

Why Read the Bible?
Psalm 119:103-105

When was the last time *you* felt that way about scripture?

The sensual delight of honey on your tongue.

The Bible?!!

“Oh how I love your law!” the psalmist exclaims 6 verses before those the liturgist read. Law and Word both referring to scripture – little did the singer know that his own words would one day become *part* of that scripture.

...Do you ever experience pleasure that deep in this Book?

Or anything at all besides confusion or frustration?

Perhaps reading some of the beautifully poetic passage of the

King James Version inspires some of you –

no matter how badly mistranslated it is.

What is it about scripture, the Bible, the Word?

Why is it the central aspect of worship each week when we KNOW there are translation errors,

inconsistencies,

improbable stories,

impossible history,

and some laws and actions that we just *can't* reconcile with a loving God?

There. I've said it: the Bible is flawed.

I am not one who reads these books

of a particular time and place in history

as the inerrant, literal word of God.

Do I, then, like so many who agree with me, throw it out for these *many* problems? Is it just “tradition” that keeps us centered on scripture? “Well, that’s how we’ve always done it!” No.

So why? Why read the Bible?

I've struggled with this question for several years.

I still struggle, but in different ways.

I've seen how Matthew had one point he wanted to make about

God and Christ, so he used stories about Jesus to emphasize that point.

And then how Luke had a different emphasis, so he

changed the stories just enough to fit his purpose.

And John – heaven help me, John – I've still not figured out his many hidden messages.

And that's just the Gospels!

I've also read stories that make little to no sense in our context. What message do I take from the tale of a left-handed man who kills a fat king in the bathroom¹? About this text from Judges there are many theories. But honestly, unless I was around the campfire to hear the story told in Israelite Canaan, I couldn't explain the importance of the story as the tellers saw it.

For now, at least, we enjoy its humor and interpret it as we can.

So again, why keep focusing on the Bible?

The Psalmist in is love with God's revelation! And recently I've been coming to enjoy my own encounters with this book.

I've found that, like the Psalmist,

God's Word lights the path to new ways
of understanding this world around me,
and I savor the wisdom I find there –
not because of what people have told me the stories are about, but by starting over with them.

Through listening intently,
critically questioning,
interpreting through my own experience
and checking in with a community.
That last I've found very significant.

This past week I was talking with our church secretary, Karin Marsh. She was telling how the All-Church Retreat was so powerful for her because she became a part of this community in a different way. She *is* a part of Plymouth, because she knows almost all of you by name, if not by face. But Karin is a member of another church, and so she hasn't had opportunity to interact with us as a community of faith. For her, taking part in the retreat with so many of us put her in touch with that *power* of being a part of *this* community.

The Bible is a part of this community. These are OUR stories.
The stories of faith of the ones who came before us.
Even if they are not FACT, the stories can be TRUE for us.
True in the sense that they reveal a community's experience of the Divine.

For example: The Creation story in Genesis 1 may not have factually happened as "Let there be...and then there was...and it was good" –
but it is *true* in the sense that the Israelite priests who shared it were expressing that *their* God –
not the gods of other lands,
the gods in the lands of Israel's exile,
but *their* God –
was the God of the universe, the God who created all and named it good and capped it by creating Sabbath.
Sabbath – something that even Israelites in exile could hold onto, something to remember
and claim their identity as people of YHWH.

Genesis 1 need not be fact to be true. And these people, the Hebrew people, were the community that sustained the stories for us.

Biblical stories are true in that they share a people's experience of the Divine.
And this moves forward from the Hebrew people to the early Christian community.
Paul's letters sharing *his* experiences of Christ's message with the rest of the community.
The Gospel-writers sharing *their* experiences of Christ and his message to the REST OF THE
COMMUNITY.

Why do we hold fast to this book?
Because we claim to be part of this community.
Descendants of the Hebrew people, *proclaimers* of Christ's message. Even if we disagree about parts of that message ...
Ahh....
Can we disagree? *Must* we claim connection to these ancient communities if we call ourselves Christian?
What about our individual experiences of Christ and God, the Divine or Holy in our own lives?
Good question.

We *are* also individuals experiencing the world and experiencing God, just as the people who wrote the Bible, and yet differently than did these many authors.

How do we find the balance between individual and community?

The Reformation of the 1500s tried to find some balance. The reformers sought less rule by the church and desired to have people read scripture for ourselves. But have we, as so many diverse denominations fighting each other and even among ourselves, strayed too far from the communal or united aspect of the Roman Church?

In our own Congregational history, we had the New Lights of the mid-1700s –those faithful stressing that “the path to religious truth is experiential, not merely intellectual”².

The New Lights fought with the Old Lights – those who felt the emotional excesses of conversion and personal relationship with God undercut the church’s part in the covenant.

Has the UCC as a whole successfully found a way to balance “heart knowledge” of God with reason and intellect, combining the individual with the communal? I’d venture that not many of our congregations have.

Even today, we find people who adamantly oppose being called *religious* in favor of the more individualized *spiritual* – I’ll admit, I sometimes feel this draw to remove myself nominally from the “Christian” community.

We must seek the balance.

While I strongly believe in the benefits of community, I also firmly agree that the individual is essential in the experience of God.

I may be in opposition to some of his theology, but it was the Apostle Paul’s *personal experience of conversion* that made him one of the greatest founders of the church.

Balance.

Without personal experiences of the Holy,
we wouldn’t have scripture.

Without personal experiences of the Holy,
why should we buy into what others tell us about God?
Why be Christian?

And without community, where is accountability?
Where can we check-in about or share some of our more amazing experiences?

This is why the Bible remains valid.

Through the scriptures we are in constant conversation with the ancient Israelites and the early Christians.

Through sacred writings we are a part of these full and diverse communities.

Not to indiscriminately believe what they share as fact,
but to *listen* to them, hear about their Divine encounters as *they* understood them ... and to critically question them.

Conversation is never one-sided.

We listen,

we consider,

we think,

we respond.

Not heedlessly accepting; but not immediately rejecting as having no value, either.

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So, why do I care?

Because I’m a minister, and I think the Bible’s GREAT!

(You don’t know me very well, if you think that’s my style.)

Because we need to know the Bible in order to counter false or harmful interpretations.

Sure, that's an excellent reason – but I'm simply not that practical.

I care because our stories make up so much of who we are.

Because I want to know where I come from,  
 what family traditions are meaningful for me  
 and what family traits I *don't* want to pass on.

I care, because since I've had the opportunity – the need, even –  
 to read the Bible as a part of THIS community,  
 I've had to start again.

I can't take what I've been taught about these stories and  
 make them fit the world and Spirit as I understand them.

So, in reading again, I've discovered there's more there than you think.

More mystery,  
 more wisdom,  
 more insight into other world religions.

We say that God is still speaking –  
 through creation, through modern-day prophets, through ordinary experiences.

But I also believe God is still speaking from these ancient stories –  
 speaking NEW meaning into what we THINK we know.

Isn't it exciting!

*"How sweet are your words to my taste,  
 sweeter than honey to my mouth!"*

May we all experience such pleasure. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Judges 3:12-30

<sup>2</sup> *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, ed. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, p. 9