

The Healing of Scripture: Story, Song, Wisdom and Commandment

Deuteronomy 30:11-14; Matthew 4:1-4

Along with our Season of Grace theme on healing our broken world, I want to talk today about the healing of scripture, its healing through story, song, wisdom and commandment. Our whole service is centered in the Bible today, and the climax will be a celebration of the Bible, based on the festival of *Simchat Torah* which Rabbi Judy Schindler introduced to us in her Davis Lectures years ago. *Simchat Torah* means the Joy of Torah, and I hope you will experience joy in our scriptures today.

Some may wonder about the Bible as a healing thing in the face of all the ways it has been used to harm through the centuries. It has been used as a bludgeon, as a tool of oppression and to prop up political power. In my early sermon and Davis Lecture here on homosexuality I dealt with the six “clobber” passages used to condemn homosexuality and LGBTQ people. But there are other “clobber passages” used to justify slavery, racism and the devaluation of women.

Nevertheless, nevertheless, our scriptures are given to us by God for healing, and that’s the focus today. So we proceed, a sermon in five parts.

I The Bible is Not God!

Some make the Bible an object of worship as if they are the same, the Bible and God. Some call it bibliolatry. Someone described it as climbing up a signpost rather than following its directions.

The word the Bible uses for itself is “inspired”, which means “God breathed.” It was written by human beings inspired by God. Some parts are more God-breathed than others.

II The Bible is a Library of Books

The Bible is a library of books, each written in its own time and place. By Christian count there are 66 books, 39 from the Old Testament and 27 from the New Testament. So you could say it has *two* parts.

Which leads to the number *three*. The Hebrew Bible has the same books as the Christian Old Testament, but they are counted differently and arranged differently.

It is arranged in three parts which I like to draw as three concentric circles. Want to draw along? Draw a small circle and put beside it a T. This stands for the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible and the heart of Jewish scriptures.

The Torah is often called the Law, but it is far more than law. It has stories and songs as well as commandments. In the *Jewish Study Bible*, Torah is often translated as the *Teachings*. We could also call it the *Way*.

Now draw a second circle around the first. This is the *Prophets*, so you can put a P beside it. These are books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah. The prophets continually looked back at the Torah and interpreted it for their time. They told the nation and its leaders: You have fallen away from the teaching of the Torah. And they showed how to live the Torah in their day.

Now draw a third circle around the second. These books are called the *Writings*. They include books like Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. They too looked back at the Torah and tried to interpret it for their times. The Writings include songs, proverbs, and short stories like Job. Job is a corrective to a simplistic and false reading of the Torah, a reading which said that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Simple. Well....

You could say that in the Hebrew scriptures all three parts are always talking with each other. It is a dynamic way of reading scripture. Jews call their Bible the *Tanakh*, which is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter for each part. TNK. Add the vowels, *Tanakh*.

For us Christians, I like to add a fourth circle. Call it the *Gospel*, or Good News of Jesus Christ. As we read the Bible in this Jewish way, we interpret the Torah, Prophets and Writings for our time through the lens of the Jesus event. It's the way Jesus read scripture. It helps us interpret scripture in a dynamic way as each part talks with the other.

Some of the most false pictures of Jesus and the most dangerous theological beliefs about him have come from divorcing Jesus from his Jewish heritage and robbing him of his Jewishness. No wonder an eminent church historian has said that the most important decision of the second century church was to be a people of *two* books, not one. There was enormous pressure on the church to ditch the Hebrew scriptures. Some of this was due to anti-Judaism and anti-semitism, the original sin of the church. But we have been given the spiritual treasure of *two* books, all bound together in one book, our Bible.

III The Word of God comes to us in many forms and ways.

The Word of God, the revelation of God, comes to us in many ways and forms, not just in the written words of scriptures. Sometimes not even in words!

The Celtic Christians through the centuries said that God's revelation came in two books: The Book of Scripture and the Book of Creation. As the Psalmist wrote: "The heavens are telling the words of God, and the firmament declares God's handiwork."

The Iona Community today captures the sense of this when after the reading of scripture they say these words: "For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us, for the Word of God within us, thanks be to God."

In our lovely reading from Deuteronomy, we heard these words: “For the word of God is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away...it is in your heart and in your mouth.” (Deut. 30:11-14)

In a wild detective novel, a young detective, Claire DeWitt, meets an Indian wise man in New Orleans who tells her that God broke His word into two parts. One part he put in the Bible and the other part he put in our hearts. The spiritual quest is to connect the word of God in the Bible with the Word of God in our hearts. This is when scripture becomes real, and this is the work of the Spirit of God. “For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us, for the Word of God within us, thanks be to God!”

IV The Healing of the Bible in story, song, wisdom and commandment.

