



“Back to Basics: How Do We Read Scripture?”

Matthew 22:36-40

January 31, 2021

In his book, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, Christian historian and theologian Justo González writes about something interesting that happened to him when he entered seminary. He learned to read the Bible critically for the first time, using all the tools of the academy. González reports that, as a result of his studies, he *understood* Scripture more completely. But he didn't know what to do with that understanding. As a young Christian growing up in Cuba, González had learned in church that the *Bible was good to him*. But once he became a scholar, he lost the ability to allow these sacred stories to be good to him. González goes on to say that too many sermons today seek to *explain* the Bible, with the hope that all of us will leave the sanctuary and be able to say, “Well, that's nice. The Bible makes sense.” Our goal, he says, should not be explanation but revelation. Our conclusion should not be “the Bible makes sense to me” but “the Bible is good to me.”¹

The gift of Holy Scripture is not that it makes sense. It is, I think, Scripture's sacred capacity to encounter us, to challenge us, to change us. The Bible was never intended to provide a history of the ancient world, a definitive scientific thesis, or a secret code to discerning the end times. The Bible is the Word of God, living and active, that tells the story of God's love for the world and discloses God's will for us. It is revelation, not explanation. It reads us at least as much as we read it.

This morning, as we conclude our series on the foundational basics of the Christian faith, we come to the book in which our beliefs and practices are centered. The Holy Bible, a collection of sixty-six distinct works written in diverse contexts by many authors, occupies a unique and authoritative place in our theology and in our ethics. But how do we

read Scripture? How are we to let these ancient sacred texts be good to us? What do we do with our understanding of Scripture?

Anyone who knows me for very long learns that I love the Bible, and particularly the New Testament. I have been especially captivated by the letters of Paul since taking a college course with Professor E.P. Sanders. He painted a picture of the religious landscape of the Roman Empire in the First Century and then described the unlikely, world-changing paradoxical preaching ministry of Paul. I was moved by a depiction of Paul's conversion from a concocted call of violent persecution to a ministry of preaching the Gospel without shame or apology. I was inspired by the poetic beauty of his writing—“faith, hope, and love abide, these three...and the greatest of these is love.”

Because I love the Bible, and because I know the power of these words to sustain and renew communities of faith and strengthen our resolve for discipleship, I am concerned about the role of the Bible in the contemporary church. I am concerned when this vibrant, diverse, powerful testimony is fashioned into a rigid test of ideological conformity to serve our self-interest or confirm our preconceptions. I am equally concerned when Christian believers reduce the living word of God to mere historical statements from thousands of years ago or fantastical fables with pietistic morals akin to Aesop's fables. Both perspectives restrict our openness to transformation and privilege human interpreters over the sacred word. We Presbyterians have been particularly insistent that human beings never fully grasp the immensity of God's love and grace and justice, just as we never fully realize the vision of the kingdom of God in practice. We can never claim to have it all figured out; God is always on the move, reforming and remaking

us in God's image. We must read the Bible with this same sense of humility and prayerful openness. We must take seriously our questions of the text *and* the questions the text asks of us.

I love the image of Scripture proposed by the great theologian Karl Barth, who wrote that the Bible is “a strange new world”ⁱⁱ in which we are called to make our home. Each text, according to Barth, is a call not to understanding but to conversion. If we take this conviction seriously, we open ourselves to this possibility: *we* can be transformed by the Spirit as we read Scripture. Too often, I think, we turn to Scripture to reinforce rather than reform our perspective. The best way to tell the difference between a living God and an idol of our own making is that the idol will never challenge you, will always share your prejudice, hate your enemies, will never ask you to change. The world of the Bible is strange and new because it does not always support the world as it is. It challenges the smug assumptions and unsettles the false stability of our lives.

We all know that a single verse or a bit of Scripture, divorced from context and wielded as a weapon, can be employed to undergird almost any argument. There is a long, shameful history of this in the church, which has wounded our witness and curtailed our credibility. There is another way. If you are tired of watching Scripture used to strike blows against others or to build walls of separation and towers of superiority; if you seek within the Bible a word of hope and not doom, a word of grace and not wrath; if you yearn to give witness to a faith rooted in the promise of God's love and redeeming the world; if you want to shout from the rooftops that Christian theology is not the sole property of the most divisive voices; if you want to recover the power of the Bible to form and reform the Christian community—then I have good news for you. There is another way.

