

## HOW I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE BIBLE

### Luke 24:28-31

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday of Easter, April 23, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the first of a three-part series on the Bible, the latter two to come on May 14 and 21.*

This past Fall, in Adult Formation classes on Sunday morning, our committee asked several of our staff and pastors to share the writers who have influenced them in the formation of their own Christian faith. I was glad to be a part of that, and I entitled my presentation “How I Fell in Love with the Bible (and Who Helped Me).” The presentation is available online,<sup>1</sup> but I wanted to expand and share it with the larger congregation. So, I have re-worked it into three sermons that I will give during this Season of Easter.

Today’s is entitled “How I Fell in Love with the Bible.”

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, I will preach on “*Who Helped Me Fall in Love with the Bible.*”

And on May 21<sup>st</sup>, “*How You Can Fall in Love with the Bible.*”

The passage behind each sermon will be that which appears in the lectionary today: Luke 24:13-35.

This passage is set on the third day after the death and resurrection of Christ. A disciple named Cleopas, who appears nowhere else in the Gospels, joins an *unnamed* disciple walking the eight miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. These two disciples are aware that Christ has been crucified. Some of their group have seen the tomb and been told by an angel that Christ is risen, but these two are doubtful about the report. Luke says that as they walk, they remain “looking sad.”

A stranger approaches. They do not recognize him. Luke tells us, the readers, that the stranger is Jesus. The disciples question the stranger concerning how he could not know of the violent events that have unfolded in Jerusalem, but he begins to speak to them about how the Messiah must suffer and die in order to “enter into his glory.” Luke then tells us, “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [the stranger interprets] to them all the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

This is where we join the story, midway at Luke 24:28.

*As they came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’*

*So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*

*They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’*

Let us pray: *Lord, may our hearts burn within us. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Hayward, “The Journey Home: How I Fell in Love with the Bible (And Who Helped Me) - October 23, 2022,” YouTube, uploaded November 17, 2022, <https://youtu.be/vEpvexOIXb0>.

When all is said and done, the greatest source of *my* faith is this mysterious book we all *love* at points, are *intimidated* by at other points, and try to *master* only to find that it *masters* us, in the best sense of the word “master.”

My love for scripture did not begin as an adolescent infatuation; nor was it love at first sight.

- As many of you know, I grew up in a family in Memphis and one of its early suburbs, Germantown. While my childhood church was in one of the largest Presbyterian churches in the denomination, when we moved to the suburbs, we joined a small, white-framed, family-oriented Presbyterian church of about 200 members.
- Neither of my parents were ministers, but alongside sports and school, they made sure church was a central pillar of our life. And it was a *positive* experience: mainly fellowship dinners, workdays in the church yard, delivering Thanksgiving meals to underprivileged families out in the country, and most of all, an annual all-church family camp each Labor Day Weekend.
- What I experienced in the church of my childhood and youth was *warmth*, a sense of *community*, the smell of coffee in Fellowship Hall and the taste of donuts and hot chocolate on cool fall mornings at the rustic retreat center where family camp met. It was all about *community*.

But it was not *directly* about the Bible.

I did not remember enough of the preaching, or enough of what I was taught in Sunday School, to have developed a feeling one way or another about this book that became so important to me and has played such an influential role in Judaism and Christianity for thousands of years, has been central to the canon of Western literature, and has been instrumental in the building of empires – positively and negatively – across the world.

In high school, I was in an environment in which many of the other kids were from prominent, influential families. At the same time, they had strong evangelical religious experiences, often coupled with a literal interpretation of scripture. Though I was not well-schooled in the Bible (as some of them were), I had a deep sense that my own church life was important to me. I was not particularly appreciative of the way some of my fellow students seemed to use the Bible to challenge the legitimacy of my own faith and I had an intuitive sense that the way they sometimes interpreted passages in the Bible just didn’t seem right.

One day, a similarly inclined friend of mine found a verse which reads, “There are some things in [Paul’s letters] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.”<sup>2</sup>

Here was a verse in the Bible from Peter, whom I knew to be a significant Biblical character, challenging other verses written by Paul, another significant character. This verse set me on a path of thinking there is more to the Bible than many of the religious people around me understood. And that stuck with me. It was the beginning of my “heart burning within me” – like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus – over a deeper meaning within Scripture.

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The way the Bible would soon come to life for me – and lead me to fall in love with it – came when I was introduced to viewing it as *narrative*. Let me illustrate what I mean by that word by telling a few stories.

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<sup>2</sup> II Peter 3:16.

During my middle and high school years, as I have related before, the civil rights movement was in full force in the South, and I had been drawn into it emotionally and intellectually around the time Dr. Martin Luther King was killed in my city. Three or four years after his death, I was given a cassette tape of a series of sermons that had been given at the Montreat Youth Conference in North Carolina. I had not attended the conference, but I knew the speaker, Dr. Robert Walkup, to be an Associate Pastor at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis (whose youth group and worship services I sometimes attended).

