

“Have You Read This Book?”
Nehemiah 8:1-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21
A Sermon Preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
January 24, 2010

We’re going to circle around to Nehemiah in a minute. I want to think with you today about the Bible – the scriptures we’ve received and read in worship. To begin, I’d like to share with you a little story that Kathleen Norris calls the scariest story she knows about the Bible. She and her husband heard it one Saturday night in a South Dakota steakhouse from an old-timer named Arlo – a rancher . . . a tough and “self-made” man in the classic American sense. He had gotten where he was by being single-minded when it came to money, says Norris, making as much of it as possible, and spending as little as he could.

He was a taciturn man, she says, but that night he was in a talkative mood, “possibly because he had recently encountered a situation in which all the money in the world couldn’t help him; he was facing chemotherapy for an advanced, probably terminal, cancer.”

Out of the blue, Arlo began talking about his grandfather, who had been a deeply religious man, or as Arlo put it, “a damn good Presbyterian.” His wedding present to Arlo and his bride had been a Bible, which he admitted he had admired mostly because it was an expensive gift, bound in white leather with their names and the date of their wedding set in gold lettering on the cover. “I left it in its box and it ended up in our bedroom closet,” Arlo told us. “But,” he said, “for months afterward, every time we saw grandpa he would ask me how I liked that Bible. The wife had written a thank-you note, and we’d thanked him in person, but somehow he couldn’t let it lie, he’d always ask about it.” Finally Arlo grew curious as to why the old man kept after him. “Well,” he said, “the joke was on me. I finally took that Bible out of the closet and I found that granddad had placed a twenty-dollar bill at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and at the beginning of every book of [the thing], over thirteen hundred dollars in all. And he knew I’d never find it.”

[Norris says that after Arlo had laughed a bit at himself and this memory of his granddad] he began talking about the interest he could have made had he found that money sooner. “Thirteen hundred bucks was a lot of money in them days,” he said, shaking his head.¹

I find the story sad, to be sure. To think of that Bible buried in a closet, dusty and forgotten. To imagine its treasures so thoroughly eclipsed by the dollars hidden in its pages. A crying shame. But I have wondered about Norris calling the story scary – the “scariest story” she knows about the Bible. For some reason it’s started to make sense to

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1998. 94-5.

me lately. After reading Nehemiah? . . . I don't know. Maybe there *is* something scary about it.

What Gani read from Nehemiah implies that there had been a kind of closeting of the scriptures entrusted to Israel. While in exile in Babylon, the people hadn't read God's law. To some extent, they had forgotten it; it has ceased to shape their life and identity as God's people. That's why it was such a big deal when Ezra brought the scriptures out again. That's why the people wept when they heard the Torah read aloud. It had been a long time since they had listened for God's word together.

I love thinking of the ways that our congregation's reading of the scriptures resembles theirs. At Ginter Park we hear all four Bible passages prescribed by the lectionary almost every Sunday. That keeps us listening to all parts of the canon: Old Testament and New, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle. Over the course of three years we work our way through most of the Bible, allowing it to shape our sense of who God is, how God works, and what we are called to do and be as God's people. These readings take up a good bit of space in our worship, serving as our anchor, in a way – our center. Here we listen for the word God is speaking to us today. And it's a treasure – that word! It is.

To me it seemed a poignant moment during last week's "Daily Show" on Comedy Central, when Jon Stewart read from the Bible. He was responding to Pat Robertson's obnoxious comments about Haiti; he showed a clip of Robertson scolding the Haitian people for their so-called deal with the devil. Like so much of the world, Stewart was appalled. He said to Robertson,

Out of all the things! Out of all the things that you could draw on from your religion to bring comfort to a devastated people and region . . . [He pulled out a big red Bible about the size of this one, and said] Look! Look how big your book is!

Look at . . .

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted!
He rescues those who are crushed in spirit.
Fear thou not for I am with thee.
Be not dismayed, for I am thy God, I will strengthen thee.

Have you read this book?

