

## **People of the Book**

Isaiah 55:10-11 & 2 Timothy 3:16-17

*24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/16<sup>th</sup> September 2007*

Listen to this story, remembered and written by the writer Bret Lott, entitled “Genesis.” I came across this account this week and would like to share it with you. So sit back and listen.

“I am sitting in the sanctuary, a few rows from the front: to my left, my mom, my dad and my little brother, Timmy, in Mom’s lap, sleeping; to my right, my older brother, Brad. Brad and I have just received these thin, blue books, every kid in the service passed a brand new copy by men in gray or black suits standing at either end of the pews, stacks of these books in hand.... The pastor says it is the book of somms, and I wonder what that is, look at the words in black ink centered a little high on the cover. I sound out the words to myself: The Book of – and stop. P-S-A-L-M-S. How does that, I wonder spell out somms? But even if I don’t understand, this is the first Bible – or piece of it – I have ever gotten, and I don’t want to lose this book. I want to keep it. So I take one of the nubby pencils from the back of the pew in front of me, nestled in its tiny wooden hole beside the wooden shelf where attendance forms are kept, and beside the larger holes where the tiny glass cups are placed once we’ve emptied them of grape juice. And I begin, for the first time in my life, to write my name by myself. I start in the upper left-hand corner, just below the border, but the first word trails off, falls toward that centered title in black, as though that title is a magnet and the letters I make are iron filings. They fall that way because there are no lines for me to balance them upon, as I am able to do on the paper given me by my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Pasley.” He finishes the first word as the pastor rolls on, but soon realizes he’s taken up too much space for his last name, so he tries to put it above his first name on this page without lines; it doesn’t quite fit. But, he remembers, eventually the letters “line up to mark this book as mine and mine only. Then I am finished, and here is my name. Me. The first time I have ever written my name myself, alone.” Later he will write his name in other places on the book, “the words will be a little more jaunty, full of themselves and the confidence of a kid who knows how to write his name, no problem at all.... Later I will be baptized into the church at age 14, a ritual that, it seem to me, is the right thing to do. Later still, in college, I will be born again, as Christ instructed Nicodemus. And later even still, I will have written entire books of my own, created lives out of the whole cloth of the imagination. I will have created, and created in my name. But on

this Sunday, with the pastor still rolling on, these two words are enough. Only a kid's scrawl. My own small imitation of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Many things struck me reading this story. It stirred memories of receiving my first Bible in third grade. I still have it. Dorothy Boulton still has her first Bible. On the inside front cover of my Bible someone else wrote my name, but my name is there, signed by the pastor who baptized me. I can remember flipping through it looking at the photographs of the Holy Land when I was kid, particularly a photo of the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, images of a land foreign and distant in time and space. I never imagined at that time that one day I would stand in front of those very same caves in Qumran, like I did this summer. What strikes me in this story and remembering my connection with the Bible is the way this book somehow *connects with identity*, our sense of who we are, and that it somehow, in some mysterious way has *the power to shape our lives and tell us who we are*. Its stories, its images and metaphors, its vision of what it means to be human and what it means to encounter the Holy One, in subtle or explicit ways this book tells us who we are. *We are shaped by this text*.

When asked what about the Bible, this library of books, makes it so special, when I'm asked why do we Protestants take the Bible so seriously, when I'm asked why does scripture have so much authority, there are many ways I could respond. The classic, orthodox response is the Bible is the Word of God. Every sentence was perfectly dictated by God and written down verbatim by the various authors. It's special because God spoke it and some – men – were able to be silent long enough to listen and write.

