

## WHO HELPED ME FALL IN LOVE WITH THE BIBLE

Luke 24:13-17, 25-27, 32

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the second of a three-part series on the Bible. Next Sunday will be the conclusion of the series.*

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*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad...*

*Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’*

*Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures...*

*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?’*

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Three weeks ago, I preached the first of a three-part series entitled “How I Fell in Love with The Bible.” I shared with you that my affection for scripture took life when in high school I encountered a series of narrative sermons on the Parable of the Prodigal Son that related that parable to the Civil Rights Movement going on around me. I also related that my love for Scripture grew in my seminary years when I learned that the individual stories in the Bible were all part of the more overarching Biblical story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption that God enacts and promises to bring to full fruition, a story narrated in the dense but beautiful pages from Genesis to Revelation.

Today I want to bear witness to a series of Biblical scholars who have strengthened my lifelong love of this Book. While I did not know them when first I “fell in love with the Bible,” it is they who have helped sustain that love into what has become a fifty-year marriage.

When two disciples are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus three days after the death of Christ, they are in shock over the brutality of the death of the one to whom they had committed their lives. A man joins them whom they do not recognize. He begins to “*interpret to [these disciples] the things about himself in all the scriptures.*” They still do not recognize him, but as it is late, they ask him to stay the night with them. When they set bread before him at the evening meal, and he breaks that bread in their presence – as we shall experience in a few minutes – they recognize him as the risen Christ. They then say to one another: “*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*”

Over the years, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments have acquired a power to lead my heart to “burn within me.” Sometimes this happens when I *teach* them. Sometimes when I *preach* them. Sometimes this happens in a *sermon* I may read or hear in person or online. Sometimes it happens when I come across them in *literature* or *popular culture*. But behind my “burning heart” lies the work of people who have devoted their lives to the study and teaching of scripture in secondary schools, colleges, universities, or seminaries around the

world. I share with you today how some of these scholars have opened the scriptures for me, in hopes that further study and worship on your part may lead your own heart to burn as well.

Let us pray: “*For the cloud of witnesses who go before us, we give you thanks, O God. Speak through them to us, that Scripture will never cease yielding its meanings and insights to our hungry hearts.*” Amen.

## I.

An early scholar who deeply influenced me was the late Dr. Brevard Childs of Yale University. Like me, Childs was Southern and Presbyterian. He developed what was called “canonical criticism.”<sup>1</sup> To put it simply:

- For the 100 plus years prior to Childs, most Biblical scholars were trained in what was known as “the historical critical method,” in which a scholar or reader seeks to uncover the historical and literary *background* of a particular text, determine how it related to *its own* day, and then see if it can relate to *our day*.
- While not discounting the importance of historical context, Childs argued that over the centuries, as the people of Israel and then the church committed to writing the stories, laws, histories, sayings that had been passed down orally, and as these writings made their way into the worship and teaching of the synagogue and church, what was *most important* was not how these “texts” had *developed* over time and circumstance, but rather how they were *heard* in the life of the synagogue and church as they were read, studied, sung, chanted, taught and preached.
- If prior to Childs the *action* of a Biblical text involved understanding its *origins*, after Childs the *action* of the text was found as it spoke to the *church* and the *individual* in its *finished form*. The question was not: “Can we find Noah’s Ark, but rather why did God choose to start over with the project of creation?”
- Childs’ writing went a long way to allowing the preacher, the teacher, or the person in the pew to *receive the text directly* and *hear the voice of God* through the *printed or spoken word* before them.

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During those years at Union Seminary I also was fortunate to study the Gospel of John, the stories of Jesus’ birth and infancy, and the stories of his passion and death from one of the top New Testament scholars of the last century: the late Father Raymond Brown.

- From Father Brown I learned that the four gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – are four *distinct* voices, something like the four distinct preachers you have at WPC.
- I learned that each writer brings his particular emphasis about the “good news” of Jesus Christ – writing *from* a particular community of Christians and primarily addressing *that* community.
- Part of the “story” of the Bible is having these *four distinct portraits of the same subject: Jesus Christ*. This allows for a greater depth and richness for us as we *hear* and *read* scripture *in our own distinct*

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<sup>1</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970).

context,<sup>2</sup> in the singularity of our own lives, as we, in the words of William Tyndale, “apply the medicine of scripture,” each to our “own sores.”<sup>3</sup>

## II.

As the nineties evolved and I eventually came to WPC in 2004, the writings of *four women* have taken front and center in my understanding of Scripture.

