

# **A Hop, Skip and Jump Through the Bible: The Eternal Plot**

Hebrews 4:12-13

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Peter J. Gomes, minister of Harvard University's Memorial Church, writes that when he first came to the church in the early 70s, an anonymous benefactor offered to donate as many Bibles as were needed to fill the pews. Being new, Gomes thought it wise to ask for the advice of some of his colleagues. Their reactions were to be quite suspicious of the motivation behind the gift. "What does the donor want or expect?" they asked. They warned Rev. Gomes that placing Bibles in the pews would simply create an invitation to steal them. And worst of all, placing Bibles in the pews might lead people to think that "this is a fundamentalist church." Too many Bibles lying around in the sanctuary could create a big image problem for a religious institution on the campus of a very secular university. Gomes decided to accept the gift anyway. The church's image didn't seem to suffer and, he says, over the years they have happily lost quite a few to theft. (Gomes, 3)

In the decades since then, keeping Bibles in the pew racks of mainline Protestant churches has become more acceptable and less indicative of fundamentalist leanings. Indeed, Bibles are everywhere. Every motel room has its Gideon, of course, and surveys tell us that an astonishingly high percentage of American households claim to own one. The Bible has been translated into nearly every language on earth, and publishing houses produce Bibles for every subset of the population that you can think of: there are Bibles for women, men, children, teens, mothers, fathers, students, Asians, African-Americans and Hispanics. But has the Bible's omnipresence in our culture actually led to an increase in biblical literacy? Do we believe that the responders to those surveys were

actually telling the truth when they said they not only owned, they actually *read* their Bibles?

From the mid-90s to the year 2000, both the Gallup Organization and the Barna Research Group released several reports on the status of biblical literacy in America. The results did not support the popular claims. Only half of the adults interviewed nationwide could name any of the four Gospels of the New Testament and just 37% could name all four. 38% believed that both the Old and New Testaments were written in the decades following Jesus death and 75% believed that the saying “God helps those who help themselves” came from the Bible. (Neither of those is true, by the way.) And you don’t have to have used email for very long before you’ve heard the following statistic that sounds like it’s made up. But it is apparently true that 12% of American adults think that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. (Vlach)

But let’s admit it, reading the Bible is intimidating. It’s not simply a book, it’s a library of books, written by many people in many forms for many purposes over the course of three thousand years and in two different languages. Most of the authors of the Bible never knew one another, and in a majority of instances they had no idea of what the others wrote.

To make matters more complicated, as Ellsworth Kalas says, the books of the Bible represent many different kinds of literature. “Genesis reads like a historical novel, a saga. Leviticus is a law book, Proverbs is a collection of pithy sayings, and Job is a discourse on the injustices of life. The psalms are poetry,” and the prophets are stern critics of social iniquity. In the New Testament, are four books that appear to be biographies, except they disagree with one another in odd ways. “The Acts of the

Apostles starts out as a history of the early Christian movement but about halfway along becomes primarily the story of one particular leader in the movement, Paul. Then there is a series of letters,” some written to congregations and others to individuals, and the whole thing ends with the strangest book of all, called “The Revelation.” (Kalas, 13-14)

Furthermore, when one really does investigate the stories inside the covers of the Bible, one finds tales that are not at all appropriate for something that’s supposed to be so holy and solemn that newly-elected officials put their hands on it to take their oaths. The Bible is full of uncivilized stories, strange characters and embarrassing outbursts. Like the story in the Second Book of Kings where some little boys tease the prophet Elisha. “Go up, you baldhead!” they yell. Elisha curses them and immediately two bears come out of the woods and eat the little boys up. Honest! You can look it up – 2 Kings 2:23-24. As Fredrick Buechner says, “One way to describe the Bible, would be to say that it is a swarming compost of a book, an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda, law and legalism, myth and murk, history and hysteria.” (Blue, 33)

Perhaps it is because it is such a strange mixture, that the Bible is so easily turned into a weapon of condemnation and coercion. On the one hand, it contains some of the most beautiful poetry, deep wisdom and radical thinking that you’ll find anywhere. But on the other hand, as Pastor Debbie Blue of St. Paul, Minnesota, says, “People have a tendency to find in the Bible what they seek.” And many have used what they find in such a way as to contribute to “oppression and repression, exclusion and violence, and the destruction of the environment. Not just once in a while, but daily. Not just 50 or 100 years ago. Right now. All over the place, women and gay people and US citizens and Muslims and Jews, salmon and psyches are being killed by the sword of scripture.”

(Blue 39) It's so easy to use the Bible to uphold our ideologies, what we already know and think and believe, and to provide justification for slashing and smashing what opposes us. No wonder some people would rather just leave it on the shelf!

