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2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 & Luke 18:1-8

Inspiring Scripture

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Really? All scripture? Our suspicion of the connection between God and scripture is evident in our congregational response to biblical readings: “Hear what the Spirit is saying to us” instead of the more traditional, “The Word of the Lord”, implying that you may or may not hear anything worthwhile; let the Holy Spirit work it out.

Perhaps some of you have experienced some dissonance hearing a reading from the Bible described as God’s own words. God couldn’t have meant that! Our modern lectionary tries to skirt the most objectionable, least “word of God” like readings, but there are some: God’s demand of Abraham to sacrifice his son; David’s casual desire and taking of Bathsheba; Jesus’ claim that the world will end in violent judgment. There are enough of what feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble would call “texts of terror”¹ to make us queasy about ascribing God as the author to some scripture.

And some scripture is really boring. Long lists of ancestors – the begats, measurements of the arc of the covenant, the repetitive recounting of wicked kings, archaic laws. It’s not so easy to call that stuff “inspired”.

Finally, other places in the bible are simply unreliable. For example, the writer of 2 Timothy purports to be Paul, the apostle who built the church and whose letters form the heart

¹ Phyllis Tribble. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Fortress Press, 1984.

of the New Testament. However, the only thing we really know for certain about this writer is that they were not Paul. Nothing sneaky went on; it was common in that time to write using a famous writer's name as a pseudonym. But in 1 Timothy, Not-Paul, wrote some stuff about women and keeping silent in church and obeying their husbands – you know, stuff that has been oppressing women for over a thousand years². So it makes a difference to us who this guy was and where he got off saying such things.

Scripture has been used as a club, not just to keep women in a subservient position (but yes, a whole lot of that), but also has been used to justify slavery, anti-Semitism, and more. It might have been used as a club on you or on someone you love and it is to the church's shame that this is true.

Many of us might have heard this bible quote, that all scripture is inspired by God, as a way of saying that somehow God ghost wrote the Bible, that we just have to contort our hearts and minds enough to make the words on the page seem like the words of a loving deity. No one is that flexible.

The Bible is only recently a book at all, instead of a collection of scrolls. The audience that heard this scripture read would, of course, not thought of it as scripture, but be thinking of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, perhaps the gospels and a few of Paul's letters (if they were a lucky and wealthy church). Paper and writers were scarce and people memorized texts. Memories are fragile and faulty and so we have various versions and diverging translations. The Bible is a mess.

² See 1 Timothy 2:11-15

But the word “inspire” comes from the verb “to breathe”. God has breathed into scripture. We might wonder how? And it that’s just a way of saying “we don’t know if this connects to the divine at all, why do we bother, really?”

As post-modern people who tend not to have either the sense of awe of our pre-modern spiritual ancestors or the certainty of our modern spiritual ancestors, we are a people cut off. We know too much and too little about religion to make much sense of it sometimes.

A few years ago, before I came to St. Mark’s, I was a Lilly fellow which basically meant that the Eli Lilly Foundation paid for me and my mentor, Bishop Jane Dixon to attend nice conferences. One year we went to a conference at the Trinity Institute on Hearing the Bible.

It’s interesting, I think, that we don’t much just sit and read the bible. Most of us, most of the time, have the bible read to us. It’s read to us in church and though it’s possible to own a bible and sit down and read it on your own time all by yourself, that’s a relatively new phenomenon and certainly a very privileged one. From the beginning, the Bible, or that mess we call the Bible, was read aloud, in a group.

It is as a community that we read and hear the Bible and it is as a community that Christians have heard and read the Bible from the very beginning. So it’s not just the words themselves, but what each Christian community brings to it, in their own context. It is this hearing of the Bible in our own contexts that was the subject of the conference.

Several of the speakers at this conference were just like the first part of my sermon, they pointed out how unreliable the Bible is, how rickety its authority is. Jane Dixon, by the way, loved this. She loved hearing the Bible of her childhood blown up. Not that I think she

didn't love and respect the Bible, but that there is some pleasure, and meaning as well, in destroying an icon that has been hurtful.

But the speaker I found the most meaningful was a scholar from South Africa, Gerald West³. He was not only a Biblical scholar but also a leader in a church that had experienced profound suffering – first during the many years of apartheid, then an ongoing AIDS crisis, as well as a domestic violence crisis.

He, together with his congregation, listened to the Bible with their own context in mind. What did it say to a woman who'd been beaten, to a child with AIDS? He brought his scholarship and they gave him their meaning. This process created a new Bible that was not merely the fragments of history gathered all too arbitrarily together, but a living book, a breathing book, a dialogue between history, understanding, and current context.

As post-modern people, we have learned to be suspicious about the stories we tell about ourselves. They are not trustworthy. But the answer is not to stop telling stories about ourselves. We are a meaning making people, we need stories. One way out of this conundrum is to remake these stories by paying special attention to, by privileging the voices of those who have been left out of our story. Who is most in need of the breath of God? What do they hear?

In our gospel story today there is a certain widow who must press her case to a judge who is the exact opposite of what a judge should be; he is unjust. She persists and eventually he relents. Jesus tells us, by way of Luke, that God is just, unlike the judge, and will hear us quickly.

The way I've tended to hear this story is to cast myself as the widow, the one pleading my case to God. But if God is not like the unjust judge, God is still pretty capricious about how

³ See Gerald West, editor. *Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*. Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.

God responds to my pleas. I don't really get that much from the story except the entreaty to keep pleading and God will eventually respond. Maybe, I'm thinking, God and this judge have more in common than Jesus seems to think.

But when I listen to the text with others in mind, others whose voices have not been heard so much, I start to think I'm not like the widow. I'm like the unjust judge who relents after getting frustrated and bored, who doesn't want to hear hurt and pain. That opens up new possibilities for how God might want me to respond to the text.

Be suspicious of the text and the way we might have heard in the past. Be open to new meaning by making way for other perspectives. There is some urgency in this need to breathe life into Scripture.

"For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires,⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." (2 Timothy 4:3-4) The author of 2 Timothy warns.

In this time of fallible and unreliable authority there are those who will continue to weaponize scripture and beat people over the head with it, particularly the most vulnerable. And then there will be those who finding no common story to rely upon will make a new story that is equally as hurtful as a scripture club. A story that builds up some people at the expense of others.

How is scripture inspired; how is scripture breath filled? By us, by hearing it anew and from the perspectives of those who have been shut out. Listen to it and then act. Breathe God back into the world.