Turn your eyes to Jesus, the Word of God who took on the flesh of humanity. The life and teaching of Jesus give us the clearest picture of who God is and what God asks of us. And fortunately, we do

need to speculate about how Jesus read Scripture or which texts he turned to most often. The very first time Jesus stands to deliver a sermon in his hometown synagogue, he turns to the words of the prophet Isaiah—“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” And so his ministry begins. Later, when Jesus is asked by an attorney to name the greatest commandment, he turns again to Scripture. First, the words of Deuteronomy. Love God with all you've got: heart, soul, and mind. Then, drawing on words from Leviticus this time—“love your neighbor as yourself.” There is nothing more important than this. Love God, and love what God loves.

The words seem simple enough. Succinct. Briefly stated. They make sense. But that is not enough. We do not love in ideas or abstractions. Jesus does not command a passive, feeble, half-hearted love. We are instructed and compelled to love wholeheartedly, proactively, vulnerably, investing all of ourselves in this mission. This is a difficult, soul-searching, life-changing demand.

It requires each of us to question our intentions, our actions, our priorities, our commitments; to ask ourselves, “I wonder if God sees it that way? I wonder if I'm investing my whole heart and soul and mind in ways that God would intend? I wonder if my love has been deep and broad enough?” These are among the questions that Scripture asks of us. And, they are also questions that others are asking of the church, particularly emerging generations exploring what faith might mean to them. Does understanding Scripture make us more loving? Do we practice in the world what we preach in the church? We can quote Scripture chapter and verse until the kingdom comes, but somewhere I read these words—“By their fruits, you will know them” (Matthew 7:20). The test we face is not understanding those words, but living them.

Ray Bowden died on Monday. Ray joined the staff of our church in 1985 for what he described as a final chapter in ordained ministry. He was sixty years old—that final chapter would bring more than thirty-five years of fruitful and transformative ministry. I've been reflecting on Ray's life and faith this week, the gift of our conversations and time together. On Thursday afternoon, I picked up this treasure—Ray's autobiography, written in 2012. I opened it up and knew immediately I was on holy ground. I closed my office door and read it all. As I did, it struck me that there is a common thread that runs through Ray's story—through his life. At the age of six, Ray lost his two-year-old brother who had been born with one lung. Ray was despondent, "terribly grieved," he says. Then Ray writes, "It was a time when I had to make up my mind whether God was truly a good, loving, and compassionate God, as the Bible said, or whether he was a cruel, uncaring God who allowed little babies to suffer. With the help of a loving family and a faithful minister, the God of love and compassion won out and my faith took shape."

The God of love and compassion, the God of Scripture, would walk with Ray Bowden every step of the way for nine decades to come. Ray was a servant of God who took the witness of Scripture to heart and *lived* it—even when doing so brought great risk and threat. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Ray helped to lead a memorial service and serve a meal in the basement of a church in Kansas City for reeling Black teenagers.

The word got out that this white pastor had done such a thing. Ray received threatening phone calls, rocks were thrown through the windows of his home. Ray took his family out of town. When he returned, he found a cross that had been burned on the lawn. It was Good Friday. Ray went to church. He heard the words of Scripture, the cries of the crowd, the judgment of the religious leaders, and the words of Jesus from the cross. Ray wrote, "I felt as never

before the assurance and peace that Christ alone can give when one is receiving threats and hearing angry, unjust, and undeserved words." Assurance, not doubt. Peace, not fear. I think about six-year-old Ray, deciding to trust the God of love and compassion. The Bible was good to Ray Bowden—the word of God made its way deep into his heart, gave him the courage to stand firm, and assurance that Christ stood with him.

And that is how we read Scripture. Amen.

ⁱ See Justo González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, Abingdon Pres, 1996. p. 21-27.

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, *Word of God and the Word of Man*, Peter Smith Publisher, 1958. p. 28ff.