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How Do We Treat Scripture?

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Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21

Three days ago 34 of us slowly climbed up through the cobbled streets of the Old City of Nazareth, past market stalls and low doorways and tiny alleys. Our Westminster travel group was on its way to an ancient synagogue. It was there, *or near there*, that Jesus preached his first sermon.

We turned down one narrow lane, and then another, and another, walked past a Melkite Catholic Church, and finally came to a small wooden door. We knocked, it swung open, and the caretaker invited us in, down several steps into a room with stone walls, ceiling, and floor - illumined dimly by votive candles. They would have used oil lamps in Jesus' time; except for that detail, we could have been entering his hometown synagogue, where today's gospel scene took place.

Seated on benches built into the base of the wall around the room, we listened to the same scripture we heard this morning.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to those who are captive and recovery of sight to those who cannot see, to let those who are oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

We sat in silence, pondering what it must have been like to hear Jesus read 2,000 years ago from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and then look out at his neighbors and friends and family, and say, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jews have always been a people of the book. For many generations long before the time of Jesus the Hebrew people had centered their religious life around the scriptures. Each ancient Jewish town we visited had a scriptorium, a room set aside for copying scripture. In the ruins of the synagogue high up on Masada, a new room has been created there, next to the synagogue, and a rabbi sits inside. We watched as he slowly copied the ancient texts by hand.

We saw the caves at Qumran where the Essene community had placed their scrolls in clay jars as the Romans closed in on them, to protect them. Those carefully-copied texts would be safely hidden until discovered accidentally 20 centuries later.

For Jesus to declare himself the fulfillment of the age-old hope of the Jews, hope kept alive in the ancient texts, in the words of the prophets, and in the poetry of the psalms and in the prayers of

the people, *was bold*, to say the least. No wonder they wanted to throw him off the cliffs outside the town after worship that day.

On our trip we visited the place where Jesus was said to have been born, in Bethlehem, where he might have taught and healed and preached in Galilee, and where he is said to have been crucified in Jerusalem. Today most of those locations have beautiful, ornate churches marking the spot. For centuries Christians have come to the Holy Land to go to those places and touch the stone or pray before the image or kiss the icon.

We Protestants often found ourselves on this trip wandering through those sites as spectators, bystanders to religious experience so different from our own.

The simplicity of the old synagogue in Nazareth, in contrast, stirred something in us. Its quiet humility reminded us that the words of scripture matter – more than any religious shrine or monument or particular place, the *texts themselves* bring to life our faith in God.

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul,” the Hebrew poet writes.

“The decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the
eyes...

the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”
(Psalm 19:7-10)

The Hebrew view of scripture: *sweeter than honey...more to be desired than gold.*

When our travel group got to a place of quiet, away from the gawking crowds and trappings of religiosity and read the biblical story, that's when we sensed the holy presence. In each of those places - the Mount of the Beatitudes, the villages of Capernaum and Magdala on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, by the springs of Caesarea Philippi or the waters of the River Jordan - in each of those places *it was the reading of scripture that made them sacred.*

At the heart of Christianity as we Protestants practice it, we find the Bible. But our relationship to scripture is not always straightforward and simple, clear and comfortable. In fact, it could best be described as *complicated*. Otherwise educated, intelligent people wilt when asked to read and interpret the Bible.

A recent study on the *State of the Bible in America* reveals that although 87% of American households have a Bible, one-third of Americans never read it, and only half of those surveyed read or use the Bible more than three or four times a year. The study does show a *desire* to use the Bible more regularly: 60% of us say we wish we read Holy Scripture more often. There's an easy remedy

for that! Even among non-Christians, *non-believers* – one-in-five (20%) say they wished they read the Bible more often.

