

“Questions about the Bible”
Sermon from Psalm 119:17-24
Given Sunday, January 9, 2022
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

*Be good to your faithful one, that I may live and keep your words.
Open my eyes and let me ponder the wonders of your law.
No matter where I am on earth, I am a foreigner;
don't hide your commands from me.
I am eaten up with longing for your ordinances all the time.
You rebuke the arrogant with a curse
for turning away from your commands.
Take scorn and contempt away from me, for I keep your decrees.
Though tyrants conspire and testify against me,
your faithful one meditates on your statutes.
Yes, your decrees are my delight - they are my counselors.*

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“No matter where I am on earth, I am a foreigner, don't hide your commands from me.” This Psalm is written, spoken, sung, by a wanderer - or an exile - someone whose home is not a place, but a story. Someone whose home is in God's story.

Do you hear how he loves it? “The wonders of your law!” “Your decrees are my delight; I am eaten up with longing for your words; they are my counselors.”

Some of you may have that kind of relationship with the Bible. Some of you may not. Some of you remember being read to from it each night before bed as a child, and some of you only heard from it on Christmas morning, when a parent turned to the second chapter of Luke while all the kids sat, trying to be still, waiting to open presents, and some of you never heard its stories before you entered a church on your own as an adult. Some of you did Bible drills and were sent to competitions to prove how much you'd memorized, and some of you remember the ornamental version of the Family Bible on

the shelf, names written in the pretty pages in the middle, but were unaware of the contents of the surrounding pages.

Regardless of how prevalent these pages have been in our lives, most of us know - this book is complicated. It is beautiful and terrible. And because it is so central to our faith tradition, we wrestle with what to make of it.

To begin our series on the deep questions of our faith, I've grouped together several of your submissions. Remember, during this season of Epiphany, of revelation, we'll spend some time in each worship service taking up those pieces of our tradition that puzzle us, those questions that nag at us. Today, we'll look at some of the questions you've sent in about the Bible. Not about the interpretation of specific passages, we'll save those for a later date, but about the book as a whole, about the place it occupies in our tradition, about what we owe to it and whether we need it.

Here's what you asked:

- Why is the canon closed? Aren't there other writings or teachings at least as worthy of our attention as what we find in the Bible? Can't we consider those sacred?
- Do we still need to pay attention to the Bible?
- Is the Bible (part of) the reason increasing generations find Christianity irrelevant or unattractive?
- How important is it to read the Bible on a regular basis?

At root, you are asking, we are asking: what good is the Bible? And, might it even be causing us harm? And these questions aren't flippant. They are serious inquiries, from people who are seriously concerned for the future of our faith tradition. From people who can trace the line back, but look ahead and aren't sure how far it might extend into the future. Asking, not just for me, but for my children and theirs - do our ties to these stories from the past keep us from tying ourselves to a life-giving future?

And as I was turning these questions over in my head, I couldn't shake what I'd say is my most salient memory of the Bible. I've told this story here before, so bear with me, please.

It was twenty-two years ago. And I had just left Stuart Hall, the oldest building on my seminary campus, this giant second-floor classroom, it was a Monday afternoon. It was winter, and it was snowing outside, and since the class stretched until almost dinnertime, darkness was beginning to fall.

And I was walking with my friend Ellen. We were walking because we couldn't go to dinner that night, because we couldn't go back to our dorm rooms, because we had this terrible restlessness we just couldn't shake.

We felt like we were leaving that class as different people than we'd entered it. Not, like, the semester, but like, that particular afternoon's class. We'd come in, unsuspecting, eager to continue our work with Professor Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, who was leading us through an exploration of the stories of women in the Hebrew Bible.

And that day, she'd told us a story of a woman who left her husband - eh, not technically husband, but the guy she was with - she had left, and went home to her father, in a different town. And a few months later the guy shows up. Like, *four* months later, the guy shows up. Says he wants her back. The father welcomes him, and wines and dines him, says, "stay a while." The guy keeps trying to get on his way, keeps saying, "we need to be on our way," the father keeps pouring drinks, keeps saying, "stay a bit longer, a bit longer." Finally they head out - the guy, the woman he's come for, a servant, two donkeys - it's really too late to be getting started, but they head out, travel for a while, but it's dark, it's no good to be out, and they end up stranded in a strange town, and they accept the offer of this old man in the square who says, "Come, you can stay with me for the night."

