



October 30, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

"The Bible that God Didn't Write"

Readings: Luke 4: 14-21

Some of you will be familiar with US radio personality Dr. Laura Schlesinger and her talk show in which she gives out advice to the nation. Several years ago, she caused quite a stir when she said that as an observant Orthodox Jew, she believed that, as it is written in the Bible in Leviticus 18: 22, homosexuality is an abomination. After she made the statements, an open letter to her was circulated widely on the internet.

Here are some excerpts from it:

Dear Dr. Laura:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the other specific laws found in the Bible and how to follow them:

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord - Lev.1:9. The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot.

Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? - Lev.24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

All of this from the Bible that many claim God himself has written.

Over the past two weeks I have been preaching sermons about the God I Don't Believe In and the Jesus that Didn't Die for my Sins. Today we come to the topic of the Bible. What I've been trying to do in these sermons in part is to point out that there is more than one way to understand God, Jesus, the Bible and the Christian Life itself. In fact there are many ways. To simply things, American scholar Marcus Borg says there are in fact two very distinct ways of understanding the Christian tradition. He calls these two ways the Common Way of Understanding Christianity and the Emerging Way also called the Generative Way.

In the Common Way of Understanding Christianity, among other things, God is an all powerful and all knowing super being, an old man who lives far away; Jesus is the Son of God, perfect in every way, who was sent to the world to save us from our sins; the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God, a divine product written by God, full of moral and doctrinal absolutes, true because it comes from God.

In contrast to this, in the Emerging or Generative Way of Understanding Christianity – among others things, God is an all-encompassing Spirit, dwelling within us and among us, known by many names and metaphors; Jesus is both a historical figure of the past, executed in part because of his political beliefs, and he is a Divine reality experienced by his followers in the here and now whose presence nudges and strengthens them to follow in his way of seeking justice, peace, radical inclusion and compassion;

and the Bible is understood as a human response to experiences of the Divine, written many years ago for two ancient communities that produced it, the community of ancient Israel and the community of the early Christian church.

If we understand the Bible in this way, as a human product, then what follows logically is that it is not the absolute truth or God's revealed truth, but rather a human creation shaped and formed by a particular culture and a particular context and by a particular experience.

For example, I often ask groups of people to take a marker and a piece of paper and draw what they hear described in the first chapter of Genesis, the first story of creation. The result is something that looks like a snow globe with stars hanging down from the top of it. Why? Because that's as much knowledge as those ancient people had to understand the world in which they lived. If God had written that chapter you'd think the earth might be round not flat with at least a couple billion galaxies in there for good measure.

I also often ask people to read the three different versions of Jesus birth in the Bible. For many folks it is the first time they realize there actually is more than one version of the story in the Bible and not one jives very closely with the other, not to mention the fact that Mark's Gospel doesn't even bother to tell a story about Jesus birth. Why? Because they are stories written for particular communities living in a particular context.

For some people to suggest that the Bible is a human product written in a cultural and contextual manner is to water down these writings, to put them aside and to claim that human beings are greater than God.

But that is not necessarily so, because to say that the Bible wasn't written by God is not to say that it wasn't inspired by God, or that it has stopped inspiring people, or stopped being relevant for people's lives because we now live in a very different culture and a very different context. In fact what continues to amaze me about this "funny old book" as I sometimes lovingly like to call it is that it does hold incredible relevance even for our day and age. Not when we're asked to believe it word for word, but when we lift out its archetypal stories and find ourselves relating to the characters; when we thoughtfully and prayerfully let its poetry wash over us and we find ourselves being spoken to in the most remarkable ways sometimes in the most challenging of life's circumstances; when we let its core precepts shape and form our lives, the hard ones like loving our enemies, loving ourselves even and caring for the outcast and the marginalized and forgiving the hard to forgive.

There's incredible insight and wisdom and guidance and inspiration in this "funny old book."

I was in my last year of highschool when I first had a world religions teacher really unlock a metaphorical way of understanding the Bible for me. He told my classmates and I about the many stories from other ancient communities that parallel various stories in the bible. It was the first time I realized that I didn't actually have to believe that a whale actually swallowed a man named Jonah. It meant I could now look

at the story and see myself. I could now see the many times that I like Jonah have wanted to run away from God's call in my life and how that in turn has caused storms to brew in my life and in the lives of others around me until I redirected myself back towards what resonated with my soul.

