



SUNDAY SERMON

How to Read the Bible: Sermon Series (1 of 3)

Good morning friends. Today begins a three Sunday preaching series that I'm calling "How to Read the Bible." Before I get too far in, I want to tell you what I mean by that, and why I wanted to do a series on the Bible to begin with. First, what I mean: the Bible isn't an easy book to just pick up and read, as if it were a novel. If it were a novel, it would be at least as hard to understand as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, except with the bible, there's 66 books instead of one, and most of the books have multiple authors, often writing hundreds of years apart in wildly different contexts. Oh, and don't forget we're reading in translation . . . from ancient versions of Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek that even the most skilled linguists today aren't entirely sure how to translate. Let's just say the deck is stacked against us when it comes to understanding and appreciating the Bible.

So if we're going to read it at all, we need to learn how to read the Bible. And on top of all the challenges that the Bible is bringing to us, we have to remember what we're bringing to the Bible when we try and read it – all the baggage we bring with us. One very basic example: what we even think it means to read a book.

We sit down on a rainy Saturday afternoon with a nice cup of tea, cozy in our favorite reading chair, and try to dig into the bible, again, as if it were a novel. But this is an experience of reading that the original authors could never even have imagined. They didn't have books: they had laboriously produced scrolls, richly decorated and vastly expensive, one copy in the synagogue maybe, for the whole town. My point is that every time we open the Bible, we're bringing with us a heavy load of assumptions. Who we are, where we live, when we live: all of these things and more inform the way we read and hear and understand the Bible. They form the lens through which we see this text and hear this story. -- A lens can clarify, but it can also distort, so we have to be careful. We have to work hard to identify our own biases before we can let the Bible speak for itself.

All of which raises an important question: why bother going to all this trouble? I mean, especially as the Bible seems full of hard to justify things, from our 21st century perspective. Questionable gender politics, for one. Sometimes attributing violent, and I would say rather un-God like behavior to God, for another. By the way--thanks to all who filled out my "Help Jason with the Bible" survey--I hope I will address some of the questions you raised, but I want to be clear up front: I'm not going to try and solve the problem of evil in this series. If theologians of the stature of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth couldn't explain why evil exists--and I don't think they did--who am I to even try?

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DATE

Epiphany 5
Sunday, Feb. 10, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

Here's what I will do: I'll try to tell you why I love this book so much. Yes, there's stuff in the Bible that I don't like, or understand. There are narratives in the Bible— a lot of them— designed to uphold the status quo, to legitimate human prejudices and reinforce traditional power structures. After all, the Bible was written by human beings. But— despite how unlikely this is— there is a consistent counter-narrative that keeps emerging from this text, and it is a relentless and irresistible drumbeat for justice. For equality. And for peace.

This is the story that I have fallen in love with, and I am continually amazed at how radical and world-changing this counter-narrative within the Bible is. This is the lens I want to give you in this preaching series: I want to make sure this counter-narrative for justice, equality, and peace, jumps out at you every time you open the Bible. Because I believe that story is, indeed, the Word of God.

Over the next three weeks, I'm going to focus in on three key texts that I believe can offer us an interpretive key for different parts of the bible. This week, we will look at the story we heard from Exodus this morning, about God's plan to liberate the people of Israel from the oppressive power of Egypt. Next week, we'll consider the big theological idea that Paul presents in his letter to the Romans. And finally, we'll hear Mark's version of Jesus' big idea: that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Each of these stories, in different ways, is a summation of the Big Story that the Bible is trying to tell.

It's important for you to discern, for yourself, what you think the Big Story in the Bible is: the main idea, the big point the Bible is trying to make. If you don't have a sense of what that is, you'll lose the forest for the trees. But if you know what the Big Story is, then you can keep climbing to the top of that platform and looking out over the landscape and be able to see how it all fits together.

This is the Big Story as I see it, at least the way we're going to talk about it for the next few weeks: the Bible is a story of our oppression by the ways and the powers of the world, and how God intends to set us free from that oppression, to liberate us and claim us as God's children.

Now to be clear: oppression and liberation isn't the only way the Bible tells this story. Sometimes the story is about exile, and return; sometimes it's about blindness and sight. When Jesus steps into the picture it becomes a story about death and new life. But I think these are mostly variations on a theme: As Marcus Borg writes in his book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, "The ... Bible is to a large extent the story (and stories) of . . . the human predicament and its solution."

This is the predicament that the people of Israel found themselves in: without quite knowing how it happened, they found themselves enslaved in the land of Egypt. If you're curious about how they ended up there, you'll want to read the Joseph saga in chapters 37 through 50 of the book of Genesis. The short version is that they came to Egypt as refugees, and at first were welcomed in and offered hospitality. But some generations later, a Pharaoh came to the throne who didn't like these Israelite foreigners: they kept multiplying and eating too much food and it seemed like they might overrun the native born Egyptians. And: there was a public works project underway, and the Pharaoh didn't have enough labor. So he hit upon a simple solution: we'll just force the Israelites to do it.

Here's how the whole story is summed up in chapter 26 of the book of Deuteronomy – imagine this being spoken by a Jew in the Kingdom of Judah, some hundreds of years later: "A

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wandering Aramean was my ancestor. He went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us by imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. The LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; And the LORD brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Friends: that’s the whole story the Bible is trying to tell, in five short sentences. This story shows us who God is – it reveals God’s essential character. Our God is a God who hears the cries of the poor – and does something about it. Our God is a God who liberates us from bondage, from our slavery to the ways of worldly power and money. God sets us free to live lives centered in justice. Equality. And peace.

Scholars used to think that five-sentence introduction from Deuteronomy was the oldest surviving piece of the Bible: the foundation on which everything else was built. Some still think that, but others now think it’s a later summary, rather than a foundation. Either way, though, the story of the Exodus is Israel’s primal narrative, the story that means more than any other. Everything in the Old Testament leads up to this story, or flows from it. It’s how Jews define themselves to this day – and it’s our narrative too, as Christians. The story of death and resurrection that we tell in Holy Week would make no sense without the backdrop of God’s liberating intention that filters through the story of the Passover, the central conflict that broke the power of Pharaoh and let God’s people go free – free to build an egalitarian new world in the land that God had promised them.

And Israel was a remarkably egalitarian society, at least in its first few hundred years, before it learned the ways of the world again and decided it needed a king of its own. But God’s radical agenda echoes and re-echoes throughout Israel’s founding documents: from its insistence on a sabbath day of rest for all people, regardless of wealth; to its concept of the Jubilee year, an every fifty year festival when mortgaged property was returned to the family that had originally owned it. Slaves were to be set free after a set period of time: as the writer of Deuteronomy says, “remember, you were slaves in Egypt.” Israel’s leaders tried to put protections in place that would keep wealth distributed throughout society, rather than accumulating too heavily in one place. And always, always, the alien in the land was to be honored: as it says later in the book of Exodus, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

This is the Biblical paradigm shift: from the oppression of Empire, to the liberating power of the Kingdom of God. The Empire tries to scare us into believing that the only power that counts is the power we hold over those who are weaker, or poorer, than us. But friends, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God – and God’s love teaches us that real power comes when we join hands with all the free children of God and work together to build a new world of justice, equality, and peace.

Amen.