Sermon - “Opening ourselves to the riches of Scripture”
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield
August 12, 2018

We’ve all sat here and heard a Scripture reading that makes us want to chuckle or raise an eyebrow - we’ve all sat here and heard passage after passage that we could barely make heads or tails of. Did Jesus really say that? How many more clauses could Paul string together in one paragraph-long sentence that seems to have no clear point? Why couldn’t we have cut that reading?

It could be one of those bits of Scripture like the one that got passed among the boys at Choir Camp a few weeks ago - amid snickers and whispers - a sentence from one of the prophets that was equally obscure as it was obscene. But it’s not just teenage boys! My seminary friends and I still have light-hearted memories of times when one of us would be scheduled to read at Morning or Evening Prayer in the chapel... a laundry list of unpronounceable names, or the prophets calling out Israel’s unfaithfulness to God in florid terms.

What should we do with Scripture? That’s the question that I hope to tackle just a little in these next two Sundays’ sermons. How do we engage Scripture so that we can open ourselves to its riches, while acknowledging its potential for harm, and still believing that in it we will see God’s presence not just in the human story, but in our own lives.

Imagine if we tried to capture in words how God has worked in the history of this place: at first we might recount the big moments of God’s grace: a visit from Martin Luther King, the calling of a rector to become a bishop, the raising of the first wreath on the tower, making it through the most recent economic recession… We might go into more detail as we told stories of the strengths of certain leaders, or the importance of certain parishioners; when some came on staff and others left… Then, if we were courageous we might relate the times when we’ve messed up; the deep complexity of our clergy, or when our values weren’t quite what they should have been; when we’ve had to be called back to what God’s about… But even if we told all the stories we could remember, how many voices would be unheard, and stories untold, and people forgotten…

You see, the story of a people - and of God’s presence among them - is always complex, and it’s often filled with the miraculous as well as the strikingly mundane.

So it is with Holy Scripture. We have received the good, the bad, and the ugly. And we say as a Church that we believe it all to be Holy, and inspired - that must mean that God doesn’t want us to just tell the shining moments of our lives! God is present to our complexity and our weakness, as well as our best… because God wants us… all of us… human us…

Thus, for example, the same handsome young David whom Samuel had to call in from tending the sheep, and could barely stand in Saul’s heavy armor, whom we cheered on as the underdog in his victory over Goliath, that same David grew up and became a fierce and calculating warrior. He basically led a coup to become king. And in some ways he was a great king, and in some ways an abusive tyrant. We recently
heard the story of his roving eye and his willingness to have an honorable man killed in order to protect his own honor. Now we see the same David as an older man mourning for his son Absalom who had just been killed in battle while trying to overthrow David’s own government.

Human beings are complex, and so is our relationship with God. Scripture does not hide that from us. And it helps us not to flatten God into a stock character of our own making, too.

Consider that, if you were Episcopal, Roman Catholic, or Lutheran before the last quarter of the 20th Century even if you went to Church 52 Sundays in the year, you only ever heard two readings each week. You would have heard very little of the Old Testament since the first reading almost always came from the Letters of Paul. Very scant portions of the Psalms were read. And the Gospel readings were almost always from Matthew. Imagine that! Imagine never hearing a thorough representation of Luke or Mark or John’s portrayal of Jesus - who was a complex person, too. In fact, Jesus was complex enough that we have four different accounts of his life and ministry and identity from four different communities in the early Church!

That’s why the framers of the current Lectionary strove to have us read three readings each Sunday, and a Psalm - one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and a Gospel - in a rotation that reads through a significant portion of the Bible every three years.

Because the Scripture is too rich not to read as much as possible in Sunday worship. And yes, it can feel sometimes like we just lay before ourselves a vast, indigestible quantity of words. Or like we don’t get much opportunity to address and reflect on the content of what we hear read. Sometimes what’s proclaimed among us is challenging and shocking, and even embarrassing. But there’re also Scripture’s moments of sheer beauty and delight, too… and as we come back again and again over time, we often discover that even the same passage speaks to us in new and different ways.

That’s how we are reminded that Holy Scripture is a Spirit-filled document, I think, especially when it’s read in worship. In it we are reminded that God has been present in the best and worst of our history; and that Christ is present and active among us now - in the proclamation of the Word.

So how do we listen for it? I can’t speak for you, but I often need to close my eyes and repeat what I’m hearing in my head as the Scripture is read… sometimes a simple, stare on the floor is enough to create the space in my being to receive the Scripture being proclaimed. And of course my mind wanders! But then, suddenly, even when the reader is stumbling through, or I haven’t had enough coffee in the morning to wake my brain from its cloudiness, or I’m thinking of my laundry list of things to do, suddenly the Spirit grabs me through the words and something takes ahold of my soul.

One of the nights of choir camp a couple weeks ago, one of the youngest choristers got up to read a passage from late in John’s Gospel, a bit of John’s recollection of Jesus praying for and blessing his friends before going into his Passion. And the kid wasn’t a stellar reader, but he was earnest, and excited. As he read along I started to wander off. Until he read Christ’s words: “I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Joy. I’ve heard and read that passage many
times, but that night I was overwhelmed by the presence of the Risen One in our midst in the voice of John’s Gospel read by that kid…

The Risen One stands here today, praying that our joy may be complete, too - may we have ears to hear in our Sacred Story his words of eternal life.