- The first is *Dr. Phyllis Trible*. She was raised Southern Baptist in Richmond, got a Ph. D. at Union, taught a couple of places before returning to Union (though after I had graduated), then retired from the divinity school she helped found at Wake Forest. Trible was an early feminist scholar most known for her book entitled *Texts of Terror*.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on her Southern Baptist commitment to not ignoring or discounting any text in scripture, she wrestled long and hard with some of the most difficult texts – particularly ones in which women were brutally raped or killed<sup>5</sup> – always trying to see what we can glean from these texts as sacred scripture, even as painful and dehumanizing as some of them are.

For me, the most helpful concept she articulated, in an essay in the *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*<sup>6</sup> I use in my classes, is the *distinction* between whether a text is being presented to us as *prescriptive* of what we are to do or *descriptive* of what we human beings are *capable of doing*. Not every text is given to us with the command: “Go and do likewise.” Some are given to us to show us how cruel and violent we fallen human beings can be. Trible taught that it is important to ask *this* question as we are reading texts, as we are following the narrative of scripture, particularly when we are reading “texts of terror.”

- The second female scholar who has had a major impact on me is *Dr. Margaret Mitchell*, a Roman Catholic scholar of the New Testament and the Greco-Roman world at the University of Chicago.<sup>7</sup> She supervised my thesis for my Doctor of Ministry at McCormick Seminary in the early 1990s. The thesis was on Paul’s First Letter to the Church at Corinth. Mitchell stressed that it is important to read Paul as a “working pastor” making on the ground decisions about issues that came up in the young congregation he had founded at Corinth but which after he left had become divided and fractious over which members and leaders were more spiritual than others.

Mitchell taught me to view Paul as a human being, trying to strike a delicate balance between holding his congregation together in *unity* in the midst of the *diversity* of its members’ views, opinions, and backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Paul did this, Mitchell said, by urging members to put the *interests* of others ahead of their own interests or views when possible,<sup>9</sup> and uniting around what was *essential*, which in Paul’s belief was *the death and resurrection* of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: 1977); *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: 1994); *The Gospel According to John* (New York: 1966, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> William Tyndale, prefix to the translation of the Pentateuch, 1530, quoted in Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), frontispiece.

<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: 1984).

<sup>5</sup> See her treatment of “The Unnamed Woman: An Extravagance of Violence,” on pages 65-92. This is an exegesis of Judges 19-21.

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible, “The Authority of Scripture,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2248-2254.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*. *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie*. Vol. 28. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. 1991).

<sup>8</sup> I Corinthians 1:10.

<sup>9</sup> I Corinthians 10:24.

<sup>10</sup> I Corinthians 15.

Mitchell's teaching spoke directly to me as a Pastor. It was a *narrative* way to read Paul, rather than the *doctrinal* way in which he had been read for centuries; and it is the way I have continued to read Paul. At the time, as our own denomination was in the middle phase of a forty-year process of sorting out what we believed about sexuality – particularly gay and lesbian ordination and then marriage – this approach to Paul proved enormously helpful to me as Pastor of a church with decidedly mixed views, which is the only kind of congregation I have ever served.

- A third person who has influenced me in the last twenty years is *Dr. Christine Roy Yoder*, with whom I have studied at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar. Yoder teaches at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta. If Tribble is known for tackling “texts of terror,” Yoder could be known for tackling “texts of boredom.” She is a specialist in Proverbs.<sup>11</sup> I have said that reading the middle part of Proverbs, Chapters 10-29, where one proverb follows another and another, is like reading a telephone directory with the names not in alphabetical order.

Yoder's thesis, which many of you have heard me say, is that the first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs show a father seeking to inculcate wisdom in his adolescent son in an affluent, educated, urban home.<sup>12</sup> He does this by appealing to the adolescent male's budding sexual awareness by depicting the choices the son will face as being between two appealing female figures: Wisdom and Folly.<sup>13</sup>

With Chapter Ten, the young man is suddenly cast out into the world on his own, and he has to choose from among the 19 chapters of miscellaneous proverbs he has inherited from home *which teaching to apply to each situation he faces*. In other words, as an adult, he has to draw on the wisdom of his “home and training.”

Some of the wisdom he has learned is contradictory;<sup>14</sup> some is repetitive;<sup>15</sup> some of it is unclear;<sup>16</sup> but ultimately the choice is his. And if he chooses well, over time, he may become mature and strong enough to marry the final character who appears in the book, the strong, independent, wise woman labelled in our NRSV translation “The Capable Wife.”<sup>17</sup>

- The fourth and most recent addition of female interpreters to my collection of Biblical scholars is *Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg*, a literary scholar, daughter of the former chief rabbi of Scotland. Zornberg has published five books on Midrash, which is the Jewish commentary on scripture that has existed since the early Middle Ages.<sup>18</sup>

Zornberg is the most gifted writer I have encountered among Biblical scholars. She is versed in American literature, psychoanalytic theory, modern philosophy, and Midrash. She frequently quotes Emerson and T. S. Eliot. I have devoured her commentaries as soon as they have come out – reading and

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<sup>11</sup> Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> See Proverbs 1:8, 9, 20.