It's not such a great offer, because soon the other men of the town are pounding on the old man's door, saying, "Send that new guy out, we want to show him a good time!" And the old man says, "How dare you insult a man in this way?! He's my guest! Show some respect!" And they keep after him, and so the old man says, "Hey, look here - he's got this woman; I've got this virgin daughter - have your way with them." And the men of the town aren't interested, but the guy, the guest, the one who's gone after his not-quite-wife and is traveling back home with her now - he grabs her and shoves her out the door, into the hands of this mob, where, the text says, "they raped and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go."

When that guy opens the door again *in the morning*, she's lying there. Her hands on the threshold. He tells her to get up. She doesn't respond. It's unclear from the text at this point whether she's alive or dead. He tosses her body onto his donkey, and when they get home, he cuts her into twelve pieces, and sends a piece of her body to each of the twelve tribes of Israel as a declaration of war because *he is so insulted*, and now all the men must rally to defend his honor.

I had known there were hard stories in the Bible.

I had not known there were stories like this in the Bible.

Dr. Sakenfeld is a Hebrew scholar of the highest caliber. She is a tough and sensitive reader. In previous classes, she had walked us through stories word by word, like teasing out the nuance of the original language, bringing to life these characters and settings in ways that made us feel like we were right there, like these were our best friends. We analyzed and dissected and challenged and repeated and diagrammed and imagined with these stories.

But with this story, she kept the lights low. We just read it, as given. And we held a long silence.

And then she drew our attention to the giant arched windows on the north and west walls of our classroom, where, before our time together had begun, she'd placed tiny lit votive candles on the ledges. Tiny flickers of light, made more visible now because the darkness was deepening.

She said *the only thing to do* with a story like this - a story of dismemberment - is to try to put some pieces back together. The woman's body was scattered, she said. And still, people's bodies, people's spirits, people's lives, are torn apart, and tossed aside, and scattered to the corners. And sometimes all we can do is bear witness, and tend the pieces with care.

And she invited us each to grab a candle from a windowsill, and to bring it to a table she'd placed in the center. To re-member what had been broken. What still is broken, what still is being broken, today. And we gathered those scattered lights, and we brought them together, and they shone brighter that way. And we watched them flicker, and the story kept burning in our minds, and eventually she prayed, and told us we should leave.

And Ellen and I walked, and we kicked the snow, and we wondered aloud why we had never heard that story before. And we wondered what we were supposed to do with it - and, as seminary students, what we were supposed to do with our lives - now that we had heard it.

The Bible is terrible.

It is wonderful but it is terrible.

And the terrible is the problem, right? Like, if the whole Bible were the Sermon on the Mount or the Good Samaritan or Jesus saying, "the whole of it can be summed up like this: Love God, and love your neighbor, like you love yourself." If that were the tone of the whole thing, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

The Bible begins, the first words of Genesis, in expansiveness: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.* It begins in a garden, in deep communion between what is and what might be, and there is a harmony and a generosity to it all.

And the Bible ends, the last words of Revelation, in that same wide invitation:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."

And let everyone who hears say, "Come."

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

It ends with all being gathered together, and every tear being wiped away, with that same deep communion, for all of creation to enjoy together with the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer of it all.

But right after the beginning is this weird not-science account for how the world came to be that people have tried to sell as science, and right before the end is this weird fantasy-violent account for how the world will end that people try to sell as promise or hope, and in the middle are love stories and war stories and laws that make good sense and laws that don't make any sense, and accounts of who God is and accounts that contradict those first accounts, and somewhere along the way we bound all of that together, and called it holy, and said it was God's Word.

And now here we are using it as a weapon. Here we are making claims for it that it maybe never intended for itself. Here we are trying to figure out how not to let it divide families and denominations and faiths as a whole as we interpret it differently.

