

The Bible in 50 words By Jim O'Hanlon

Part One: The Bible in 20 pages



***God breathed**

Snake tricked

Noah built

Sarah laughed

***Jacob lied**

***Joseph dreamed**

Moses floats

Miriam sings

Law given

Ruth clung

Deborah judged

***Nathan tells David**

***Esther went in**

***Jesus read**

Reign explained

Crowds followed

***Remembering Her**

Tables thrown

Disciples fled

Crown bleeds

Hope rose

Spirit burns

***Paul sailed**

***Lamb returns**

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The Bible in 20 Pages

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These books are not presented in the order of my "50 Words" which is the order which they appear in the Bible. Here they appear in order of importance to a Christian approach to these scripture as I understand it.

Paul sailed

For Christians, Paul is the most important person in the Bible, or, rather, TO the Bible. Paul centers our faith in Christ. That means that, while Jesus should be more important, Paul is the apostle who tells us how Jesus' life matters and how we are to live because Jesus lived. Paul tells us that the news about what Jesus underwent is good for US.

Paul doesn't tell us much about his life story and he tells us even less about Jesus' life. Many other writers would collect the accounts of Jesus' life, and Paul's life. Paul tells us what we need to know about Jesus, how to remember him, what to do in remembrance: he tells us about the Last Supper. He sees this death and resurrection and the meal to remember it as sufficient: "*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*" (1 Corinthians 2) Paul tells us that we should "not neglect to meet together." That's a double negative so, just to be clear, we need to keep meeting and having the Supper and sharing the good news. That's what it's all about.

Paul says little about himself but what he tells us is shockingly honest in at least one respect: he persecuted the church. He hunted down the followers of Jesus. He worked for the powers

that be and at some point his world was turned upside down. The Pharisee who was called Saul suddenly transformed to become the apostle called Paul.

Luke writes a sequel to his gospel (the book of Acts) which tells us about the years following Jesus' return to heaven. It quickly becomes the story of someone who wasn't even mentioned in the first book. Paul missed all of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is brought to his attention by a post-Jesus (sic) burgeoning community that threatens the traditions and the fragile position of the Jews in the Roman empire. Jesus was executed for creating social/political turmoil. His followers continue the mayhem and claim he is alive and he is "God among us." Paul responds to this heresy with prosecutorial zeal traveling as far as the movement spreads. Jesus was thought to be gone but he has sent the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the constant in both the first and second books by Luke.

Luke tells us about the moment of Paul's conversion (Acts 9). Maybe it wasn't the brilliant moment of complete change that narrators often describe in their stories but it seems that, somehow, Paul had a radical transformation and came to identify with those he was persecuting. Imagine if the persecuted of the world were suddenly seen as human by their oppressors. Luke tells us in the book of Acts

that Paul was knocked down, made blind by a bright light and heard a plea, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me." Paul was heading to Syria to search out Christians but now God tells him to expect a disciple named Ananias to meet him there. Then God tells a wary Ananias, "'Go, for he (Paul) is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized."

Jesus, who gave sight to many who were blind, has taken sight away and blinded Paul in order to redirect him. Paul is told how his sight will be returned, and, as promised, Ananias healed his eyes. He's healed, and yet, Jesus tells him his mission will involve still more suffering. Paul is healed by a person who should have hated, and likely did hate him. This would have brought him along to seeing people he persecuted as real individuals. Previously, he might have imagined that suffering evidenced God's judgement; now, in serving God, he must suffer too.

So many people have an understanding of religion as a means to get something, to escape hardship. The New Testament, and Paul specifically, do speak of amazing things the disciples will accomplish but some people will hear that as an opportunity for prosperity and success. Clearly, that is not what Jesus described. We wish people "a blessed day" and speak about how blessed we are but Jesus describes the blessed (Luke 6:20-26) as anything but healthy and wealthy models we might see walking breezily through glossy catalogs.

Paul traveled great distances, often by boat: "Then Paul and his companions set sail and came to Antioch.... And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, 'Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it.' ¹⁶ So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak: 'You Israelites, ²⁶.... you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷ Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him. ²⁹ When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead; ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, my friends, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; ³⁹ by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins.'" (Acts 13)

Paul grounds our faith firmly in (1) Christ, in the salvation brought by his death and resurrection. Paul grounds the Christ story in (2) the Hebrew scriptures, always turning to his Bible (the Old Testament aka the Law and Prophets) in explaining who Jesus is. And Paul grounds our purpose in (3) a worshipping, sacramental community, always showing up at the local synagogue and the local house church. Paul did not meet Jesus as the other apostles did; he experienced his powerful, personal presence in "The Word," i.e., Christ, in the community gathered, and in the bread of the supper and the water of baptism. Paul's Christ is people gathered to be the body of Christ in authentic community that prioritizes the poor and excluded.

Paul Wrecks

Paul often speaks about his ailments. Like his temporary blindness, his health problems play

a role in his discovery of his mission. Paul speaks of a "thorn" in his flesh, clearly a euphemism, which leaves me wondering why he needs a euphemism. Something unspeakable? Elsewhere, he speaks of licentiousness and warns against living "according to the flesh." Could he mean the lure of the flesh was his "thorn?" Or was it not a physical but an emotional ailment? Maybe it was a person, his *bête noire*? Paul prayed on this, "*Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness....'*" ¹⁰*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*" (2 Corinthians 12)

Paul decides to switch sides, to stop persecuting and join the persecuted. He is not taking again to the same violent fight for a different team, he is giving up inflicting punishment and, instead, is receiving punishment. Anyone who uses his letters to talk about prosperity and advancement and optimal physical well being is overlooking most of his writings. Paul was not pursuing health, status and happiness, he was forfeiting it. However, Paul was not a sulking, posturing, self righteous martyr. He's not a masochist. He wasn't a sadist of the school that H.L. Mencken describes: "Puritanism: The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." Paul wasn't seeking worldly pleasures and secular solace but he saw the life of the Christian as an active, supportive, vital, deeply satisfying soul community.

