

HOW YOU CAN FALL IN LOVE WITH THE BIBLE

Deuteronomy 26:5b-10a

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the third of a three-part series on the Bible.

Scripture

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.

⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

⁸The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders;

⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.”

Today’s sermon is the conclusion to a series in which I have been sharing the sources and nature of my longstanding love for this book we call the Bible. In previous sermons I have spoken of “How I Fell In Love With The Bible” and “Who Helped Me Fall In Love With The Bible.”

Today I want to turn the camera away from my spiritual autobiography and focus instead on those of you who sit in the pew and live and work in the world. I want to preach on “How *You* Can Fall In Love With The Bible.”

Though I rarely preach “how-to” sermons, I owe it to you to provide whatever tips I have picked up along the way concerning this book that is at the heart of our faith and a continual source of beauty, wisdom, and consternation.

Let us pray:

*Guide us, O God,
By your Word and Spirit,
That in your light we may see light,
In your truth find freedom,
And in your will discover your peace;
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

I.

One of the most helpful statements I ever heard about the Bible was made by the late Dr. Fred Craddock several decades ago. I heard him say, in an offhanded way, “The Bible isn’t really a *book*, it’s a *library*.” He is right.

Though the Bible is bound and sits on our bookshelves, our coffee tables, or at our bedsides, it is actually a collection of 66 books, whose origins lie in stories told around campfires or in huddled desert tents in the Ancient Near East and later in house churches in the Greco-Roman world to which the Apostle Paul traveled

after the death and resurrection of Christ. The stories and sayings, poems and prayers in the Bible were repeated long before they were written, edited, translated, and collected into the Old and New Testaments.

Thus, when we open this book, we are walking into a library, which is one reason it takes a lifetime to plumb the depths of the 66 books before us.

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Like reading Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson, it is impossible to digest the whole of the Bible at one time. We have to start small: One passage, one psalm, one book at a time. Over a long period, perhaps a lifetime, we can eventually partake of the whole meal. But a warning from the maître de is in order: There will be dishes and even courses we will never fully digest, and some recipes that taste so bitter we push the plates away. Such is the nature of a book this long, this complex, this wise, yet still revealing and reflective of the fallen world in which we live and God's commitment to that world's redemption.

Many people start out reading the Bible *cover to cover*. This is a noble goal, but I warn anyone who starts this way that some of the most challenging parts of the Bible appear early. Maggie and I are in the process of reading aloud one chapter a night. From about the middle of Exodus – the second book – through Leviticus – the third book – and through about the first half of Numbers – the fourth book – almost nothing happens. No events. No sayings. Hardly any characters. Instead, this portion of the Bible contains 613 laws that grow out of the Ten Commandments.

While these chapters provide religious, political, and social identity to the newly created people of Israel,¹ we Christians tend to *stumble over* or *slumber through* the specificity of detail. If we start out reading the Bible cover to cover and get stalled in the legal material, it is okay to skim and move on, though eventually we may be moved to return.

II.

Another way to begin reading the Bible is with some of the wonderful *short books* than can be read in one sitting.

Since most of us have an interest in Jesus, his story is presented four times in four different ways by four different writers in the *section* of the library called the New Testament, on the *shelf* labelled Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John live in this section. They each give a positive portrait of Jesus, though they begin at different points in his life, and the colors and hues of their portraits vary. While we cannot go wrong by starting with any one of them, Mark is the shortest and simplest. We can read Mark in less than two hours, and come away with a great sense of religious accomplishment that just might spur us on to read Matthew, Luke, and John.

¹ James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 261, has a beautiful description of what these commandments mean to Judaism: There were rules about vows to God that you might utter in a moment of panic; what God had ordered you to do in case you contracted a then-common skin disease; rules about festivals and pilgrimages and fasting, menstruation and seminal emissions, rules and rules and rules, until it seemed like there was no area of life about which the Torah did not have *something* to say – and that, for later Judaism, was the beauty of it. In doing each thing according to the way that God had prescribed, a person could, as it were, turn life itself into a constant act of reaching out to God. Nothing was done for its own sake; everything was done to serve God. And so, without having to retreat to a monastery or a mountaintop, one could live each minute in a state of holiness and sanctity, creating a living, breathing connection between one's little life on earth and the God in heaven."

If we prefer a story from the Old Testament, I suggest the Book of Ruth. It is only four chapters. Ruth is a book in which every character does the right thing. There is beauty in Ruth. There is love in Ruth. There is healing in Ruth. There is loyalty in Ruth. There is faithfulness in Ruth. There is romance in Ruth. There is passion in Ruth. There is childbirth in Ruth. There is respect for tradition, law, social norms, and civility in Ruth. And behind the scenes in Ruth, there is the quiet, hidden hand of God, helping things work out for the better for every character who appears in this shortest of stories.

And if we pay attention to the shelf from which we take the Book of Ruth, we will notice that it follows the shelf containing the Book of Judges. Unlike Ruth, Judges is violent. The violence is often committed by God's people,² sometimes at God's command.³ The Book of Ruth refers to this violence obliquely, when it opens by saying, "In the days that the Judges ruled..." and then moves to narrating a beautiful story of one whose life was full of light and beauty – a welcome foil to the widespread violence "in the days the Judges ruled."

