

Why do we bother?

Easter 4B, Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23

Grace Church Newton

April 21, 2024

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE SERMON. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life. Amen. (BCP, 236).

This prayer I just offered is a collect that makes an appearance on one Sunday morning each year at the end of the liturgical year, just before Advent begins. It makes it sound like a lot of work to make sense of scripture, huh? Hear it. Read it. Mark it. Learn it, and inwardly digest it. That's a not-so-subtle clue that it may not be so simple to understand what the Bible is trying to get at.

A few weeks ago I joined the confirmation class. The topic for that session was liturgy and worship. After a conversation about the different elements of worship, we asked the young people which element was most important to them. Two of the three young people said, "the sermon." This sort of surprised me, so I asked if they could explain why. Why was the sermon important for them? Here's what they said: "The readings are really hard to understand. They are so old, and they talk about things we don't know about. And it's just really confusing. So the sermon sort of helps us understand a little bit about what's going on."

That's the task, isn't it? To – in the words of our young people – try to "understand a little bit about what's going on" in this ancient, often contradictory, multi-genre, intertemporal, self-referencing, crazy, amazing collection of books that we call the Bible. That's the task. To spend time in the texts, to understand – as best we can – what they might have meant in their original settings – how they came to be – so that we might begin to apply them in our own time. Or, in the words of that collect, so that we might "hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the meaning that can be found in the Bible.

Here comes a provocative question: Why? Why put in that effort? Why spend half of our liturgy each week – half of our gathered time together – on what is called, "the liturgy of the Word"? Why do priests, as part of our ordination, "solemnly declare that [we] do believe the Holy Scriptures...to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation" [BCP, p. 526]?

Why? The Bible is full of problems. Have you read it? When I first started working with children in a religious ed capacity, I used a curriculum that followed the lectionary. I remember being excited that the OT selection was Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea. With my adult eyes – my hardened eyes – I was thinking, “This is one of the great stories in the Bible. One of the top stories that kids should know. This will grab their attention!” You know their response? “Why did God want to kill all those people?” They were referring to the Egyptian soldiers who were in pursuit of the Israelites when the waters closed back in upon them. Their little ears could hear that the Bible is full of problems.

Not to pick on the Old Testament. The New Testament – as we have discussed several times in these last weeks – has also inspired violence against Jews through the centuries. It has been used to justify the domination of enslaved people in this country. And it continues to be used to do violence to this day. Readings of New Testament texts are used to exclude and oppress women in many places and to incite violence against the LGBTQ community. So, full of problems.

My spirit was led toward this topic for my sermon today when I first read the selection from the book of Acts, when the voice of Peter called out the rulers, elders, scribes, and high priests of Jerusalem, accusing them of crucifying Jesus, of rejecting the cornerstone, of rejecting the only source of salvation, to quote Acts. That deserves our attention. My heart was also still heavy from last Sunday, when I made a choice NOT to challenge the selection from Acts that was offered last week. Just to remind us, at the height of it’s anti-Jewish invective accused “the Israelites” of “kill[ing] the Author of life.” We’ve talked about this a lot recently, I rationalized. People will know that I bring this kind of lens to the New Testament, even if I don’t address it every time, I told myself. And, my sermon is already pretty long, I worried. But in the choice to let that challenge fall to the wayside, I did harm to some members of our congregation.

If responsible use of scripture requires us so often to stop and challenge the texts or risk doing harm, then we’re back to our provocative question of the day: why bother?

Now, as one of those priests who has solemnly declared that “I do believe the Holy Scriptures...to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation,” you may not be surprised that I think the Bible is worth the bother. Because intertwined with these problematic elements, shining through these difficult pieces, we also find the expression of God’s loving, creative, salvific movement in our world. It’s expressed in necessarily limited human form – we can only begin to know the love and the presence and the power of God. We simply can’t take it all in. So, sometimes we get it wrong. And

always we are limited. And we need to note that and take responsibility for that. But, at least for me, the Bible – this ancient, contradictory, multi-genre, intertemporal, crazy, amazing collection of books – is a place where God can be found. Even in its sometimes ill-fitted metaphors that are more suited to a pastoral, agrarian culture, we can still glimpse the Holy. “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. God gives me rest in green pastures and leads me to still waters.” Imagine this, in a parched land where water was life or death. “God spreads a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me” ...when food – much less food in glorious abundance – was much harder to come by than merely swinging through the aisles of a supermarket. “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” at a time when hospitality meant protection and security.

There is a late 20th century, early 21st century American theologian, Verna Dozier, who speaks into this question of “Why bother?” Dozier asserts that “the most courageous statement in the world, perhaps, is the one that begins the Hebrew Bible, ‘In the beginning...’ By that statement,” she says, “the Hebrews would stake their lives on the fact that there is an ultimate reality in the world.” Dozier continues, “Then they went on to be even more daring and said, ‘In the beginning God created...’. Not only is there an ultimate reality in the world, that reality is for us” [[Source](#), p. 14].

This is why we bother. As Dozier puts it, the Bible “is a book of wrestlings, not a book of answers” [ibid., 18]. So we challenge, and we stop to address the places where harm might be done. AND we keep our ears open for the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls us each by name, knowing that in the history and the poetry and the songs of this book we find the very presence of God.

Amen.