Paul catalogues his tribulations. He sees them as marks of a Christian life, as it mostly was in his day. Many times he received, "*the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;.... in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.....At Damascus, the governor ... was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall*

and escaped his hands." (2 Corinthians 11) Paul recalls the trials and challenges endured by the church: "*beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger....*" (2 Corinthians 6)

Paul has miraculous escapes more than once, much like Jesus, but he will not emerge unscathed. Paul was not sailing for leisure. He was always corresponding and traveling as one sent by Christ to preach freedom, faith and love. Freedom from religious repression, faith in God's plan and love as a private engagement with God, as well as love as public work for justice and, most importantly, mutual love in being the church, as in the communion of saints.

Paul preached (verbally and in writing) freedom, faith and love. He preached the freedom that God wanted for us, the freedom we would give up to be with those who are denied that freedom. He preached faith, faith that through trials and hardships God will not leave our side, as we will not leave those we sacrifice to be in solidarity with. He preached love, a love that requires justice, mercy and amazing trust that whatever "our present sufferings are (they are) not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." -Romans 8:18

Remembering her: the one they would have you forget.

Jesus gave a few directions: baptize all nations, love one another, do this (meal) in remembrance of me, wash one another's feet. He has another direction, a description of how his followers will tell the story of his ministry.

'Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.' Matthew 26:13

Jesus tells us that what this unnamed woman has done will be an integral part of the good news,

the gospel, wherever it is proclaimed.

"Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, 7 a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. 8 But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? 10But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me.... 12 By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial.'"

"Why do you trouble this woman?" He asks.

To Jesus, this woman is now considered essential to the telling of the gospel; it's not likely that he wanted us to forget her name. We get the name of Simon the leper but not this woman whom all Christians are to remember and tell about *wherever* they proclaim the good news of Jesus. The gospel writers can't seem to give women the same acknowledgement as men. She remains unnamed.

"Why do you trouble this woman?" He asks. Why indeed. She was warned. She was given an explanation. There are rules restricting women in those days. Clear rules, specific punishments.

Jesus has remarkable interactions with women, considering he should have had no interactions. Women who were thought to be destined for trouble and, deservedly, preemptively, to be troubled. We hear stories of women and widows who persist (Luke 18), and rewards for such people, like the Syrophenician woman begging for her daughter. (Matthew 15) Jesus encounters many troubled women who find no one else to help them. Jesus is met by a woman who has been bled of her money by many doctors. (Mark 5)

Most of these women are unnamed, as if reluctantly remembered, shoved aside, clinging to the margins on the Bible's pages.

More recently, these women are being recollected and recovered in the effort to restore

women to their intended place.

The most notable effort on Jesus' part to transgress the restrictions against women comes in John's gospel. The story puts the lie to the idea that women must be silent and out of the way and rejects the idea that divorced people should be considered unworthy of the same participation that the rest of the sinners have at the Lord's table.

"A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'.... 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)" John 4

Jesus is breaking two taboos by talking with a woman and a Samaritan. Taboos contaminate much like leprosy. It's hard to say which of those are more offensive to the mores of the time but it might be the talking with a Samaritan given how much hatred there was between Samaritans and Judeans. The disciples respond as expected:

"Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'"²⁸ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city."

The disciples are so shocked they are going to pretend they didn't see this. The woman is so startled that she leaves her water jar.

We only get this story from John. Another story we only get from John is Jesus washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper. Jesus was performing the duty of a slave. John leaves out any mention of bread and wine and gives us the scene of Jesus kneeling at his disciples' feet instead. Jesus offers his body for food and his hands to the work of a slave. Jesus finishes his lowly work and instructs his disciples to do the same. He wants us to remember the woman who washed his feet for the service she performed. Jesus wants us to be of service, not

just to tell of this woman's duty but to do the same.

In her book with a title from Jesus' reference to the woman who anointed his feet, "In Memory of Her", Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza looks at the role women played in the early church. Much has been said about Paul the Apostle mistreating women by pointing to verses in his letters about women's subordination in the family and the expectation that they will be silent in church. Schüssler Fiorenza looks past Paul's preacherly admonitions into the stories of Paul and his relationship with the women he knew.

She notices how Paul saw the women as equals both as people and in ministry. She also looks outside the Bible to ancient writings such as the Acts of Paul and Thecla.

There are, throughout the Bible, women who are blurry recollections, who are unnamed and given no voice. There is also, consistently, notice given to the the consequence of such minimizing. Notice is given to victims of this subjugation. Notably, Jesus' genealogy in Matthew remembers them. While there are mighty efforts to forget these women, their stories make it through, visible enough for anyone who is looking for them.

Always alongside of patriarchy is the story of the underside of patriarchy. Alongside rules and reminders and warnings and explanations are women who persist in breaking those repressive rules and transgressing those tainted taboos. Let us remember them. Let us remember as Jesus tells us to remember. The Bible recalls how women were confined to a restricted space but it also shows us the damage that patriarchal rules leave behind, the violence, the poverty, the murder, the physical and emotional and spiritual brutality. In the Bible we read that women are said to be deserving to be treated as less than men but it also shows us how women persist and attend to holy things like washing people's feet, having set the example for Jesus.

Jesus read

Jesus' story takes up nearly half of my "Bible in 50 Words" but what if I only had "Jesus" and one verb like everyone else in the list? As it is I have:

Jesus read

Reign explained

Tables thrown

Crown bleeds

Hope rose

Lamb returns

Along with these I have the responses to Jesus:

Crowds followed

Disciples fled

Remembering her

Paul sailed

So Jesus gets more than one verb: reads, explains, throws, bleeds, rises, returns.