From the depths of the earth, you will again bring me up.
Though the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,
my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

I mean, that almost sounds like it's about earthquakes!

You've got *all this*, and you went with an urban legend about a deal with the devil!²

Have you read this book?

We have all this to bring comfort to a devastated people – people like Arlo, the rancher, with cancer no money can cure . . . people like the Israelites just back from exile – jobless, homeless, unsure how to start over . . . people like the Haitians who wandered the streets last Sunday, as they probably also do this Sunday, clutching their Bibles, looking for a place to worship. *Have you read this book?* It's a treasure. It matters.

Of course, there is judgment in the scriptures, as well as comfort. These stories and prophecies and laws give us a lens to look at our lives through God's eyes, and what we see is never straightforward or simple. After Ezra completed his reading, all of the people wept. Why? We can't be sure. Perhaps they were overcome with regret for having lost the Torah during the exile. Maybe they were ashamed to see how far short their actions had fallen from God's expectations of them. Or perhaps they were crying tears of joy, because they'd recovered the Torah and because the God they thought had abandoned them was now so certainly present with them.³

Whatever the people felt, Ezra and Nehemiah told them not to weep or lament. They were not to grieve before the Lord; they were to feast on fat and sweet wine. They were to send food and drink to people who didn't have any. They were to rejoice, remembering that the joy of the Lord was their strength. Their encounter with scripture was supposed to end in joy, the priests said. It was supposed to lead them to delight in the world God made. It was meant to enhance their neighborliness. Meant to help them lean on God. So the priests helped the people to understand.

This week as I read all the names that Gani so bravely pronounced today, I was struck by the role that the community played in hearing and responding to God's word. All of those people were gathered around Ezra and Nehemiah to bear witness to the reading of Scripture, for one thing, and to lend their support. They also worked to help the people understand God's word – teaching and preaching it, so the congregation could make connections between God's word and their lives *that very day*. The Torah wasn't self-explanatory, you see, nor did it bear the same message for the Israelites just back from exile as it did to the people in Moses' time. The meaning of the Torah changed as the people changed, giving them new wisdom for a new day . . . fresh comfort for a fresh situation.

² *Comedy Central*, "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," January 14, 2010, "Haiti Earthquake Reactions," <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-january-14-2010/haiti-earthquake-reactions>

³ W. Carter Lester in his Pastoral Perspective on Nehemiah 8:1-10, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1.

The Seminary students in this congregation who are in the midst of their ordination exams might be gratified to hear this testimony to importance of study and interpretation as we listen for God's word in the words of scripture. To dig into the Bible – asking questions, learning what we can, laboring to relate ancient words to a new situation – it is so important. We can help each other do this. But I want to lift up another gift of reading scripture in community, too. Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of it beautifully as she describes worship in a church she used to serve as pastor. What a gift it was, she says, to sit there together

saying sonorous words in unison, listening to language we did not hear anywhere else in our lives. *Take heart. Go in peace. Bear fruit.* Although we could have sat quietly with Bibles on our laps and read these things to ourselves, we took turns reading them out loud to each other instead. The words sounded different when Kline read them than they did when Kathy read them. They sounded different from the mouth of a young mother than they did from the mouth of a widow. This was because the words did not come straight off the page. They percolated up through the silt and gravel of real people's lives so that the meaning in them was fluid, not fixed. Listening to one another read Holy Scripture, some of us learned what is meant by "the living word of God."⁴

The living Bible – it is not a paraphrase published in the 1970s. The living Bible is the Bible that percolates up through the silt and gravel of our lives, through the diligence of our studies, and through the community of which we're a part *to speak anew* God's promises, God's comfort, God's law. Precious things are revealed here – words to revive the soul, make wise the simple, enlighten the eyes, comfort the desperate. Sweet words. Relevant words.

Have you read this book? Have you allowed its words penetrate your heart, your mind, your *life* this day, as you face the many things you're facing? *We've got all this . . .* . . . Even Jon Stewart can see what a shame it would be to waste it.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor in *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, HarperOne, 2007.