

The Risk of Reading the Bible

Pentecost +14

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Exodus 32:1, 7–14, Psalm 51:1–17, 1 Timothy 1:12–17, Luke 15:1–10

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I fear that many most Christians perceive the Bible way too safe. When I asked one student had she read any of the Bible, she said no. And then she said, well, I've read Revelation. For some appears to pose potential risk. You might be in danger reading that book. For some, there's an appeal of reading something a little threatening. So, maybe more people would read the Bible if we put a warning 'untamed God at loose in these stories.'

We've made the Bible too safe, but actually we've made God too safe. We've domesticated God, almost like a... I hate to say it, but almost like a pet that we can get him out of his box when we were ready. But, that's not the kind of God we read about in the Bible. So, reading the Bible risks everything, even our lives.

In his meditation on Discipleship, Bonhoeffer holds the risk out front. He writes, "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." Instead of this stark call, we can easily reduce the Bible to a warm-hearted devotional. We can reduce the cost of grace.

Bonhoeffer writes, "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheap Jack's wares, the sacraments, the forgiveness of sins and the consolation of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace without price, grace without cost, everything can be had for nothing."

As we read Scripture, we are threatened with the potential of being called by God. Called to follow him, called to obey him, called to let go. Now some people read the Bible or have devotions out of a sense of guilt, and Jesus didn't come to load us with guilt so that we would be bent over the weight under of our failure. He has come that we might have life, abundant life, which may require that we face all the ways we live in death. So, we think about that as we reflect a little bit on the reading today on Scripture.

Sometimes it might be helpful to slow down and just sit with some passages, sit with some stories, marinate in what we're reading into. And particularly it might be helpful to read the Old Testament.

The New Testament is clearer for many people, and they tend to read only the New Testament. But, the New Testament is written in and through the Old Testament. So, it's important to encounter this untamed God at loose in the Old Testament. In our passage from Exodus today, Moses is seeking the Lord. He's up on the mountain. He's been on the mountain for quite a while and the Lord interrupts their little meeting and says, "We've got a problem."

Before we get to today's reading, the 10 Commandments are handed down from the mountain, in sight of all the people. We're not exactly sure what they heard at the bottom of the mountain. But, they definitely hear God speaking in some form or fashion and they're terrified to death.

At the end of the 10 Commandments, the people plead with Moses never let that happen again. They don't want to take a risk with this God. They said, "From now on we want you to speak to us." If we follow the rhythm of the way the Bible is written, there's a certain propriety to that because Moses would be the image of God and the people. We know in Genesis one, God has created humanity in his image and likeness. So, Moses would be the image of God. And we also know in the New Testament, Jesus is the express image of the Father, meaning he's the complete image of God. And then, right after the people cry out to God about that. And back up here at the end of 20, the Lord reiterates the second commandment. The Lord says to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people, you have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make gods of silver to be with me. You shall not make for yourself gods of gold." There we have the second commandment summarized.

Now, Moses goes back up the mountain and is gone for a pretty extensive amount of time as God is laying out all sorts of directions for Moses. And then, we get to our reading today. The people have grown weary in waiting and they think Moses may not even be coming back. Maybe God killed Moses. Maybe this dangerous God killed Moses. And so they say, "We need to worship this our God." And Aaron collects silver and gold, which was the last thing they heard through Moses before he went away. "Don't take the silver and gold and make images." Aaron collects the silver and gold and makes an image. They believe they are worshipping Yahweh through this image. But, this is expressly forbidden, this image.

They've contained God in this little image. I opened saying that we tend to domesticate God. He does certain things. We can define it all with theology or depending if it's theology or whatever church. We can give a list of all the things this God does. So, we have him all figured out. We go see the untamed wildness of God who's revealed in this description. And so, there is a danger even in our concepts that we might try to create a little something that keeps us away from that untamed God.

They create this calf and from the way it reads, all chaos breaks loose. They're probably really breaking all the other commandments in the midst. And so, this untamed God, he says, "My wrath..." He says, "Moses, I have seen this people and behold it's a stiff necked people. Now therefore, let me alone and my wrath may turn hot against them. I may consume them in order that I make a great nation of you."

So, he's dangerous. He's ready to destroy the people he's just delivered from Egypt. Moses implores the Lord, "Oh Lord, why does your wrath burn against hot against your people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say with evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth? Burn from your anger, relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants to whom you swore by your own self and said to them, I will multiply your offspring like the stars of heaven and all this land I have promised I will give to your offspring and they shall inherit it forever."

And of course, the Lord relents. Moses brings up Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So, I thought we might just pause with him for a moment this morning.