But what if I had to choose just one verb? Would it be one of these six on my list or another? Maybe "gave"; he gave sight, he gave bread, he gave his life, he gave us his victory. Jesus gives: God is grace upon grace.

There's a famous depiction of a neon sign: "Jesus Saves." Maybe that's the verb?

Actually, I think that instead of giving Jesus more verbs I should just give "Jesus" and nothing else.

Jesus.

That's what God gave: God gave Jesus, God is Jesus; Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We have a hymn, "Give Me Jesus."

Jesus.

Jesus, in John's gospel is "The Word." Instead of telling us about Jesus' birth, John places Jesus at the dawn of creation. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."* A Spanish translation choses not to

say "The Word," ie. "*la Palabra*" but instead "*Verbo*." "Jesus is The Verb". (John 1:1 "*En el principio era el Verbo, y el Verbo era con Dios, y el Verbo era Dios.*")

What ONE word could describe Jesus who is "Thē Word?" What verb could I chose for Jesus when he is the "Verb of God?"

Luke tells us that Jesus begins his ministry by reading the Bible to the worshipers in the synagogue. He reads from the prophet Isaiah and then announces that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing. Isaiah and the prophets were speaking about him, about his advent here among us.

Jesus grounds us firmly in the scripture, that is, the Old Testament, as Christians call it. He tells us he did not come to replace scripture but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

Later in the day on that first Easter, when the risen Christ walks with some disciples, they don't recognize him. As he talks to them his words move them and their hearts burn within them. They hear with their hearts even as their eyes don't register who this is. What was he saying to them that moved them so?!!

"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." Luke 24

We might hope to get clear, direct answers to our prayers, a message that confirms God is hearing US. All of the replies that we need and all that we could want, however, are there in the pages of the Bible: the Bible collecting dust on the top of a book shelf, the Bible stuck in the draw of a motel room. The Bible so common and so old that we hardly think much of it. How

could something so old have anything new to say? The Bible that needs to be opened, needs to be read aloud and shared, needs to be prayed over, needs to be interpreted. It is God's unfolding answer for us. It is God swelling the questions in our hearts before we even know them.

Paul tells us about the God who made our hearts and holds our hearts and fills our hearts in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans: *"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."*

What word would we use to say what Jesus did and what it meant? How about "love?" The love within us that comes from God and brings us back to God. How about "peace," the peace that passes all understanding. Whatever the word, it is expressed not as the world understands but as God gives it to us. It is seen and encountered in the event of the cross which we must look upon and by which we are healed.

When words fail us, Thē Word endures and speaks to our hearts a language that the mind cannot express.

God Breathed

In the first account of creation (Is there more than one?!) God is a wind that "swept over the face of the deep". There is an orderly progression of God calling things into existence. With each day's work God "saw that it was good." "And there was evening and there was morning." There is no visual for God here, only a voice and a wind. On the sixth day God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." God is not alone; God's image is male and female. God

does no work on the seventh day but rests. This is a pattern for each day as God ends with taking time to observe the work and declare it good. This pattern of work and rest will be the stated reason for the third (also known as the fourth) commandment. (Exodus 20:11)

The second account of creation begins four verses into the second chapter of the book of Genesis. This account begins by briefly saying that God made the heavens and earth in one day. This account switches language and refers to "The LORD", also known as Yahweh, (sometimes translated Jehovah) instead of "God." "The Lord" is the appropriate way to avoid saying God's name and, so, many English Bibles print "LORD" instead of "Yahweh" and with all caps in two font sizes whereas the Hebrew tradition alters the vowel points to indicate "Lord" is to be spoken when reading aloud something spelled YHWY.

In this account we hear mostly about God's intentions for Adam and Eve and, in sharp contrast to the first, God is described in visuals that depict the crafting and labor done by divine hands and feet and mouth. God formed Adam from "the dust of the ground." God gets into the dirt in contrast to chapter one where God floats above. When God stops to consider this creation, he doesn't say "It is good" but decides on a needed revision. God puts Adam under sedation in order to reach inside and remove a rib and declares that human 2.0 will be called "woman." Prior to this there was no gender to the Hebrew description of the first human. The first gender to be mentioned is woman (*ishshah*).

These are two distinct creation accounts with two very different ways of naming and describing God; scholars see this as evidence that these were two separate accounts, originally independent, oral traditions.

There are more creation accounts including those in Job, the Psalms, Isaiah and the Gospel of John. Psalm 139 indicates the tools God generally uses when it says God "knit me together in my mother's womb." Picture that for

a moment.

The third chapter of Genesis introduces a serpent, "more crafty than any other wild animal." All the animals are quite tame at this point, however. The serpent suggests that God is lying and that the fruit of the tree that God has forbidden will not be fatal. (The snake has a point here.) The serpent speaks to the woman Eve and Eve eats the fruit. She then gave some to her husband Adam and he ate. After they both have eaten, their eyes are opened and "they knew that they were naked." There is no explanation for this reaction but they then hide when they hear God approaching and Adam explains their hiding by saying "I was afraid, because I was naked and hid myself." (Is this anachronism not obvious?) Before God approached they had covered themselves with fig leaves, so weren't they no longer naked? This implies, perhaps, that they were afraid because God would see their leafy loincloths as evidence that they ate the forbidden fruit. God asks Adam, "Who told you that you were naked?" Adam doesn't answer and instead says that Eve "gave me the fruit." When God questions Eve about her action she says the serpent tricked her. God declares the difficult life that must result from these actions. This includes expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

The fourth chapter continues the second account by introducing the children of Adam and Eve: Cain and then Abel. "Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground." We learn of their livelihoods in alphabetical order instead of age order, or in reverse age order. Then we learn that first Cain and then Abel each "brought to the LORD an offering" from their labors. "And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance (face) fell."