However, it's not this simple. This way of approaching the text leads to the dangers of literalism. Just think of the ways a literal reading of Genesis has hindered scientific exploration or the way the Bible was used to justify slavery. Is every verse in Scripture inspired, spoken directly by God and therefore essential for the faith? I'm not so sure. I don't think the Bible writers ever intended for all their writings to be taken literally. I don't think Paul wrote his epistles to Corinth knowing that some day Christians in Catonsville, Maryland, would be reading them in worship. Literal interpretations of scripture, I believe, actually inflict considerable violence upon the text and help contribute to the violence Christians inflict upon the world. Some take the approach, “the Bible said it, I believe it, and that's good enough for me,” closing off any potential for dialogue or new insights. However, I would agree with that great prophet and

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<sup>1</sup> Bret Lott, “Genesis,” *Creative Nonfiction* (Number 27, 2005), cited in Susan M. Tiberghien, *One Year to a Writing Life: Twelve Lessons to Deepen Every Writer's Craft* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2007), 23-25.

preacher, William Sloane Coffin (1924-2006), who once said, “It is a mistake to look to the Bible to close a discussion; the Bible seeks to open one.”

If you’re not going to read scripture literally, neither can we go the way some liberal Protestants like to go, preferring a more secular approach in which the Bible is just a book, viewed as a major part of the canon of Western literature. To this point, Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian writer and pastor once said, “To read the Bible as literature is like reading *Moby Dick* as a whaling manual or *The Brothers Karamazov* for its punctuation.” It is to miss the point. The Bible is not like any other book and cannot be treated like any other book.

It’s been said Presbyterians are people of the book and of books. It’s true. We value learning and the life of the mind in service to God. Presbyterians are readers, we engage the world, we think, we ask questions, and we engage the text of scripture, we think about it, and we wrestle with it, and we ask questions of it.

But why do we do this? Why do we even bother? What is it about this assortment of writings that touches our soul and sends our spirits soaring? What is it about the stories, histories, poems, songs, prophecies, gospels, and epistles that speak to us? How is it that when we read these words they seem to contain the meaning of the universe? How is it that when we hear these texts we hear an unfamiliar, yet known voice? A voice that sounds so human, yet communicates a language, and conveys a wisdom, a truth, that can’t originate in human knowledge and wisdom. *How is it that when we allow these words to settle into our hearts they become something other than mere words, they mediate a grace, and a presence who addresses us and knows us?*

Maybe Isaiah has an answer. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return from there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth,” says Yahweh, “it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” When we find references to the “word” here in Isaiah, God is not talking about the Bible. We have to be very careful that we do not become guilty of *bibliolatry* – worshipping the Bible, instead of the God who speaks through the Bible. *What we find here and in many other places in scripture is this powerful Hebrew idea that the universe comes into being and new people are formed and reformed and things happen through the creative, redeeming, active voice of Yahweh. What we find throughout the Bible are texts that give witness to the ongoing Word – capital “W” – of God that was made flesh in Jesus and through whom God continues to speak. Scripture has authority because God chooses to speak God’s Word – the creative, redemptive voice of God – through these words. That’s why there’s a Presence here,*

not in the literal words of scripture, but behind, around, and through the words. With the help of the Holy Spirit ordinary words can become the very Word of God. With the help of the Spirit we can hear God speaking still through these pages, the Word behind the words. It's why we are asked to *listen for* the Word of God, instead of *listen to* the Word of God. Listen for what God is saying to you through the words.

That's why scripture has authority – it can say to us things we could never discover anywhere else. Personally speaking, I believe the Bible has authority because it tells us who we are, a truth we could never discern on our own. *Addressed* by the Presence of God who knows us by name and hearing him speak is a quickening, self-consciousness-raising experience. *Addressed* by the Presence of God we become awake and aware precisely in the moment we know we are being addressed by an *Other*. In the exchange, in the listening we discover who we are and recognize ourselves through the *address*. Here we learn what it means to be human – in all our glory and tragic failings, here we discover why we were born; here we discover God's purpose for our lives, indeed God's vision for the world. This text forms us. Because the creative God of the universe is somehow heard through these words, these words throughout our lives create and recreate us; and when we indwell its vision and listen to its Word, we *are* changed, and the world *is* changed. We could say that scripture invites us to write our name.

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