

## WHAT IF THE BIBLICAL CANON WERE REOPENED?

Scripture Readings: John 14:25-31, Acts 7:51-53

### Food for the Journey

So the question for this week was: “If you could reopen the Biblical canon what would you include or add and why?” Before we embark on today’s journey, my Presbyterian roots compel me to remember that my vows of ordination include the lines:

*Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you? Do you?*  
**Sure. I do.**

I do, ok? But ... I also take heart in remembering that I can’t hurt God. My concept of canon, or what is sacred, or Holy doesn’t impact what is true in God’s eyes. I passed my Bible content and other ordination exams, but that doesn’t mean I’ve gleaned anywhere near all the truth the Bible has to teach me, nor do I think that all God has to tell us has been captured only in these particular books. Think of God’s conversation with us as less like taking a memory quiz and trying to get the answers right, and more of an on-going and free-flowing conversation between Einstein and an infant.

Still, trusting that this is not some sort of Presbyterian long-game of “gotcha” tricking me into messing up my ordination vows, I am excited by this question. To accept, that for today at least, scripture is an idea we can play with without fear of incurring too much wrath from God or at least the Facebook live feed. I started remembering all my favorite stories, characters, poems, books and plays. The best lines and the most poignant portrayals of the improbable and mundane alike. What a terribly blank canvas to give an English major. So I wrote, and I wrote, and I rewrote, and I looked up passages and I unpacked boxes to find the right paragraph, page, and phrase and then I wrote some more. And then I got completely overwhelmed. Partly because the Bible already contains so very much. And partly because there are just so many ways God is still speaking to us both through and beyond the texts we call Scripture. The world is so abundant and terrible and beautiful and overwhelmingly full of God.

We have the gift of brilliant theologians and practitioners of the faith who offer us new eyes through which to translate and interpret and understand Scripture. Dr. Wil Gafney, Rev. Traci Blackmon, Gustavo Guitierrez, Rev. Rosemary Radford Reuther, and on and on and on. We get womanist translations, mujerista theology, liberation theology, queer theology, and so on. Each holding scripture as sacred, and as a starting point, but each offering careful translation work that lets us know the Bible does indeed contain the Word for all people. The King James is fine but it isn’t the full story. Given that our constructions of race and gender and understandings of oppression look wildly different than Ancient Rome’s, there are new prisms through which to view God’s perpetual truth.

Building from those honored practices and the work of midrash throughout the ages, I’d be so keen to run further in directions to which I think the Bible is already pointing. For example, I could honor the proverbial figure of Wisdom and aim for pith. The Holy Spirit pops in with some sweet one-liners, so I would throw in Flannery O’Connor’s “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.” Easily could’ve been a proverb. A short pithy punch of truth to help keep our feet on

the ground in times of social turmoil and reality distorted by living in a world where “reality” is a category of entertainment.

The Bible also gives us the idea that love comes in many forms, in C.S. Lewis’s the Four Loves ... and we’d better get some C.S. Lewis in our Bible appendix too. Maybe *The Screwtape Letters*? Then we’ve got comedy covered too. Anyhow, the four loves he explores elsewhere are eros or romantic love, storge which is the bond of empathy, philia which is the love of friendship or brotherhood, and agape, which is the unconditional and frankly unimaginable love of God. The Bible covers most of these but for an extra dash of sauciness and deeper understanding of the gift that love between partners can be, let’s add Shakespeare’s 18<sup>th</sup> sonnet in celebration:

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.*

Tell me God isn’t in that somewhere.

And while I love the work of the figure of Wisdom in the Bible, I think she’s still at work through some of our more contemporary writers. Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie teaches us about the dangers of our modern interpretations of gender, what we are doing to God’s children. Of males, she says this: “Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage”. And of women? “We teach girls shame. “Close your legs. Cover yourself.” We make them feel as though being born female they’re already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think. And they grow up — and this is the worst thing we do to girls — they grow up to be women who have turned pretense into an art form.” I can picture that co-conspirator of God, Wisdom, cheering at that.

While Stephen, the imminent martyr in today’s passage from Acts, gives us a truly excellent rant to the uncircumcised ears of the people, I think a little more righteous anger could fill out our compendium a bit. Knowing how to be in the world when the world is a place of strife and violence is an important part of being a Christ follower. We can hear the call to justice in all kinds of ways. We can look to Malcolm X’s line “I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who

want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation.”

Or perhaps the words of Rev. Dr. King, so often taken to be the gentler of these two giants of the Civil Rights movement. Remember what he wrote in his Letter from Birmingham Jail? “First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season."

Or Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letters from prison “We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated — in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. Christians are called to compassion and to action.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Letters from Prison*, p.16) *And later...* “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

Who, in hearing such wisdom, can deny that God still speaks? Let all who have ears to hear, hear this.