The first act of worship introduces God's tendency to show a preference, to chose, to have a "chosen." This first religious act introduces God's favor and disfavor. God sees and asks why Cain is angry and tries to encourage him

(apparently failing) by saying that "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Instead of taking God's advice, Cain brings his brother out to the fields (a premeditated act and appearing to try to avoid detection) and kills him. London's Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, points out that the first religious activity brings a feeling of envy and the first murder.

God gave Eve and Adam one rule and they broke it and tried to hide. God told Cain to look at his failure in a more merciful light and to guard against sin. Cain instead kills his brother and tries to hide it. Can you hear God breathe a sigh? Maybe a face-palm.

Religion has both the power to love and the power to hate; the power to heal and the power to harm. Worship as thanksgiving can result in hurt and grievance for a God who does not respond as desired.

Lamb returns

The book of Revelation is foreign to many of us staid, North American Lutherans. Setting up a four week homiletical series was a real challenge. (I thank Rev. Martha for joining me in the effort last Sunday.)

Revelation is full of symbols. This is not unusual for the Bible but these symbols are surreal. They startle and confuse. There are colors which are exotic. The colors are described using gems and substances like seas of water. These colors are not flat, they shimmer and sparkle. They're not ordinary items, rather they are rare minerals. Revelation also employs symbolic numbers and references names that are too secret to be revealed.

Jesus looks different in Revelation. It's not just his appearance, he is of an altogether different nature. His skin is like bronze, his hair is white as wool, his face is like the sun. Jesus, who rode a humble donkey now enters regally on a white

steed. He is not called "Jesus" in this book, generally. He is called, "The Word" or "Son of Man" but mostly "The Lamb." This is not a new name for Jesus but while it was uncommon before it is the preferred title for this book.

As I read I wonder if Revelation redefines our Savoir and his method of salvation?

After the appearance of the book of Revelation the Greek name for the book, i.e., "Apocalypse", no longer means "revealing" or "uncovering." After this book, "Apocalypse" as a word is transformed for most people to a visceral evoking of cosmic destruction. This book gives us words like "Armageddon", the final battle, or the mother of all wars to borrow a recent turn of phrase.

This book is full of spectacle that would be challenging even for cutting edge computer generated animation. There is the diadem studded Dragon, the scarlet Beast, the "Whore of Babylon." Martin Luther was not fond of Revelation but he would famously employ this last image. He may not have liked its language about the life of faith but Luther often felt he was living through the end of days.

When the Union needed a battle hymn, Revelation supplied, "the grapes of wrath." It appears first in chapter fourteen's appeal to divine justice and deliverance from oppression in the final judgment. When John Steinbeck needed a title for his novel his wife suggested it and it seem to fit: "[A]nd in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage." Like most of the images in this book it is an unattributed borrowing from the Hebrew scriptures, in this case Isaiah.

There are moments in the psychedelic trip that stop to give us a little interpretation, we are told that Babylon is code for the seven hills of Rome (17:9) and that the battles are fought with Jesus' sacrifice and with scripture (12:11).

The book seems to address a certain kind of people, like Steinbeck's Dust Bowl "Okies," people with their backs up against the wall. Revelation's author, John, was writing to Christians at the time of their greatest persecution. The book is a description of visions given to John of Patmos. He is on Patmos because he has been exiled.

Exile is an odd form of repression, it's not very severe and, as Napoleon's France found out, it risks a vengeful return. John writes to seven churches and we get to see the great unevenness in the Christian experience of Roman rule. Some Christians accommodated themselves to the empire and decided they could pay the price for the "*Pax Romana*", the empire's promise of protection, in return for allegiance.

Many people see the cosmic battle of Revelation as an allegorical description of a church in extremis but John describes very different situations for the churches in the area of western Turkey (as we call it today). Some Christians stood against intolerance while others decided they would play Imperial Rome's game. Some scholars think the startling imagery was meant to wake Christians from their complacency, rationalization and accommodation with evil.

Exile is an odd form of repression, much like sending a kid to their room can be less punishment and more playtime. The author of Revelation is in exile. Like Luther hiding in his castle, this gave him time for things like composing, in this case a work that seems to be beyond any mortal's imagination.

It occurs to me that Christians of this time may have been thinking Jesus was in a kind of exile. Christians may have been wondering, 'where is Jesus now?' We don't use the word exile for Jesus but maybe exile resonates for some people. Many Christians have found themselves in a kind of abandonment that they have described as exile.

John wrote Revelation while in exile. He writes a scripture we have trouble recognizing. We

read this and wonder where we are and wonder why Jesus is so unfamiliar. It is as if John is throwing us into exile, casting us out of our comfort zone and into a place that asks us to think again about how foreign this world is for people of faith and how counter cultural Jesus' message is.

In Revelation, Jesus is back but not as a carpenter's son. The message is different, or is it? Did we miss Mark chapter 13?

*"Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' (They) asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'"*⁴ *Then Jesus began to say to them,....*⁷ *When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come....*²⁴ *In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, (uh oh) and the moon will not give its light,*²⁵ *and the stars will be falling from heaven."*

There is no other description for this message from Jesus but Apocalyptic and yet it is from Mark and not Revelation. Maybe there's more to Jesus than we tend to think. Does that sound unlikely? Could there be more to Jesus than what we like most and what is most comprehensible to us?

People who think they ARE living in exile are more likely to pray for Jesus' return than people who feel they are at home.