And Ruth herself wasn't even part of the people of God. She was a foreigner. A Gentile. A Moabite. Yet she embodies what God would have God's own people be. So when we read the Book of Ruth, we are reading a story in which the people of God are acknowledging that a foreigner in their midst better embodies God's will than they have embodied it in their recent history. This is quite an act of honest self-criticism on the part of the author of Ruth and those who decided the book should be included in Scripture. When the people of *Israel* tell this story, they are doing something rare for any individual, family, tribe, organization, religion, or nation: they are engaging in self-criticism. Isn't that a novel idea!

III.

A third way to fall in love with the Bible is to cling to *passages* that we have picked up along the way that express "the hopes and fears of all the years that are met in Thee tonight."⁴ We know many of them by heart:

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
...
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.⁵

For everything there is a season,
And a time for every matter under heaven.⁶

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You discern my thoughts from far away.⁷

² Judges 3:12-20; Judges 19; Judges 21.

³ The most specific case in Judges is at the outset in 1:4. This is consistent with Deuteronomy 7:1-5 and 20:16-18.

⁴ Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," 1868.

⁵ Psalm 23 KJV.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 3:1.

⁷ Psalm 139:1-2.

Consider the lilies of the field,
How they grow;
They neither toil nor spin,
Yet I tell you,
Even Solomon in all his glory
Was not clothed like one of these...
Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow,
For tomorrow will be anxious for itself.⁸

For I am convinced
That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
Nor things present, nor things to come,
Nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
Nor anything else in all creation,
Will be able to separate us
From the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁹

Now faith, hope, and love abide these three;
And the greatest of these is love.¹⁰

If you have grown up with little exposure to religious faith, you may have encountered one or two of these passages in our common language. If you have heard them all your life, they have likely already left their mark on you, become part of who you are.

In either event, read them. Recite them to yourself. Pray them. Hear again the voice of your grandmother, speaking them softly as you drifted into slumber in her lap in her rocking chair. Look them up in the Bible you have. Read them in their context. Learn about them. Every passage that becomes part of you, will help the entire book become even more “a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path”¹¹

IV.

The final and perhaps most important thing you can do as a person of faith and, frankly, a citizen of both this nation and the world is to become familiar with *the big picture of scripture*.

- The Bible is one long narrative arc – that begins with Creation in Genesis, moves to Fall in only its third chapter, narrates the never-ending attempts of God to discipline, chasten, teach, fortify, strengthen, redeem and rectify the overwhelming fracture within the human creature and the created world after the Fall.
- This divine rectification reaches its height when God “becomes flesh and dwells among us”¹² in the person of Jesus Christ, gives his life in the supreme act of *doing battle with* and *overcoming* the “principalities and powers”¹³ that threaten the world, is *raised* from the dead in victory and *ascends*

⁸ Matthew 6 :28-29 (NRSV) and 34 (KJV).

⁹ Romans 8:38-39.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 13:13.

¹¹ Psalm 119:105 KJV.

¹² John 1:14.

¹³ Ephesians 6:12.

into heaven from which through the Holy Spirit God continues to strengthen us to *live toward* the glorious final reign and rule that is “at hand but not in hand,”¹⁴ near to us, never far away.

- The Bible is one long story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption; and nearly every Biblical story, nearly every Biblical character, nearly every Biblical passage relates to this story or bears witness to it.

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In the passage we read today, God is instructing the people of Israel to remember that it is God who has released them from slavery. This is the key action in the narrative arc of the Old Testament, a release God enacts after the Fall. The *deliverance* of the people of Israel from *slavery* then becomes the model through which the New Testament writers interpret the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. God delivers us from slavery in Egypt, and God delivers us from slavery to sin and death.¹⁵ It is all part of one overarching story, which as we absorb, absorbs us.

V.

For years I have collected writings that resonate with my love for the books of the Old and New Testaments. I would like to close this series with a few words from an unlikely source: Machiavelli, the sixteenth century Italian philosopher who is both the theoretician of and synonymous with political ruthlessness.

In a letter to a friend, Machiavelli describes retiring to his library each evening to read the classics. When I first read this passage a decade or so ago, while I knew it did not describe any love on Machiavelli’s part for scripture, it struck me as an arresting description of what falling in love with the Scriptures has at times been for me.

When evening arrives [Machiavelli writes], I return home and go into my study, and at the threshold, I take off my everyday clothes, full of mud and filth, and put on regal and courtly garments; and decorously dressed anew, I enter the ancient courts of ancient [people] where, lovingly received by them, I feed myself on the food that is mine alone and for which I was born, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them about reasons for their actions, and they, in their humanity, respond to me. And for four hours at a time, I do not feel any boredom, I forget every difficulty, I do not fear poverty, I am not terrified at death: I transfer myself unto them completely.¹⁶

The way to fall in love with the Bible is to transfer ourselves completely “unto it” – its events and people, its promises and dreams. In its characters, we will be “lovingly received.” With them, we can speak and ask questions, and at times receive a response. In doing so, whether “decorously dressed” or remain in our work clothes, we “feed on the food that is ours and ours alone, the food for which we were born.”

Amen.

¹⁴ This is part of a distinction Christopher Morse makes in *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* 2nd edition (2009).

¹⁵ Romans 6:15-23; Matthew 1-2 in which the infant Jesus re-experiences Israel’s oppression under a despotic ruler.

¹⁶ From Niccolò Machiavelli, *Letter to Francesco Vettori*, 1513.