

Watch Your Verbs

Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-26

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The language of Scripture moves. It is concerned with concrete actions. It prefers to ask, “What then shall we do?” rather than “So how do you feel about it?” This is an important clue for us, as readers, because the language of the biblical text shapes the script – and so us, in turn. The language moves, and it invites us to move with it, to trace how the mighty acts of God flow through the text and straight into our lives.

- Anna Carter Florence

Words on a page don't just sit there: when we read them, they do something to us. They might make us laugh. They might make us angry. They might make us cry. They might confuse the heck out of us.

- Stanley Fish

In his novel, *The Glad River*, the old baptist radical Will Campbell, tells the story of three friends who meet in the Army in the early days of World War II while training at Camp Polk, Louisiana before serving in Guadalcanal and returning home to Mississippi and Louisiana. These three unlikely friends become community to one another: Doops, a white Mississippian, Kingston, who is mixed ethnicity of black and Cherokee (what was called “Redbone”) from Louisiana, and Fordache, who is Cajun, also from Louisiana.

Early in the novel, the three agree to teach Fordache how to speak clear English if he would teach them how to speak Cajun French. “It’s mostly a matter of verbs anyway,” Kingston said. “Your nouns and pronouns are okay. It’s mainly your verbs. Just watch your verbs” (p. 47). As time goes by, Fordache gets better and better with his English with Kingston coaching him, unless he gets excited, and then he lapses back into a Cajun French and English mix. Each time Kingston calms him saying, “Watch your verbs. Just watch your verbs.” Eventually, through the rest of the book, “Watch your verbs” becomes a kind of in-house joke and reminder to each other about paying attention to what you’re doing. In fact, the last line of the novel is “Watch your verbs.”

A few months ago, I ran across a new book by preaching professor Anna Carter Florence called, *Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God’s Word in Community*, in which part of her central argument is that we want to pay attention to the verbs in Scripture. Most of the time we all tend to notice the nouns: names of people, places, things, and so on but, she says, focusing on the nouns easily sidetracks us into all sorts of ways our world and the biblical world are vastly different. She says, we read of “shekels and cubits, arks and archangels, manna and mandrakes, pharaohs and fleshpots, cherubim and Nephilim, Pharisees and Philistines, Samaritans, Syrophoenicians, and divided tongues of fire” (p.17). We end up trying to look them up, figure them out, and explain what they mean. In the meantime, we get distracted and maybe even argue over them. But, in the end, we do not do much about them.

Carter Florence’s thesis is that perhaps we should start out paying attention to the verbs. We all have the same verbs, no matter if we’re reading about Adam and Eve or Abraham and Sarah or Aquilla and Priscilla, or ourselves. We all share

the same verbs. She says, “We even share verbs with Jesus. That does appear to be the whole point of the Incarnation, doesn’t it? – that God came to share our verbs. The Word became one of us and lived among us. Apparently, even God thought the best way to reach us was to meet us, verb for verb” (p.20).

In other words, she’s asking us to “watch our verbs” when we read Scripture and watch our verbs as we seek to follow Jesus as disciples.

A couple of weeks ago, I suggested that part of our work as the church, is learning how to speak Christian. Austin Heights Baptist Church is a language school teaching each other the new language of Jesus followers. We teach nouns and verbs, grammar, and syntax. That morning we talked about nouns and naming as ways we interpret the world around us. We talked about how to learn to use nouns like Jesus teaches us and we teach each other. Names tell us who we are, who we are to become, and they tell us who others are. We learn our nouns from the risen Christ, not from social media, not the White House, and not from the “way of life” or “the lost cause” or “the way it used to be.” We learn our nouns from Christ.

This morning I want us to watch our verbs. Verbs are where the action is. They move, they act, they do things. God creates by words. Words, the Word, verbs – creates, constructs, brings to life things that do not exist.

In Exodus 3, when Moses asks God for his name, God gives him a verb. “I am.” The verb “to be,” a linking verb. It is a verb that can mean a lot of things depending on its context but one thing you can’t do with a linking verb is nail it down in one place, in one way for all time. God’s name is a verb. God moves, God

acts, God is on the way, God does things. Throughout the Old Testament, a primary way to identify God is by remembering God's "mighty acts," or remembering the ways God has acted in our history.

In our lectionary reading from the Old Testament this morning, Abram is called by God. God says to Abram, "Go." "Go from... go from your country, go from your kindred, ... go to the land that I will show you. Go. Put down your phone, turn off your device, get up from your couch and go. God continues using verbs, "I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you." And in response it says, "So Abram went." Our entire reading is about God telling Abram to "go" and Abram "going." It concludes with "And Abram journeyed" (12:9).

Our reading from the Gospel begins, "As Jesus was walking along." Our story begins with Jesus already on the move. He comes upon Matthew, who is sitting at a toll booth collecting taxes, and Jesus says, "Follow me." Then it says, Matthew "got up and followed him" (Matthew 9:9). Next sentence "And as he [Jesus] sat at dinner... many sinners and tax collectors came" (v.10). The story goes on with Jesus teaching about why it is important that he eats with sinners.