Even if we feel at home, like we're ok if Jesus doesn't come back just yet, we should think about how many people in this world are not feeling at home, are not comfortable. Can we only think of our own comfort? How are those of us of African descent feeling about KKK members assembling and brawling? How are our Jewish sisters and brothers feeling about neo-Nazis marching in formation

bearing torches? Can they ever feel at home in this country? Reading Revelation throws us into a foreign land and Jesus seems strange but maybe it's a Jesus that we fail to recognize that we should look at again.

Jesus is returning to save us. Do we feel like we're not ready to be saved? Or do we think, "I don't need to be saved."

Do we think we can take care of ourselves without God? Do we know people who don't feel like they can handle what's going on?

This book shows a world beyond scary, a world that we couldn't hope to survive, with its beast and dragon and the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Maybe the message is that God is stronger than the scariest things you can imagine. Maybe the message for those not scared is, why aren't you?

We are in exile, aren't we? Does it feel like it or have we decided that we like it better this way. Are we ready for Jesus to return; I don't mean do you have your life in order but, do you pray for his return? If not, why not?

This book is for those who are praying fervently for Jesus' return. Maybe it will help also those who aren't ready to be saved to think again about their need.

Jacob Lied

Jacob (Genesis 25-50) has fascinated me for a long time and especially after our Seminary Old Testament professor, Phyllis Tribble, used his night of wrestling as a model of reading the Bible.

My "Bible in 50 Words" is a variation on a few others that I've seen. When I've seen the other lists I'm disappointed that they leave out the

messy situations and moral lapses. The list could be very shocking:

Cain killed, Abraham married his sister (or not which means he's lying), Abe contemplated filicide, Lot offers his daughters to a violent mob, Jacob's sons slaughter the city of Shechem, Judah pays a prostitute, Moses killed, David raped, Amnon rapes his sister Tamar, Absalom threatens patricide in a coup d'état, God rescues Jesus while Bethlehem's children are killed, Peter denied, Judas betrayed, Saul persecutes, angels do battle.

That's 67 words and I could go on with that theme. Our professor, Phyllis Tribble, is the author of "Texts of Terror." In this book Professor Tribble focuses on four variations upon the theme of terror in the Bible. With feminist Biblical interpretation, she looks at the tragic stories of four women in ancient Israel: Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed concubine, and the daughter of Jephthah. Prof. Tribble shows how these neglected stories—reinterpreted in memoriam—can challenge hurtful notions of male supremacy.

If you have not heard me say this before I hope you catch it a few times yet: We cannot explain away the violence of the Bible and the wrath of God as an Old Testament problem. You also cannot say, truthfully, that the Muslim Qur'an is more violent than the Bible. That's overly simplistic and dangerously chauvinistic and not true.

I don't spend a lot of time talking about some of the darker parts of the Bible because it's hard to treat it intelligently and end with some well reasoned hope during a Sunday morning sermon.

My "50 words" only take a hard look in three instances: Jacob lied, Nathan tells David, Disciples fled. My list also has more gender balance than the lists of 50 I've seen or that we see in a traditional view of the Bible in our churches: six women and eight men. The

women I include are not undeserving; they are people of note and deserve a place among the fourteen who make the list.

Phyllis Tribble, maybe in our first class, talked about Jacob wrestling with a dark and shadowy figure as a model for our faith life and a metaphor of using the Bible for deepening our faith.

Jacob lied. His mother concocts a plan for him to fool his father into thinking that he is Esau. Even though their father is blind and frail, Esau and Jacob could not be easier to tell apart. They could not be more different which is funny because they are twins.

"When the two boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. (The parents have their favorites.) Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob."

Jacob is domestic. He likes to cook. He's an ancient metrosexual. These brothers are born for adversity. They remind me of the first brothers, Cain and Abel. "Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground." Such livelihoods can be destined for conflict, think of the movie "Shane" or the song "The Farmer and the Cowman should be friends" from the musical "Oklahoma!"

Jacob lies. He tells his father that he is Esau. It's absurd like the story of Little Red Riding Hood only Jacob fools his old man. Jacob is challenged: You doesn't sound like Esau. Still, he feels like Esau and smells like Esau. "Are you really my son Esau?"

Jacob lies in order to steal his brother's blessing, his birthright. Lies are often required to cover up a crime, the costly maintenance for sin.

Years later Jacob decides to return. He sends messengers ahead to soften up his brother. They return saying, "He is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." Jacob is distressed. He starts planning for what might

happen. He prays, "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother." Then Jacob spends a night alone. A long, dark night of the soul. "A man wrestled with him at daybreak." This assault is the answer to his prayers? His prayer is, essentially, "save me from the one I wronged." Jacob is getting the upper hand when the man "struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was out of joint." Jacob is disabled but not defeated. He will not let go.

When he and Esau were in the womb he grabbed Esau's heel trying to pull himself past him to get out first. That's how he purportedly gets his name. His name is explained as meaning "holder of the heel" or "supplanter". What Jacob lacked in the manly arts he made up for in tenacity. Jacob demands a blessing in order to relent. He gets his blessing and a new name: Israel. A curious request to settle a wrestling match but then we are told that it is in fact God that is with him.

We don't think of God as wrestling with us but the idea of us wrestling with God, with God's will and God's word, is exactly what I feel. His prize for a stalemate on the wrestling mat is a blessing. The blessing is a name to replace a name which might be considered a mark of a disreputable start in life or a failure to get your objective. The new name says that he gets an "A" for effort or that effort is what matters. His new name is Israel, "The one who strives with God." We might like to have God as our friend and protector but striving and wrestling is mostly what we get and what I guess we should expect and appreciate.

Esther Went In

"A summary of every Jewish holiday: They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!"

- Alan King (Comedian 1927 – 2004)

One such holiday is Purim and it remembers the

story of Esther and Mordecai.

Esther's story reminds me of Daniel, and Moses, and Elijah, and every other story where the people of God are in dire straights: demonized, feared, persecuted. Esther lived 500 years before Jesus.