And if, indeed, God is still speaking to us, we are surrounded by reminders... of how to live, how to be, how to embrace our fellow human, how to care for the world. How to love. How to grieve. That last one hits particularly close to home. We're all grieving in some form right now – missing people we love, feeling confined in our mobility and engagement with the world, the loss of a sense of security in our every day lives, the loss of health and even life. It can be overwhelming, this grief over what could have been and what is not. So I'd definitely include something in my compendium that speaks to despair, and nobody despairs quite like Hamlet.

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to*

Ok, I'll save you the more opaque language, but if you haven't revisited that one since high school, take a moment and do so.

And yes, I double-dipped on Shakespeare. So be it. Plays give us whole new access to the human condition and while I'd love to find good reasons to include songs from Hamilton and Avenue Q in the Laurie-vetted compendium to the Bible, that's a hard sell even in a UCC community. Oo wait! The song “It's quiet up town” in Hamilton!

*If I could spare his life  
If I could trade his life for mine  
He'd be standing here right now  
And you would smile, and that would be enough  
I don't pretend to know  
The challenges we're facing  
I know there's no replacing what we've lost  
And you need time*

Ok, scratch that, I would totally include that. If Lin-Manuel Miranda isn't a prophetic voice, I'm not sure there's much hope for the rest of us.

And celebration of God's enduring glory in creation in spite of humanity's destructive behavior shows up throughout the Bible, and again throughout history, so to that I'd include God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Of course, what would be really great is if the Bible wasn't just comprised of words on a page. If I could fully welcome in all imaginative possibilities, I would include the color of the ocean off the shores of Belize, the taste of every homemade meal in the outskirts of Calcutta and my Great Aunt Maud's house and my Grandma's gingerbread boys, the sound of the various calls to prayer you hear in the old city in Jerusalem at sunrise, the sound of my daughters' laughter, the smell of fresh baked cookies or the earth just after a strong spring rain. Every single note of Mozart's requiem in D minor. And almost every song off Josh Ritter's album "So Runs the World Away."

Don't even get me started on what I'd want to borrow from other faith traditions! The part where anyone from anywhere can always find a meal at a Sikh temple or Gurdwara and that theological practice of Langar celebrating selfless service to all means that any time, anywhere, if disaster strikes, members of the Sikh tradition will be there with trays and trays of incredible vegetarian food for anyone who needs to be fed. We definitely got the message of "feed my sheep" but the Sikh

community seems to have figured out a way to collectively make it a mandate and personal mission.

I'd add the Jewish practices of atonement by which, before you can complete your annual atonement with God, you must atone to the people you have harmed and wronged in the year before. The mindfulness of Buddhism. The non-possessiveness of Jainism. The commitment to hospitality in Islam, and the shared commitment to completing the Hajj. I have seen what pilgrimages can do to and for people. Wouldn't it be something if all Christians felt a similar commitment to return to a Holy place and remind ourselves of what we are all about? The wild gratitude and profound optimism of the Shinto faith's affirmation that people are fundamentally good. The sense of one-ness with all that has been and will be in Hinduism. On and on and on. It's like God's constantly trying to remind us of who we are and whose we are, interrupting us along our self-made path to call us back home. Like my two-year-old repeating "mommy, mommy, mommy" on an endless loop, louder and louder til I notice and pay attention to the sacred rock or ant that demands both of our attention in just that moment.

Scripture is a document meant to be danced with and wrestled with, explored and known, heard and maybe even occasionally understood. It transcends our human made confines. I find it is helpful to approach it like a living, breathing thing. It is absolutely appropriate if it makes us laugh, or cry, sigh, or wonder.

So yes indeed, God is still speaking. Certainly through the Biblical texts, but through prophets well beyond the confines of any particular place and time. The wit and genius of humanity's creativity is a gift from God. What better end to such a gift than to further enlighten the human condition? To persuade us anew of God's love and longing for our delight, a call to a relationship set free among the ruins of our daily commutes and our fourteenth zoom meeting of the week. Why not persuade, remind us of the spectacular in new words and new ways that meet the moment? Why not meet is in the thin spaces of communion and cups of tea shared with someone we love?

The point of all of this is not just story time with Laurie. It is, however, time to welcome in a particularly wild question: what if we actually lived like God was still speaking to us? Like we were not tuning in centuries too late to a broadcast from a culture we can't quite translate, but rather catching up and then reading ahead in a story already in progress.

Well, then... then we would have to discern, to attune our hearts and ears to God's message. So I ask you.. where do you hear God speaking? Because she surely is. I mean this question, and not just rhetorically. I expect to receive emails of "I would've added this!" Or "how could you miss this?!" "This would be first in my collection of thin spaces where God and I convene". Because that song, that experience, that poem seared in your mind, that might just be where God is talking to you. We grow together in the work of our faith, to listen to the on-going and everlasting Word of God, discerning God's voice from the rest of the world, and from our own.

There's a different part of the Presbyterian ordination vows, and one that I use as a touchstone in discerning where God is poking at me today. It's the part where I promised to "serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love." So as you consider where God is still speaking to you, I'd encourage you to look for the same in your life. Where do you come alive with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love? For there, always, I am certain, God can be found.