Further on, the story says, "While he was saying these things." Again, movement, continuous action – while Jesus is teaching, other things are going on. A leader of the synagogue comes and kneels saying that his daughter has just died but if Jesus will come and lay his hand upon her, she will live. "And as Jesus got up..." suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years touched him. She is healed. Jesus goes on to the synagogue ruler's house, where he takes the hand of the dead girl and she gets up (v. 26).

In the readings this morning there is lots of action. Much is going on. God speaks, Abram goes, Jesus calls. Matthew follows. Jesus moves. People are healed. Lots of verbs.

Abram is told to “go” and Matthew is called to “follow.” Both of them set out on a journey that will change their lives. To be with God is like jumping on a moving train. God in Christ is on the move and for us to go with him, to follow him, we had better start running too.

Another analogy comes to mind. When I was in junior high and high school, I ran track (as hard as that might be to believe now). My favorite events to run and to this day, my favorite events to watch are the Sprint Relay, (now called the 4X100 relay), and the 4x400 meter relay. Both are fast, exciting, run by the track team’s fastest sprinters. But here’s the thing: the key to running relays in track is the hand-off of the baton. Good handoffs are remarkable – fun to watch and even more fun to do. Bad handoffs are, well... bad, embarrassing to watch and humiliating in which to be a part. Bad handoffs result in collisions, dropped batons, and lost races.

To have a good handoff means the runner who is about to receive the baton has to start running before the other runner gets to him or her. You cannot wait. You cannot stand still until they get to you. With lots of practice ahead of time, you learn to mark where your teammate will be in order for you to take off running. When they hit that mark, you explode forward in your lane. Never looking back, but with practice, you learn how and when to put your hand back as your teammate places the baton in your hand. When it works well, it is beautiful, a seamless transition of the baton from one runner to the next.

Following Jesus is more like running a relay race than it is sitting around a classroom. We had better be in shape and we had better start running before he shows up in order to stay with him. All of our training, Bible study, prayer, music, singing, and worship is about practicing and getting in shape so we can take the baton from others when they show up going full speed ahead. Jesus is on the move. He does not stay in his place. When the Powers of Domination try to nail him down, before you know it, he is risen and off to Galilee. He heals, he teaches, he prays, he challenges, he comforts, he goes here, and he goes there, he is interrupted by someone needing healing, he listens, he shows mercy, he forgives, he loves. He saves. He reconciles. He redeems.

We don't know God ahead of time and then decide to follow. We don't get the Christian life all figured out before and then go do it. Rather, we come to know God in Christ as we go, on the journey, as we follow.

God told Moses, "I am." A verb. And Jesus tells us, "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the door of the sheepfold." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the true vine."

In John 18, Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, a place no larger than our church parking lot. A cohort, 500 heavily armed troops in riot gear, all crowd into the garden to arrest one man. Jesus knows what's going on, but he walks forward to meet them and asks, "Whom are you looking for?" They answer, "Jesus of Nazareth." And Jesus says, "I am." When he says, "I am," the entire

cohort falls to the ground. The same thing happens a second time. When he says the verb “I am,” God’s very name, they all fall back onto the ground.

No wonder that in the Book of Acts, the earliest Christians called themselves, “the Way” (Acts 9:2). Following Jesus was and is about joining the Movement. Clarence Jordan called it the “God Movement.” In the Old Testament, the word we usually translate as “law” or “Torah” can also be translated “way.” Rather than static information to learn, the Way of God – going and following – is mostly trying to keep up with Jesus and imitating what he does, learning to be like him. And what information we do learn, we discover along the way, is information that helps us on the journey. We learn as we go.

And we learn from others who have been on the Way before us. They come to us through stories, and books, and hand us the baton. And we run the race that is before us.

Yet we remember to watch our verbs.

I tend to be a preacher who exhorts us to “do” and we tend to be a church who asks, “what can we do?” We want to do something – get busy and help change things. The imperative mood of the verb is important to us: “do this,” and “we must” or “we ought.” Yet hear the gospel. The good news is that the indicative mood precedes the imperative. The first word of the gospel is what God has done, is doing, and will do.

The indicative mood expresses a fact. “God was in Christ reconciling the world,” the Apostle Paul says in II Cor. 5:19. In other words, in the Cross and

Resurrection of Christ, it is done. Paul goes on, “So we are ambassadors for Christ... be reconciled (II Cor. 5:20). Just before this he said, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view” (5:16).

All of our verbs are a response to what God has already done and is doing and will do. Rather, than the imperatives of ought and do and make happen. We participate in what God has already done. Rather than building the train, repairing the train, driving the train, and making the train go, because of Christ we are to jump on the train already on the move.

People used to ask Will Campbell, “What do we do?” And Will would say, “Do? Do nothing. Just be.” Be who you are in Christ. Be reconciled. Will liked to quote his friend, the Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, who said, “Before you do a damned thing, just *be* what you say you are, a Christian; then no one will have to tell you what to do. You’ll know” (W. Campbell, *Up to Our Steeples in Politics*, p. 152-153).

So, we are on the Way and learning as we go, trying to keep up with Jesus.

In *Lord of the Rings*, one of Tolkien’s characters says “The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet it is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: Small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.” (Elrond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book II, Chapter 2).

We are called to this road. And it is hard. Our own strength and willpower are not enough. The good news is that our hope is in the God who goes before us, and who is at work even through our small hands.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.