(<https://www.barna.com/research/state-bible-2017-top-findings/>)

Those statistics don't surprise me, especially the one about people wishing they read their Bibles more often. If we asked this morning how many in this sanctuary feel they don't read scripture often enough, I suspect most hands would be raised. As a pastor I read scripture multiple times a week and still feel as if I should study it more regularly. People would like to have better knowledge of the Bible. They feel intimidated by it, or inadequately prepared to interpret it.

With the advent of what came to be known as the “historical-critical” study of scripture, growing out of the Enlightenment, involving the use of historical documents and archaeological evidence, people began ceding the Bible and its interpretation to the professionals. It became an academic exercise; serious Bible study migrated to seminaries and divinity schools.

Preachers were expected to be scholars, to do the interpretive work for the congregation.. Before they can be ordained as pastors, Presbyterian candidates for the ministry are required to spend three years in graduate school, study ancient Hebrew and Greek, and pass a series of difficult exams to show capacity to use the original languages in interpreting the scripture for those who, apparently could not do it for themselves. Understanding scripture was beyond their reach.

Sometime in the mid-20th century church goers – at least in our tradition – stopped carrying Bibles to church and ceased doing much scripture reading at home, if any at all. That’s when we started putting Bibles in the pews. People began to treat scripture as if it were impenetrable or irrelevant or too mysterious for them to interpret. The Bible raised too many questions and didn’t offer enough answers. The result is that among Christian denominations that required an educated clergy and endorsed the academic use of historical-critical analysis of the Bible, people stopped reading scripture. Let the pros do it.

It’s time for us to rediscover the Bible – its richness, its beauty, its wisdom, its power, its truth, its story.

We don’t have to be experts to read and understand scripture. Ironically, one of the methods to study the Bible among academics that has emerged in the last few decades is called “reader response.” That means just what it says. Read the text and see how you respond. Bring your own self, with your experience and point of view. Listen to the words. Reflect on them as you hear them. Go over them again. Don’t start with a scholarly commentary or Bible dictionary that someone else wrote on your behalf to help you understand.

Start with your life when approaching the Bible. Read and respond. How does this word change me? What does it suggest to me about how I should live my life?

That's reminiscent of the ancient Benedictine spiritual practice called *lectio divina*, where a text is read out loud slowly once, followed by silent meditation and reflection on the words, and then read again and again, followed by more reflection. =as that happens, particular words and phrases begin to rise up for the listener, who begins to sense a response coming into their heart. The intent is not to analyze it or drain scripture of any impact by dissecting it, but, rather, to listen, and listen deeply, and encounter the living word.

We don't need to treat the Bible as an impossible mystery to solve, or a conundrum beyond our capacity to crack. We need not be intimidated by it, and we certainly don't need to depend solely on the professionals to make sense of it for us in our lives.

Jesus was not a trained biblical scholar. He never went to seminary; he was schooled in carpentry and, perhaps, stone masonry. And yet, that day in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, perhaps walking down the same steps we walked, he had the courage to read from Isaiah, to hear the words, to reflect on them, and then to offer his bold response to them: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

That one line from Jesus sums up how we might best approach scripture. Can we, by the way we live, by the justice we seek, by the relationships we pursue, by the love we show, can we *bring the word to life?*

Our travel group gathered one morning a few days ago on shaded benches in a garden on the hillside high above the Sea of Galilee where – *or near where* – Jesus preached another homily, the one we call the Sermon on the Mount. We usually shorten that wonderful biblical text to the Beatitudes, and there's nothing wrong with doing that.

“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”
(Matthew 6:3-5)

But the reading that day on the Mount of the Beatitudes did not end there. We sat together in silence and listened to the entire Sermon on the Mount. It's rarely read all the way through. But in that moment, sitting in gentle light of the Sea of Galilee, with the waters visible below, we needed to hear the full sermon.

Words matter.

The aim of those who follow Jesus, the work of those who follow Jesus, the goal of those who follow Jesus, is to be able to say one day that *in our very lives and in the life of our community, the scripture has been fulfilled.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.