<sup>13</sup> See Proverbs 1:20-53 for Wisdom calling out, and 7:1-27 as Folly (the “loose woman”) calling out.

<sup>14</sup> Proverbs 26:4 versus Proverbs 26:5.

<sup>15</sup> Proverbs 18:8 and 26:22.

<sup>16</sup> See particularly Proverbs 31:4-9, and the differing interpretations of the advice the King's Mother is giving to the King concerning how to treat the poor.

<sup>17</sup> Proverbs 31:10-31.

<sup>18</sup> Her books are published by Schocken Press, New York, except where noted. Dates and titles are *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (1995); *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (2001); *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (2011) *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (2015); *Moses: A Human Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); *The Hidden Order of Intimacy: Reflections on the Book of Leviticus* (2022).

re-reading them so many times that after marking up the paperback editions I buy hardback copies for preservation purposes.

Zornberg studies ancient scholars who were committed to “connecting all the dots” to a story in the Bible, and the ways in which one story will refer to another. Midrash *speculates* on the action or thoughts *between the lines*, on what may have been *thought* or *said* or *felt* by characters who were silent or unnamed (often women), or what may have *happened* but *not been recorded*. This way of reading, especially coupled with her sensitive knowledge of Hebrew, can bring a Biblical story or character to life in ways unmatched by other scholars whose works I have read or studied. This summer, when I will be preaching on several characters from Genesis, I will draw heavily from Avivah Zornberg.

### III.

While this sermon has been a bit like having your mechanic explain how he or she diagnoses and repairs your car, I have felt like you as a congregation have the ability and appreciation to hear a little bit of what goes under the hood, even as you, like me, are more interested in how the car gets us from one place to another – as smoothly and quietly as possible in DC traffic (the one unwelcome rejuvenation we have experienced after COVID). None of these scholars would play the role in my life they play if I had not discovered a sense of delight and indeed compulsion for *preaching* and *teaching* the scriptures, a delight and compulsion that your response has only fueled in the nearly twenty years I have served you.<sup>19</sup>

As church and culture have changed a good deal over these two decades, I have come to believe that the Bible is the *only* real tool the church has. And in recent years, I have come to believe that the church is the *only* institution that will be able to carry the Bible forward into the future, even as often as we do great damage to this book by the ways we misuse it. But the Bible is *all* we have, and increasingly, we are the *only* entity in society who can *preserve* it and *present* it to the world, particularly if we work hard to present it both well and with integrity that allows it to shape us rather than us to shape it.

In the final sermon in this series, next week, I will try to give some practical advice concerning “How You Can Fall in Love with The Bible.” But spoiler alert: one of the best ways is if you will just sign up for either my Old Testament or New Testament classes which start again next Fall. So this sermon ends with a commercial, and I’ll see you next week.

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<sup>19</sup> I would be remiss not to name other scholars whose work has influenced me: Dr. David Gunn’s *The Fate of King Saul* (JSOT: 1980), was the first monograph that led me to teach a large portion of scripture narratively; the writing of Rabbi James Kugel opened me up to the sometimes strained by often creative ways Jewish scholars sought to reconcile texts of scripture, as well as the sheer beauty of much of the Bible. The extensive works of Dr. Robert Alter illuminate the intricacies of Hebrew words for me in ways well beyond what little Hebrew I know; the understanding of the writings of the Apostle Paul provided by both Dr. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and the late Dr. Hans Frei have helped me understand the primacy of God in the Letter to the Romans; and most recently Reverend Fleming Rutledge’s *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (2017), has focused on that same primacy in ways that have deepened my understanding “the faith of Jesus Christ” and therefore my own faith *in* Christ. I am also indebted beyond words to two long-time teachers of the Moveable Feast, the late Dr. Fred Craddock, and Dr. Tom Long. Despite my focus away from the historical-critical method as the primary way of approaching texts, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine provides excellent material in that direction. I have been nurtured during COVID by conversations and guided reading of Dr. Christopher Morse. And I am deeply indebted to colleagues in the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, of which I was a member from its founding in 1983 through this past January. This community of preachers has been one of the mainstays of my ministry.