There are some theories about how we came to be here: Before the printing press, we didn't have a Bible, as one book, we had these documents, these scattered pieces, and so it was easier to conceive of scriptures, plural, as

coming from multiple authors, from multiple time periods and places, and so the contradictions weren't as troubling, we expected multiple perspectives. Then came the day when we bound and printed it all as one. And that, that physical reality changed our orientation to the words.

Before the enlightenment, people were comfortable with a not-literal reading of the Bible. Not-literal was the default. Not-literal never meant less-than-true. It meant true in a different way, a deeper way. And with the enlightenment came an emphasis on a different kind of truth, a kind that appeared threatening to religious truth, and religion in too many cases responded to that from a place of threat, from a feeling of being cornered, and it started making assertions for itself that it just couldn't hold up, assertions that couldn't bear scrutiny. A new kind of fundamentalist fervor grew around the Bible, and today we find ourselves fighting to recover what is important and wise and beautiful and specific and not literal and not universal and what we're fighting against is not an old book but a new reading of it.

And yeah, that's totally unattractive to people outside the fight. Like, why? Why is it worth it? Why bother? All they can see is the fight, not anything that's worth fighting for.

And there's more to read, to that question. Wouldn't it be a great project for this congregation to come up with a canon? What would you put on there? I'm thinking, as a start, Rumi's poems, and Rilke's, and some short stories from Flannery O'Connor and Tobias Wolff, essays from bell hooks and Martin Luther King and Frederick Buechner? Who else? Who else needs to be in our canon? (Responses: Bonhoeffer, Angelou, Carver, King, Merton, Mother Theresa)

Even that generation, of other stuff that's worth reading, other places inspiration can be found, we get invited to that kind of thing from scripture. Right? The Psalms say the heavens are telling of the glory of God. And

Jesus says, “Watch the lilies; pay attention to the birds; do you know, even the rocks will cry out,” scripture points us outside itself to all of the places and ways that God is speaking.

Years after I was walking in the snow with Ellen, I was teaching my own course, Feminist and Womanist Theologies, at a small college in Kansas. There were seven women and two men in the class. There were only two windows in my classroom. I set candles in each window, and the rest I scattered around the room. And one day they came to class and the lights were low and the candles were lit and I told that story.

We held a long silence together. And I asked them to re-member. And into that silence came tears and prayers and eventually my students’ voices.

They named people they knew who had been harmed or destroyed by prejudice, by abuse, by the various violences in each of their worlds.

None of them had spoken of these things before in our time together. I don’t know if they had outside of that time.

The Bible re-members. I want you to hear the dash in that word. By telling the story, it re-members. It tells of brokenness but in the telling it also puts broken pieces back together. By not letting us forget, it re-members.

The Bible bears witness to a world that is beautiful *and* terrible, which is still our world; and to a people that are faithful *and* flawed, which is still who we are; it bears witness to the God that those people understood, which is really all we can ever ask for, which is what any piece we might add to any canon we might devise today would do.

What we find is that the people we’re reading: their understanding was complicated, sometimes inconsistent, sometimes contradictory, sometimes a reflection of their highest ideals and sometimes a justification for the

basest instincts. Like ours. The Bible re-members all of that, and offers it back to us, and when we read it, and reflect on it - when we receive it for what it is, and don't ask more from it than it can be, and don't believe the hype that promises it as more than we know is possible - then it becomes this one way that God speaks, still, to us, and for us, and outside of us, and beyond us.

It is only as important to read the bible as it is to be immersed in any story that is not our own.

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During this series, I'm hoping that for each set of questions we take up, we can also hear from someone other than me. This week, since our questions were about the Bible, I asked Jenn Williams to share - not to answer our particular questions, but to take up, in general, this theme of if and why scripture matters, if it's worth it, given the undeniable difficulty we have with it. Jenn is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Linfield University, so she spends a lot of time thinking about these questions, talking with her students about them, and I'll let her have the last word here.

(Jenn's video)