First, as *story*. The heart of the Bible is the one great story that gives our lives coherence and meaning. Its very shape is the great master story that begins with Genesis. You can draw a line with Genesis at the beginning. It reaches its apex in Jesus Christ and it comes to its conclusion and fulfillment in the book of Revelation. Creation, Christ, Consummation. It is not a text book with chapters on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Church, etc. It is a grand narrative that shapes our lives. We are story-formed creatures. Call us *homo-narratus*. And if we are shaped by the story of scripture we are most blessed.

The story of scripture reads *us* as we read it. The Bible is the one story that has the gravitas, the depth to take into account both the grandeur of being human and our destructive proclivity to sin, and to plumb the depths of God's mercy and power to redeem. Let us not be shaped by lesser stories. It is a finally healing story.

And here is *song*, not just in the Psalms, but all through, like the song of Moses' sister Miriam as she sang and danced with her tambourine when the Hebrew people passed through the Red Sea into freedom, or Mary's song as she consented to conceive the Christ child, or the songs to Christ in Paul's letters, or the song of those before the throne of God in heaven in Revelation.

Singing is a healing thing even if we can't carry a tune in the proverbial bucket. Scripture helps us sing what we most need to sing and say to God, "as dancing", one wrote, "gives the tongue-tied man his ceremony of love." Maya Angelou wrote: "A bird sings not because it has an answer, but because it has a song." God has given us a song to sing, for as we sing it, we become who God made us to be.

And *wisdom*. Common everyday practical wisdom for healthy living, as in the Book of Proverbs, like this one: "A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones." Or this one: "Trust in the Lord with all your

heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.”

God has not been stingy with wisdom. It has been given to all people and religions throughout the millennia. Even in mystery novels! In the mystery novels of Louise Penny, Inspector Gamache has learned the four marks of wisdom which he passes along to others, four phrases: “I was wrong”, “I’m sorry”, “I don’t know”, and “I need help”. These sound like biblical wisdom, spiritual wisdom to me. Wisdom helps us live in healing, healthy ways for ourselves and with others.

And now *commandments*. Commandments are healing too. When God gave to Israel the Ten Commandments, God said, “I am the One who delivered you from slavery.” Now, to stay free, live free: Thou shalt not, thou shalt not, thou shalt not. These may sound negative, but things like not stealing and not bearing false witness keep us free and sustain a healing way of life.

The fabric of scripture needs the strong threads of commandment, as does the fabric of our lives, not just story, song and wisdom. Micah summarized all the commandments of God with these *three* we sing at the close of our communion service: do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Jesus summarized them into *two*: to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

These are healing for ourselves and for the world.

V On Loving the Bible: Three Stories.

The first some of you have heard before, but bear with me, this preacher who can't help repeating himself.

There was this man in Louisiana who had been convicted of white collar crime and sentenced to live out his sentence in the last leper colony in America. On Sundays he went to worship with the lepers.

Leprosy can cause not only blindness but a neuropathy of the hands and fingers that robs the leper of the ability to feel things in their fingers.

One Sunday as he was at worship, he saw a leper in front of him who at the reading of scripture put the Bible right up against his face. He was puzzled, then realized what was happening. The man had lost his sight and the feeling in his fingers and was reading his Braille Bible with his tongue. The words of Psalm 119 came to me: "How sweet are your words to my taste. They are like honey to my mouth." They can be that sweet. On *Simchat Torah*, children are given pieces of candy to remind them of the sweetness of scripture.

A second story. Tony Campolo is a leading progressive evangelical teacher and speaker who is a professor of sociology at Eastern Baptist University. During the height of the AIDS epidemic in America he was asked to do a graveside service for a gay man who had died of AIDS. Many gay people had exited the church by that time—or had been excised from church. They were considered the lepers of their day. Few had pastors anymore, and when Campolo was asked to preside at the funeral, he did.

At the graveside were the gay friends of the young man who had died. Campolo read the 23rd Psalm, said the words of committal and was about to end when one young man asked, would you read the passage about nothing separating us from the love of God? Another said, would you read the one about the Prodigal Son? One said, would you read the one about heaven, another said, would you read John 3:16? On and on it went, their requests and Campolo reading verse after verse, these young men famished for the word of God.

One final story. It was 1965 and Eli Wiesel, holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, was in Moscow celebrating *Simchat Torah* at the main synagogue there. The Soviet government was trying to end the Jewish presence and Jewish worship in Russia. Public celebration of Jewish festivals was forbidden, and when they did happen they were carefully watched by the K.G.B. Some Jews feared the end of Judaism in Russia.

But on the Simchat Torah in 1965, thousands of young people gathered to celebrate the Torah. They sang and danced with the Torah processional in the packed synagogue, then led the celebration into the streets. Defying the government, singing and dancing the Torah, singing and dancing their Jewishness.

Joy of the Torah indeed! May we celebrate the joy of scripture today as we now gather in a circle.

Amen