologists in the 1990s. The researchers identified two groups of children in the same city. One group was children who were "doing well", prosocial, hitting their developmental marker, engaged, doing well in school, etc. The other group was children who struggled, in school, behaviorally, socially, etc. The researchers then asked the families of these, what role story played in their lives? For the first group, the kids who were "doing well", there was lots of storytelling, sharing about past memories, their own parents' childhood, and conversations around the table. Stories about who they were and where they came from in the grandest sense. And for the other group of kids, the opposite was true, there were very few stories being told about their families, funny things that happened, the sharing of memories. Now you could attribute all sorts of reasons to the lack of story, a family could be in poverty, there could be familial dysfunction, there's a whole host of reasons for lack of stories. The point, I understand, that Yakonelli is getting at is that Story matters. It tells us who we are, it helps us make sense of the world in all kinds of important ways.

That is what the Bible does for us; it gives a story. A place to recall and remember who we are, and even more importantly, who God is. It is the story of the People of God, an identity that was forged by God and God's love, by God's relentless pursuit of us. And

Truly, that I think, is the single biggest “reason”, for a lack of a better word, to read the Bible. To understand who are, as God’s people, by having a Story, a history, a legacy to place ourselves into. Not just the polished, sainted version, but our real selves, just as the pages of the Bible are filled with real versions of our foremothers and fathers in faith.

This idea of knowing who we are through God’s story also connects with our Anabaptist Story, because Anabaptists hold to belief that the Bible tells us who were based on the past, but also the Bible can tell us who were now, in this time and place, as a community. “The Anabaptists believed that the best interpreters of the Scripture were those who had received the Holy Spirit. This meant that an illiterate peasant who has received the gift of the Spirit is a better interpreter of God’s word than a learned theologian who lacks the Spirit. Anabaptists taught “Scripture and Spirit together” rather than “Scripture Alone” (the slogan of Martin Luther’s church reform). This idea was radical in the extreme, especially because it opened the interpretation of Scripture to all. (Not Surprisingly,) the political authorities considered this politically dangerous and theologically irresponsible...But Anabaptist soon found it necessary to modify their teaching on “Scripture and Spirit.” Some individuals had begun prophesying and doing questionable things, claiming to be “led by the Spirit.” How were “the spirits” to be tested? One early Anabaptist document recommends that the brothers and sisters read Scripture together, then “the one to whom God has given understanding shall explain it.” This process of congregational discernment provided one way of placing controls on the interpretation of Scripture and prophecy....A second measure of spiritual claims emerged after so-called Prophets had led some Anabaptists to disaster. Menno Simons,

especially, emphasized that all claims must be measured by the life and the words of Christ.”

So within our own Anabaptist story, we see this emphasis on the Priesthood of all believers, on the opportunity to say, yes, the Bible is our story, and what does that mean to you? To Roger? To Junia? To Nora? We all have something to offer, something to wrestle with together. The Bible is a book that we all have access to, a story that we all bring our unique experiences to bear on.

A word here about Scriptural access. As a person who writes a sermon nearly every week, I'm so grateful to have every Bible translation and numerous commentaries at my fingertips. Only remember a part of the verse? Type that into google and you can get a reference. Struggling with the wording of a particular verse? Bible Gateway can give you any other translation you might like to try. One thing I can do as people of faith in 2023 can seek to do is to not lose sight of JUST how very precious the scriptures are.

So, this here, is my very first “real” Bible, like an actual bible, not a story book one. My church had a tradition that every kid, in grade three, would be presented with a Bible on behalf of the church. I still remember that presentation, all of us 8 and 9 year olds lined up at the front of the church, as our Sunday School teacher called us forward one by one to receive our Bible. I had this sense then that I was graduating into something bigger. I now had a Bible of my own, one that I could read in my bed, highlight, and bring along with me to church. This was something special.

There are so many practices, both modern and ancient, that can invite us to remember how good this Story is and to hear it in a new way. When you read scripture aloud, we might consider standing up, as a sign of reverence. For me, I know that I have to try really hard to ACTUALLY read scripture, to let each word soak in, to pay attention, to not gloss through...especially when I'm reading a familiar passage. Another practice, which aligns with our Anabaptist tradition, is to talk about scripture in community.

At our church back in Manitoba, after every sermon, our Pastor would say, "So, what did the Lord say to you?" and open up a talk-back of sorts. Some people would comment on something that stood out to them, hearing something new in an old passage, raising a question, all of that is communal discernment and interpretation. When we think about discerning scripture, sometimes the image is of people wrestling with a text, trying to figure out what the right interpretation is, what's right and what's wrong, but often discernment is just hearing what others have to say.

To close my sermon this morning, I'd like us to give that a whirl.

I'm going to read a Psalm aloud this morning, Psalm 19, and then we'll have a chance, together, to say what we've heard. There's no pressure in this. If you have something to share, you're more than welcome, but if you don't, that's okay. Not every scripture is going to pull on us in the same way. Let's pray and then I'll read.