If you know someone who has little or no interest in the Bible, give them Esther to read. They'll never guess it's from the Bible. God is not mentioned once. That might change their view of the Bible.

Jack Miles is the author of God: A Biography. He takes an academic, literary approach to the story of this Old Testament character called 'God' relying strictly on the text without any sentiment or systematic belief. He does this as an exercise in reading the Bible without outside influences and biases. He notices how God begins to withdraw, to recede. Speeches by God are gradually replaced with testimony about God. "God's Bible is replacing the Bible's God."

One reviewer of the book, Phyllis Tribble, summarizes Miles' idea of God dissipating book by book: "Psalms perceives Him primarily as counselor. Proverbs treats Him like a picture frame.... After the Book of Job, (in the Hebrew order) God never speaks again, though others repeat His speeches and report His miraculous deeds. ... In the Song of Solomon, God does not appear in the garden of Love. Ruth treats Him as a bystander who does not interact with the human characters. Lamentations waits sadly for this recluse who never comes. And Ecclesiastes declares Him a puzzle of no compelling importance. In literary terms Mr. Miles sees these books, taken together, as a denouement: they let time pass." "Following the pause, God's life moves to an elusive culmination, In Esther God is totally absent."

Someone who knows only a very little about the Bible or has only heard ABOUT it will be surprised to read books of the Bible like Esther

and the Song of Solomon.

Esther is the story about yet another empire that disrupts and defeats and displaces people. The Persian empire was one in a long series of conquerors. The Persians defeat the Babylonians. If you had to rank the enemies of Israel, the Persians defeated the far more awful Babylonians who had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple and took the Jews into exile and slavery. The Persians might be seen as heaven sent for ending the Babylonian rule. Indeed, the Persians under Cyrus would let the Jews return home and rebuild. Like others, this empire, in transcending boundaries, brought weak, isolated tribes together into a cosmopolitan entity which had the benefit of creating some tolerance for smaller groups and enforced a peace and prosperity - though at a price.

As I mentioned, the book of Esther doesn't make note of God at all and doesn't reference Jewish practices or history. Being so late in the Bible's time period it's odd not to have any references to earlier people and places. It does reference prayer and fasting. Like many parts of the Bible we miss the original purpose which in this case was entertainment with a message. The book is broad humor and sentimentality with a simple morality that vanquishes evil.

While we don't hear about a strong religious or ethnic identity, an ambitious man named Haman decides to scapegoat the Jews and eliminate some rivals. A people with a low-key or latent identity suddenly find themselves spotlighted and targeted. Again, discrimination happens many times in the Bible; when Joseph experiences a meteoric rise in Egypt's monarchy, for example, a captain's wife makes clumsy advances from which he flees. She accuses him of attempting to force himself on her: "*She called out to the members of her household and said, 'See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice;'¹⁵ and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.*" (Genesis 39:14-15) How

disrespectful of her husband to bring a Hebrew into their home! Such seasons of intolerance receded for a while but they are always there waiting for someone to find it useful.

Esther is Jewish but no one knows it, even she doesn't seem to think much about it. With Haman's call for a genocidal attack against the Jews it might seem like the wrong time to reconnect to a neglected heritage. Her adoptive father has to confront her with the cause. She has recently risen, like Moses, Daniel and Joseph, to a position of prominence, she is the new Queen. With this stature she will experience envy and conniving. She lives in an uneasy proximity to a man who can be arbitrary in his reign, who is also her husband. Her adoptive father Mordecai pushes her out of her secure silence. She resists him *"saying, 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if anyone goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. ... I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.'"* Mordecai's reply, ¹⁴ *....If you keep silence at such a time as this, ... you and your father's family will perish."* If going into the king unbidden was suicide, Mordecai tries to persuade her that disaster will happen anyway. Alternatively, she could become the hero to save them all.

While there is no mention of God, Mordecai gives voice to a subtle faith. Maybe his faith is emerging in the midst of persecution. Mordecai is working on a bold plan but knows God will save his people ultimately: *"14 if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter."* Mordecai suspects that Esther is God's instrument but says so in the most indirect way: *"Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."* Maybe his faith was just emerging and not yet clearly articulated.

And so, she went in.

Are we being called to such bravery? Will tribulation call forth our faith, our trust in God? What bravery do our times call for?

Joseph Dreamed

Now we return to our Soap Opera: "Seriously, These People Are the Worst" only on FOX TV.

Last week's episode ended with Abraham's grandson Jacob repeating his grandfather's and father's mistake of favoring one son over the other. Ironically, Jacob rebelled against the heavenly ordained "first son favoritism." Having failed to be born first, he wanted to steal the special blessing reserved for his older brother. Being the youngest twin meant he was SO close to being FIRST he couldn't accept the disparity. Following his mother's implausible plan, he tricked his poor, blind, feeble father, into believing he was the older son, Esau, so he could steal his father's oldest-son-only-blessing. Eventually, many years, many wives and many children later, Jacob and his brother are joyously reunited by some unexplained apparent miracle of forgiveness. (Lots of curious plot points are not explained. Also, people often don't recognize their own family members in this hapless, unscrupulous tribe.)

As he was returning to his birth family, Jacob felt sure that his brother would slay them all in justified vengeance. Why does he relocate his entire harem and household with such prospects? Because he was tired of how he consistently got wealthier and wealthier despite his father-in-law's sabotage and deceptions.

So, on becoming the father of twelve sons, Jacob reinstates the tradition which he upended and favors the two sons of his favorite wife, who are also his two youngest sons. And he favors Joseph the most of all. He does everything he can to let everyone know that Joseph is his favorite son. Joseph's brothers are so upset that they plot to kill him and then decide to sell him

into slavery instead. They lie and tell their father Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild animal leaving behind only the blood-soaked beautiful coat that was the bright reminder of paternal favoritism.