Marcus Borg talks about what he calls a historical-metaphorical approach to understanding the scriptures, a way that helps us understand the texts in their historical context. For example there really was a place called Ninevah that the character Jonah is said to have been sent to by God. But Borg invites us also to look at the texts in what he calls a more-than-literal way. In other words a way that helps us search for the truth in the story even if the story itself might not be historically true.

Borg has also been helpful to me in pointing out that in this historical-metaphorical way of understanding the Bible there are what he calls primary stories or meta-narratives which tell us something essential about the nature of the Divine.

One of these is the story of the Exodus, the story in which Moses leads the people out of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea into the desert and eventually into the promised land.

We know there is a place called Egypt and a body of water called the Red Sea but we don't know if this was an actual historical event. There are no other ancient sources that refer to such an event. But we do know that in our own lives when we have been enslaved to a particular experience or way of thinking, to a job that doesn't suit us, a relationship that is unhealthy, an addiction or as a people to an oppressive system or regime, sometimes there is what seems like a divine pull or nudge that brings us out of those places and towards greater freedom. That pull when it grabs us can take us into very disorienting places in our lives. Sometimes, like the Israelites in the desert, we want to go back to the place from which we've been set free. So for example when we've been set free of an addiction, sometimes its so unfamiliar for us to live out of being clean, we can fool ourselves into believing it would be easier for us to go back.

When that happens hopefully we also experience that part of the story that says that we will be fed with what we need everyday to journey through that place in our lives. Manna from heaven so to speak. Because sometimes it takes a long, long time for us to experience what feels like a promised new land and sometimes like Moses we only catch a glimpse of that land without fully setting foot inside its boundaries.

This is a historical metaphorical way of understanding a meta-narrative in the Bible.

But this approach is not the only way for us to reclaim our Bibles from a more literal interpretation. Sometimes scripture can become for us a sacrament, a thin place, a vehicle for us to experience the sacred in a very potent and mysterious way. That's what happens when the words themselves become for us a means of experiencing grace.

I have seen that happen for people when the words of Isaiah 43 are taken and made personal by reading them like this:

"You are precious in my eyes; You are honoured and I love you; Do not be afraid for I am with you; I have called me by name and you are mine; Should you pass through the sea I will be with you or through the waters they will not swallow you; Should you walk through fire you will not be burned; for I am Yahweh your God"

All of this might sound quite wonderful and perhaps a little simplistic but it doesn't address some of the key concerns that some of us still have with the Bible, namely what to do about all that violence. How can we claim a God of unconditional love with all that vengence? What do we do about those texts that say that women should be silent in church?

Sometimes its helpful to look at scripture from four different perspectives, a method called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. These four perspectives include the text itself; the tradition of the church; our intellect or reason; and our life experience. Sometimes for example we've experienced that having a woman speak in church is not such a bad thing!

For other texts some scholars have said that they should simply not be read they are simply too horrific. Like the some of the stories of Beatrix Potter and the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm, we have to carefully decide what we will and won't expose ourselves and our children to. But my hope is that like all great literature that has taken it's place in the formation of civilization we will be careful in our discernment so as not to throw out a universal truth for the sake of making the story more palatable to modern ears.

As I think about the future of the bible, I can't help but wonder since we human beings have only been on this planet a few million years and the bible is only a few thousand years old, if in the next few thousand years there might be other sacred writings that capture the imaginations of our future brothers and sisters or that they might find ways of incorporating the best of the Biblical narrative with other narratives. We live these days with such wonderful awareness of the sacred writings and traditions of a whole variety of faith communities.

For now this is the story that still shapes and forms those of us who are committed to and curious about living in a Christian way.

In this morning's Bible reading Jesus takes a scroll, one of the most ancient sections of our Bible, a writing accredited to the prophet Isaiah. He reads the words out loud and then makes a startling declaration. He claims that the scriptures have been fulfilled in his reading of them on that day. He takes the ancient story and becomes the story for his day and his age and invites us to do the same.

Whenever we tell a story from the Bible to the children of this church we always ask them the question "where are you in this story?"

Maybe that's the most important question for us to ask in relationship to the Bible, not who wrote it or if it really happened or if it's true or not, but where do we find ourselves in its telling and what meaning does it hold for our lives? How does it shape and form us into compassionate and caring earth community?