It looks so solid, doesn't it? A tangible object that you can hold in your hands. Often the covers are leather, and the edges of the pages are gold. In some editions, the words of Jesus are in red. It's a real, physical object, something we can get our hands around. It's so much more accessible than, say, God, the Uncreated One, the *mysterium tremendum*, the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

But if there is one message I hope you will walk away from this morning, brothers and sisters, it is that this is not God. It is inspired, holy Scripture, a cornerstone of our faith and a source of deep wisdom for all time and all people, but *it is not God*. It contains hundreds of stories, told over thousands of years, of the human search for God and God's search for us...but *it is not God*. The Bible isn't a cage to contain God. God doesn't live in a book. Instead it is a witness, a pointer, to the creative, infinite, mysterious and ungraspable One we call God and our relationship to that God.

The Bible itself tells of its own purpose in our reading this morning:

*"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of the one with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:12-13 [RSV, alt.]).*

Sounds a little scary, doesn't it? "The word of God...sharper than any two-edged sword"? But this isn't a something we're supposed to tuck in our belt and then unsheathe for use as a weapon against others. Having your joints divided from your marrow? The

word of God turns out to be something that's going to do a number not on others, but on you, the reader or the hearer.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is in fact, interpreting one of the Psalms, Psalm 95. (Isn't that amazing? One part of the Bible interprets another part, written 500 years previously, for the benefit of us, who live 2000 years afterwards.) He reads the ancient psalm as a word now addressed by the Holy Spirit to those who have heard the message concerning Jesus: Do not harden your hearts against the voice of God, as did that generation whom Moses led out of Egypt. The God who spoke before has now spoken again in Jesus the Christ, offering again the possibility of deliverance

The author exhorts these new hearers: "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword..." (Wood). The word is not an instrument of punishment, but rather an instrument of disclosure. The word finds us out: it penetrates to the innermost parts of our being, discerning our hearts. There are no secrets, no hidden things which the word does not reach and open up.

Most words, of course, reveal something about the *speaker* or the author, but here it is the *hearer* who is being revealed, shown for who we truly are. "Reading the Bible closely, honestly, quizzically, doesn't actually set us straight as much as it rattles us, undoes us, sets us loose so that we might fall into the lap of God." It doesn't supply us with a neat package of moral certitude. Rather "it witnesses to what it is like to be living beings in relationship to the living God, what it's like to encounter the Word of a God who speaks rather than statically exists." It invites us into the complexity of a relationship with the living God. (Blue, 44, 58 and 49)

Last week Pastor Gary introduced us to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. His sermon brought us right up to the edge of what we're able to think about – the very beginning of everything, everything except God, because, of course, God has no beginning. God always was and is and will be.

But what if we read the first chapter of Genesis not so much for the way it points to the mystery of God's nature, as for the way it tells us about the beginning of a relationship between God and humanity? "In the beginning, God created." "In the very first line of the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible, the involvement begins. God doesn't desire to be alone with no disruptions. God is not sitting serenely on the verandah on the cusp of creation sipping coffee contemplatively in perfect solitude. Instead, immediately God creates, binding Godself to the earth, giving birth to an other to whom God will relate." (Blue, 64-66)

On the sixth day, the story says, God takes God's hands and puts them into the dirt and forms the human, the *adam*, out of the clay. Did you notice? "Everything else was created by an act of speech, only the *adam* was created with the hands of God. God did not stand back and think humanity into being; God had God's hands all over the dirt, rolling it, spitting on it to wet it, molding the lips and forming the toes." This isn't a scientific analysis of the origins of humanity, this isn't a philosophical treatise on some primordial condition of unitary being, this is a story of creation. We come from the hands of God. From the very beginning, God has engaged in the muddy, bloody, potentially heart-breaking process of creation. The relationship of the hands to the work is a relationship that is the opposite of abstract and detached. It is a relationship of intimate involvement. (Blue, 66)

What is this eternal plot, as Ellsworth Kalas calls it? It is the story of God's relationship with our human race. It's a story that's told through the lives of individuals; in the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Joshua and Deborah; in the New Testament, several Marys, Peter and Paul, Lydia and Cornelius. And, of course, it's told in the life and death and resurrection of the Word-made-flesh who dwells with us, Jesus of Nazareth.

It is possible, of course, not to participate in this relationship. To keep the Bible on a shelf in the living room and refuse to let it open you up and show you the truth about yourself. But then it will always be just a book, a collection of words about God, but not the word of God. Because it's only when you crack open the cover, allowing its words to speak to you and then offering yourself back in response, that you enter the relationship and the words of God become the Word of God.

It's only when you enter the plot and become part of it, that it becomes God's *living* Word, made for you, God's *living* people.

## References

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