"Confused? You won't be, after this week's episode of...Soap."

Jacob basically flaunted his favoritism of Joseph. Joseph makes this even worse; he dreams that he will be the most important, revered person in the universe. He tells his family about dreams of his preeminence seemingly unaware of how it will infuriate everyone. His father warns him of this but he is heedless.

Joseph's brothers were the worst, absolutely horrible. For the rest of their lives, however, the evil they have done follows them and grew heavy. When they meet up with him years later, at first they fail to recognize their own family; as I said, it's a recurring theme. When they discover it is in fact Joseph, they suspect that he is going to take vengeance on them. He keeps us guessing about whether he will or not. Then he decides that all is forgiven. Why?

¹⁵ *"Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"* ¹⁸...Then his brothers... wept, fell down before him, and said, *"We are here as your slaves."* ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, *"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?"* ²⁰ *Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.* ²¹ *So have no fear."*

No matter how bad this family is, they manage to get forgiven. Isn't that a dumb story? What are we supposed to learn from letting people get away with being the worst? What kind of lesson is that?! I bet there were lots of angry tweets about this lack of fairness and basic justice. Isn't there a limit to forgiveness?

Nathan tells David: 'Dude you messed up.'

David has a legacy that continues centuries after his time. He reigned a thousand years before Jesus. We don't get much detail about David's life in the New Testament but Jesus is referred to as a King or as the anointed also known as the Son of David, as an heir to divine dynasty. For most of human history leaders have been either Gods or God's chosen, ruling by divine right or privilege.

We all know the story of David and Goliath, how the little boy killed the giant everyone else feared. We also know that David committed adultery with Bathsheba (breaking a commandment) and then had her husband killed to cover it up (breaking another commandment). Nathan, as prophet, must then tell David that God knows what he has done: Dude, you messed up.

For my "Bible in 50 words" what do I chose as one or two words for David? I chose the interaction between Nathan and David because that applies to us all; David must face his sin. My 50 words seek to be honest and unvarnished but, even more, they are hoping to have a relevant application. To just be honest about David would be to relate even more from his adultery which was at the least harassment and coercion. Some people would focus on Bathseba's responsibility for a lack of caution, for being indiscreet or tempting but hopefully we have evolved past excusing rape by saying that men can't be expected to control themselves.

David's story fits into the Old Testament treatment of the youngest brother, the least likely to be chosen. It is a theme that resonated with the Hebrew people, a small nomadic tribe often overrun by empires to the east and tyrannies to the west. David brings his little nation to its

height but it is still small among its neighbors which surround them on all sides. Rooting for the young David is like rooting for the little nation.

It's easy to romanticize David. He appears in the books of Samuel as a young shepherd boy, "ruddy, beautiful eyes and handsome." David could be described as a paragon of forbearance; like Joseph, he trusts that God will bring all things, even the worst calamities, together for God's greater good. Still, contrary to this virtue, David is a merciless warrior.

David is only the second king. The people demanded that God give them a king so that they can be like the other nations. God warns them that a king will be a harsh ruler but the people insist. Samuel is consecrated as the prophet of the people and the prophets will come to be God's check on the power of the kings.

The first king is Saul. His qualifications? He's handsome and tall. He looks the part. But, perhaps because he lacked any predecessor to look to, he runs afoul and must be replaced.

These leaders could have been cast in Hollywood but where are the leading ladies? There are no great love stories in the Bible, (except Song of Solomon which isn't a story) especially not in the New Testament where there is no betrothed or married couple we see in any conversation. There are no love stories in the traditional sense, whatever that means. The love stories we see are Ruth and her mother-in-law (Ruth's son is David's grandfather) and David and Jonathan, "he loved him as he loved his own life."

God directs Samuel to anoint the new king. There was no method for transition, however, and we simply hear that "the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul." Saul doesn't get a

severance or parachute or so much as a pink slip. He simply has run out of luck. Ironically, when he calls for some music to cheer him up David is recommended, "a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him." The late Leonard Cohen's song "Hallelujah" begins, "They say there was a secret cord that David played and it pleased the Lord." His music soothed Saul's troubled soul, "Saul loved him greatly."

Everyone loved David and Saul gets increasingly isolated and David's closest companion, Jonathan, is Saul's oldest son; losing his son's allegiance must have been painful.

David bides his time while Saul figures out it's time to leave the throne. David becomes a vassal (pledging loyalty in military service) to the Philistines, Israel's enemies, Goliath's people. He more than proves himself to the people he once opposed, "Saul has killed thousands, and David his ten thousands."

The Bible leaves us with many awkward issues, polygamy, war, slavery, prohibitions against divorce and polyester. There are things the Bible prohibits that we allow and things the Bible supports that we abhor.

David might be considered more than a warrior, a perpetrator of atrocities. He engages in total war against whole populations, not just armies. He also fails to hold his son responsible for the rape of his daughter. (Amnon is the half brother of Tamar.) His daughter Tamar tries to draw civic judgement with a public display of her accusation. Expelled from her brother's house she went away "crying aloud as she went." She made a dramatic display of her desolation by putting ashes on her head and tearing her robe. David would not heed her cry because Amnon was his firstborn. Aside from this, while still a vassal to a foreign king, David attacked whole towns and left neither man nor

woman alive.... thinking, "They might tell" about this atrocity.

But did David succeed in silencing the witnesses to his war crime? There is one witness who brings this story to the world: God. Was Tamar's cry not heard? David was worried about the towns he attacked and wanted no one left to tell what he did but scripture pronounces his killing AND his attempt to erase his deeds from history. (Concealing truth would be another commandment broken.) David did not respond to his daughter's cries but scripture records his failure and his favoritism. Indeed, scripture says this is a consequence of his misdeeds against Bathsheba and her slain husband Uriah.

