

BIBLE 101: HOW ARE WE TO READ THE BIBLE AND WHY?

Deuteronomy 11:18-21 Luke 24:13-16, 27-32, 36, 44-45

One of the gifts of being human is that we read. What a marvelous and amazing thing. We read newspapers and magazines, novels and biographies. We read menus and food labels, manuals and self-help books. We read love letters and get well cards. We read on-line and at the beach. We read to our children and our grandchildren. We read for pleasure, for knowledge, for inspiration, for encouragement. We read to encounter new worlds and new ways of looking at our own world. We read to enlarge our horizons, to gain wisdom, to experience beauty, to understand others and ourselves better. We read for company, and for escape. We read to meet a myriad of folks and to enter their lives. We read to laugh, to cry. We read for the wonder of it all. With all the reading material that is available to us, then why read the Bible?

Well, unlike anything else we will ever read, “the Bible is different” (writes Eugene Peterson the translator of *The Message*). The Bible is about “revelation”. “When we read a favorite magazine, webpage, or book we’re reading things that provide us with information about a certain topic or take us away into another world. The (Bible) goes beyond that” – it reveals to us a God who has called us by name – who desires “to form us and bless us, to teach us and guide us, to forgive us and save us.”¹ We read the Bible then to encounter God, to enter into a conversation with the divine and to be transformed in heart, mind, and soul by what read as we listen and commune with God.

To invite and to encourage you to just read your Bible is not as easy as it sounds. “We live in a culture that places significant value on time and convenience,” and reading the Bible is “anything but speedy. To truly read the Bible, you’ve got to soak yourself in it.”²

I’m sure you have been to the ocean, but “have you ever been in the ocean? Not just pulling up in a car, taking your shoes off, and sticking your big toe in the water. Have you ever immersed yourself in the ocean? When you do that, it’s almost as if a whole new world opens up to you. You see and feel and taste and hear things that you never could have by just walking along the beach – you experience things hidden from the spectators on the beach. It’s the same thing when you come to the Bible. When you *immerse* yourself in it, a whole new world opens up.”³

The Bible itself really says it best. Hear again our scripture reading from Deuteronomy: *“Place these words upon your hearts. Get them deep inside you. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder... Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning until you fall into bed at night. Inscribe them on the doorposts and gates of your cities so that you’ll live a long time.”*

Are you opening your Bibles and letting the words and thus God get deep inside of you? If you are not, maybe there is nothing I can say to convince you. Maybe you are content just to get a few sound bytes of scripture on a Sunday morning or in an occasional Bible study class. If so, you are missing out on something extraordinary. The Bible may have been written thousands of years ago, yet it has everything to do with life today. Like any good story, it deals with the big questions and themes we face in our earthly journey – life, death, hope, disappointment, love, tragedy, evil, meaning, purpose. Eugene Peterson translator of *The Message*, “When you hold a Bible in your hands, it contains our collective stories. Each of us can find little glimpses of ourselves in its pages. The people in the Bible are a whole lot like you (and me), and a lot of them were far from perfect. We need to open our eyes and see what God would have each us understand about ourselves.”⁴ You see, the more we open the Bible and read, the more we begin to ‘get it’ - we are in conversation with God who wants to be in relationship with us and wants to transform our lives.

So if we understand that the creator of the universe wants to be in relationship, in conversation with us and wants to set our hearts on fire as Jesus did when he opened the scriptures to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, then how are we to read the Bible?

Last week in our Bible 101 series we learned that to read is to interpret and that if we are to faithfully interpret scripture there is a lot of information that first needs to be acquired about a particular passage. Interpretation is an informational approach to the scriptures, when what I want to stress today is a formational approach – reading to be formed into God’s people, reading to be transformed by God in Christ. As Thomas Merton has written, an adequate grasp of the biblical text “requires two levels of understanding: first, a preliminary unraveling of the meaning of the texts... which is mainly a matter of knowledge acquired by study; then a deeper level, a living insight which grows out of personal involvement and relatedness (to the text)... Only on this second level is the Bible really grasped.”⁵ This second level of understanding is

gained through a meditative approach to scripture called spiritual, sacred, or prayerful reading.

More than 1500 years ago Saint Benedict, developed a way to enter into a living conversation with God through a prayerful reading of scripture called *Lectio Divina*. I've included in your bulletins a Bible bookmark with the steps to this living conversation with God.. We do not have ample time to move through each of the steps, so what I want to focus on is the underlying assumption to this practice, that God has a word for you, that God has something to say to you. The steps in *Lectio Divina* are about being drawn by God's Spirit to a particular word or phrase in the passage read. I speak of it as a word or phrase that "shimmers" for you or calls out to you.

Lectio Divina is about focusing your attention on this word or phrase. So as you read a passage you let the "words echo and resonate in your mind; allowing meanings to sink in, associations to arise, images to surface. If a word or phrase seems especially significant, you remain with it, turning it over in your mind and heart. When the sense of immediacy fades, (you can) move on to another verse. If it remains meaningful for you, stay with it. (Know that in sacred reading of scripture there is) a word meant for your ears... Once you have heard a 'word' that seems meant for you, start ruminating on it. (Ask yourself) Why is this a word for (me)? What is it about (my) life right now that needs to hear this word? How is God catching (my) attention?... What does God seem to be saying to (me) through the word?"⁶ Then take the word or phrase you've encountered in the text into prayer with God as well as into your life and relationships.

A woman who faithfully practices *Lectio Divina* in her faith walk begins the practice in prayer. She prays:

*All-seeing One, above me, around me, within me.
By my seeing as I read these sacred words.
Look down upon me
Look out from within me
Look all around me
See through my eyes
Hear through my ears
Feel through my heart
Touch me where I need to be touched;
and when my heart is touched,
give me the grace to lay down this Holy Book*

*and ask significant questions:
Why has my heart been touched?
How am I to be changed through this touch?*

Friends, God wants to have a living conversation with us. Jesus who was steeped in scripture and opened it up in wondrous ways to his disciples, had a living conversation with God through the words of the psalmist and the prophets. He invites us to open up our Bibles and through the prayerful reading of Holy Scripture to create a life with God and to hear and be transformed by the word that God has for us each and every day. It may be a comforting word, a challenging word. It may be an encouraging word, an empowering word. It may be a lively word, a life-changing word. You'll never know unless you open up the Bible and read.

NOTES:

1. Eugene Peterson, Introduction to *The Message Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, 2003.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. As quoted by *TruthMedia.com* 2004
5. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 61-62
6. Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, p.26.
7. Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary*, HarperSan Francisco, 1991, p. 53.

Lectio Divina (prayerful reading)

Lectio Divina is an ancient method for praying the Bible, being open to hearing in the words of Scripture a personally enlivening and transforming word from God.

Begin by finding a time and place where you can be quiet and undisturbed in your prayer. After choosing a brief passage of Scripture, take a few minutes to quiet your mind before turning your attention to the passage you have selected.

✦ Read the passage slowly, gently savoring each word. Linger with the passage as you feel drawn. When a word or phrase catches your attention, stay with it for a time, repeating it to yourself silently.

✦ Slowly read the passage again. Holding in your heart the word or phrase that has spoken to you, allow it to call forth any image, feeling, memory, or thought that may arise.

✦ Ponder what has touched you in the scripture and the response for prayer or action it has evoked within you. Is there an invitation here? Might God be calling you to be or become something in the coming days? Is there a word of affirmation or challenge?

✠ End by simply resting in God's presence in peace.