Dr. Walkup had flowing white hair and a deep, raspy voice, like the well-known Senator at the time, Everett Dirksen. I knew that Dr. Walkup had been forced to resign from a pulpit in a Southern state because of his support of civil rights.

The three sermons he preached at Montreat were on the parable of the prodigal son.<sup>3</sup> He told the story with *humor* and *power* and related it to the civil rights movement so present among the lives of the thousand or so youth – nearly all white – in attendance at the conference. He preached the parable in a way that high school youth could *feel* it.

I can still remember phrases from this sermon which ring in my ear today:

- When the son had blown all his inheritance and was left having to eat the same food he was feeding the pigs, the son “began to be in want.”
- When he returned home, not because he was penitent but because he was hungry, all the way back he practiced what Dr. Walkup called his “pitiful, little memorized speech” that he hoped would convince his father to take him back:

*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.*

- When the older brother, now having to work two jobs in the field, learned his father was throwing a party to welcome his younger brother, had said:

*...all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.*

to which Dr. Walkup added, “...as if he had any.”

Those three sermons – on a scratchy cassette tape – opened up the scriptures to me as *stories*, as *narratives*, that – like a good play or movie or novel or short story or tale we hear sitting at our grandmother’s feet – drew me in, spun me around, and deposited me on the other side – a *moved*, if not *changed*, person. Hearing those three sermons was the most thorough and dramatic experience up to that time of my “heart burning within me.” And it came as someone was “opening the scriptures” to me.

A few months after hearing Dr. Walkup’s sermons, I heard dynamic African American preachers at Montreat, in person, including the Presbyterian minister Dr. Joseph Roberts, who succeeded Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Their preaching, much of it *narrative*, had similar impact on me, and began a twenty-or-so-year period of my listening to great African American preachers in our history. Once again, my heart was “burning within me.”

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 15:11-32.

Coupled with my love of the community of the church and my experience of its pastoral care after the death of my father around that time, this exposure to the narrative use of scripture in preaching was a capstone to an internal sense that I should seek to become a minister. I listened to that internal sense, and after finishing college, felt strongly about leaving the South (mainly because I felt I would return), so enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York when I was 21.

My first semester I took a preaching course. It was led by Dr. James Forbes, who had joined the Union faculty that same year I arrived (1976). He was in his late thirties at the time and was fast becoming one of the premier African American preachers in our nation. The product of a Pentecostal background and a strong, traditional education at Union, he was warm and engaging in the pulpit, in the classroom, and in person. He had a wonderful sermon on Ezekiel 37 and a legendary sermon named “Hannah Rose.” Both were narrative – a hallmark of African American preaching and oral culture. The class had about sixty students in it: most were already practicing Black or Puerto Rican pastors serving in New York.

On a Friday night, Jim Forbes invited us all to a tradition in the Black church called a “Preach-In,” where we would show up with our Bibles, be given a passage, and then stand in line to preach a spontaneous sermon of no more than five minutes. I remember him saying to me as we walked out, “You don’t ever have to worry about going hungry; you will always be able to make your living preaching.” I later learned that he said that to nearly everyone, but what could feel better to a twenty-one-year-old kid from the South living in New York?

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If the sermons of Bob Walkup and Jim Forbes taught me the power of *individual* stories as narratives within the Bible, my introductory Old Testament class, taught by Dr. George Landes, and my introductory theology class, taught by Dr. Christopher Morse, taught me the *overarching* narrative within the Bible, a narrative that runs from Genesis to Revelation.

Those of you who have taken my classes have heard me recite this narrative:

- Creation and Fall
- Promise of Land/Descendants/Blessed to be a Blessing
- Liberation and Law
- Wilderness and Land
- Leadership: Tribal, Monarchial, and Prophetic
- Exile and Return
- Literature and Letters
- Hope for Messiah
- Pre-existence/Life/Death/Resurrection/Gift of the Spirit/Promised Return of this Messiah – Jesus Christ
- The Early Christian Movement Within Judaism
- The Early Christian Movement into the Greco-Roman World through the Apostle Paul
- The Promised Return of Christ in Glory envisioned in the strange, frightening, yet beautiful book of Revelation

As the Bible is full of individual narratives, so also are they all part of this larger overarching narrative of *Creation, Fall, and Redemption*. Every Biblical passage we read, every sermon we hear, every Biblical story you know, fits somewhere within this overall narrative. The Old and New Testament classes I teach every year at Westminster are aimed at giving us this overarching narrative within which the individual stories we know from childhood or hear from Sunday morning sermons can come to life.

When we have this larger story, we can develop, over time, some sense of where the individual stories fit. It is all part of what can make our *hearts burn within us*, like the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus.

When we experience such an “opening” in scripture, in a way that fits our personality, I believe we are experiencing the presence of God – perhaps for the first time, perhaps in a new light – but in some way touching and changing our lives for the good.

Every time I step into this pulpit, every time I enter a classroom, my hope is that something will happen that leads you to feel your “hearts burning within.” It’s a tall order and it doesn’t always happen, but it is the least I can do for you as your pastor. It is really all I can do for you. And it is one of the joys of my life to do it with you and for you in this congregation.

Amen.