God chooses the least likely candidates. God is, maybe, shallow in looking at their appearance or maybe knows we will be shallow in who we accept. God seems to choose the least qualified, most unlikely or least deserving: people like Moses, Amos, Mary and Paul. Maybe this proves that God can work with our meager gifts to make us his instruments of miracles. Maybe God can do great things with fragile, faulty, earthen vessels. Also, we may wonder why God does not bring justice immediately to wrongdoers, or even simply comment that they were wrong. When we see someone in scripture doing something wrong that IS God's way of showing us and teaching us that we may come to know that we could misuse our freedom; God will not prevent us from doing wrong. Our choices matter.

Tune in next week for: What Nathan Said.

Nathan tells David a story

God sends his prophet to King David to let him know his sins are not hidden. Nathan does not directly accuse the King. Such an approach would probably get King David angry or defensive before he had time to

think. An impulsive response might even be: "Off with his head!" So instead, Nathan tells a story:

"There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³ but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴ Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' ⁵ Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶ he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

⁷ Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸ I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹ Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife.'" - 2 Samuel 11 and 12

David hears the indictment and repents; telling a story turned out to be more effective for the prophet. When we hear a story our imaginations ignite and we identify with the people, especially stories about injustice or family relationships or situations we are familiar with. To get David to listen Nathan needed to tell a story. To get David to think

morally Nathan needed to awake his moral imagination. David become incensed. Then the prophet can bring the difficult message: I'm talking about you, dude.

This tells us a few important things. First, it's easier to get people to understand morality when we give them situations; it's easier to get people to remember when we use stories. Also, the stories of the Bible are about us, all the important stories. The story of Adam and Eve? That's about the consequences of our decisions and the futility of hiding from God. The story of the crowd that wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery: it is we who are quick to judge and severe in our sentencing when it's about someone else.

Nathan knew that David would see the sinfulness of his actions if they were attributed to someone else. Scripture uses stories to engage our memory and to stir our moral imagination. People who want to read the Bible literally are often wrong in their understanding of the stories and usually missing the way they should be applied to our own selves. The Bible is not telling us what to do, it is telling us who we are and whose we are. The Bible transforms when we enter into its story.

David, one of the top five personalities in the Bible, broke commandments against adultery, against bearing false witness, against killing, and against coveting your neighbor's wife. There is also a story about him not honoring the Sabbath which Jesus references in a scene from 1 Samuel 21:6. That's five out of ten by my count, and not any five but the biggest of the ten commandments. The others are minor, common sins; most of us covet things other than people, fail to consistently honor our parents, take the Lord's name in vain and

allow other things to get in the way of honor and obedience to God before all else. Nathan's parable says that David didn't just commit adultery but he stole. That brings his transgressed commandments up to six. That combined with the seriousness of these six means a failing grade to most people. Still, God's punishment is less than what David himself pronounces for the offense when Nathan tells of a fictional account.

The Bible leaves us with many awkward issues, faulty heroes, abusive men, polygamy, war, slavery, and prohibitions against divorce and polyester. There are things the Bible prohibits that we allow and things the Bible supports that we abhor. It seems that having a relationship with God is about more than following the rules.

Quiz

How many books are there in the Bible?

It depends.

What is the fourth Commandment?

It depends.

Who reached Jesus' tomb first on Easter morning?

It depends.

Who are the twelve apostles?

It depends because there are conflicting answers to these questions.

There is much in the Bible that is in need of interpretation because there are omissions and many inconsistencies. Do we then wallow in uncertainty? No.

We must not be uncertain. As Paul warns the Corinthians: "if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will get ready for battle?" (1 Cor 14:8) He goes on to say we need to interpret and we "should pray for the power to interpret...." ¹⁵ I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also. ¹⁶ Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can a listener say the 'Amen'?

We read how God breathed life into creation in the first book of the Bible. In the collection of letters before the last book of the Bible, Paul writes to Timothy (in second letter, chapter 3), ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

Some people use this to say that everything should be read as it is, which is to say, literally, in the Bible. I reject that fundamentalist approach. Firstly, this cannot be done consistently. Secondly, Paul was only speaking about the Old Testament, which many Christians ironically relegate to second class status. Thirdly, it is all useful but that does not mean it can all be used to support one interpretation as many feel it should.

Jesus tells us that we must interpret the Bible.
Luke 10:26

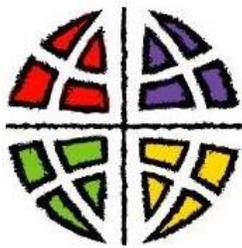
My "Bible in 50 Words" is my version of something I have seen various attempts at. They all lacked something, to my mind.

We have tried the new Narrative Lectionary for two years. (A lectionary is often used to chose a congregation's Sunday readings.) We returned to the Common Lectionary this Summer but with August we returned to the Narrative for a series on the book of Revelation. The Narrative lectionary gives old preachers some fresh content and new challenges. The Common Lectionary has been around for about thirty years and gives three years of readings. That means I've preached the full cycle five times. Revelation comes up very rarely in the Common lectionary and for only a few weeks where we can opt to choose one of the other three lessons anyway. Revelation is so unfamiliar that we needed a series of at least four weeks. It's so foreign to our tradition as Lutherans that we probably have our fill after four weeks.

The Bible is not a book. This is ironic since the word Bible means, literally, book. The Bible is often not to be read literally, though. The Bible is a library. Revelation reminds us that there are wildly different types of literature and competing ideas about God throughout the Bible. The narrative lectionary encourages us to

see the Bible as a story that we enter and explore for our individual journey. I hope these twenty pages help you to start your journey.

God's work.
Our hands.



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