We are given in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, the brokenness of humanity. God creates a perfect world. He says it's good. When it creates humanity, very good. Okay. So, this is very good. He rests. But then, you see the unraveling from Genesis 3 on. You see, Adam and Eve turn away. Cain killing Abel and then, going on to found cities that are based on vengeance and violence. We see corruption, so much so that God does destroy humanity with the flood. We only have Noah and his family live. But then, you follow the way... Same thing happens again.

And by the time we get to Genesis 11, there's a subtle image of everything falling apart. In Genesis 11, we are having these lists of generations and their years are getting shorter, shorter and shorter and shorter. Until it gets to the end of the chapter and it says it ends with Abraham and Sarah or Abram and Sarai at that point. And it says they're barren. Humanity's getting shorter and shorter. So that, we have this last couple who do not reproduce. It's communicating to us a vision of a world gone wrong. And, we have a world at odds, a world full of sin, a world that is corrupt, that is turned against itself.

God offers his solution in the saga of Abraham and sons. Here's the difficulty. Maybe this is why some people don't want to read the Bible. He doesn't say, "Okay, here's five things I'm going to do to the rest of the earth. If everybody will believe and do these things, here's what I want everybody to do." He doesn't, He never does that. He doesn't even do it in the New Testament.

We're supposed to hear the wisdom of God through a lot of ambiguous stories. Some of these ambiguous stories are odd to say the least. I taught Genesis a couple years ago with all boys in the class and we read through the book of Genesis. Said, "Well you got any comments?" And they go, "Yeah, there's a lot of sex in that book." Teenage boys.

But, how is this God's plan to rescue the earth? It's this odd story and yet this is how God is transforming the world. It's through stories. The stories of God's people across the ages. So much of the Bible is stories. And if I miss that and the ambiguity of stories and I fail to wrestle with these stories and hear these stories, I am missing part of the mystery of God's redemption. Because, it is not easily simplified into little five points, three points, whatever. It's not it's easily simplified. And so, I need to wrestle with the difficulty of some of these stories and I don't need to always try to get a little moral out. That can mess me up because the godly people also do ungodly things. Gideon who as a child, I would hear the stories of Gideon the hero. But actually, Gideon goes right back after his battle and he sets up an idol.

I remember sometimes people would teach a pattern of people repenting, God saving people, them doing well, then them turning against God, getting into sin again. And then, they were repenting, God's saving it again. But, that's actually not really the pattern. Because, God usually saves people when they're still in sin. It is his grace that leads us to repent. It's not our own recognition. Without his grace we wouldn't be able to repent. So, the pattern doesn't quite work. Here's God's plan for redeeming the world, Abraham. We read this in Genesis 12. And God says... He tells him to leave his country, leave his father's house, leave his land behind and go to

the place where he will show. At the end of this blessing, he tells Abraham, "Through you, I will bless all the families of the earth."

So, here is the plan of redemption for creation, is to bless all the families of the earth through the offspring of Abraham. And that will be the narrative that flows to the rest of the Bible and is God's promise to redeem the families of the earth through the offspring of Abraham. There is a Hebrew term there, when God tells Abraham to leave. 'Lekh Lekha,' which means, go ye forth. And it's only used with Abraham. It's used two times. It's used when Abraham is told to leave his kindred, his land, his country behind. And then, in Genesis 20, when he tells him to sacrifice Isaac. And once again he says, "Go ye forth. Take Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him."

So, some of the rabbis call Abraham Lekh Lekha, the man, go ye forth. That's his name to them because he sent forth. So, here's the story of God redemption. He sends this man who is barren into the wilderness. He doesn't even give him destination point. He just says, "Go to the place where I will show you." So, the story of Abraham is a story of waiting. God only speaks to him a handful of times over the course of his life. So, most of his life is waiting. He appears to be wandering. There's only two things Abraham does during that time. He digs wells and he builds altars. Otherwise, he's waiting. He goes and rescues lot at one point. He gets into adventures. But as far as following the call of God, he's waiting and he's digging wells and building altars.

Why does he dig wells? They're in the wilderness and they need water. It's practical. So, his spiritual life is practical. He has to do something to survive. Whether we work a job or whatever we got to do survive. The same time he's worshipping. He's building altars. We won't get into it. I didn't ring it, quite far out here today, but we won't get into all this. But the altar, in some ways recreating a mountain. It is a return to Eden. Every time you offer a sacrifice, it opens the channel between heaven and earth. God requires a sacrifice now for communication. In Eden it was instant. Now the man has been barred from Eden, man builds altars, and in the burning of the sacrifice, the smoke goes up. In that moment there is a restoration of communion. So, that's what Abraham does. And he wonders, he often questions. Every once in a while God shows up and reiterate the promise and tells Abraham, I'm going to give you offspring that are like the stars of the heaven. Later, like the sand of the seashore.

So, God appears to Abraham on occasion, but not that often. So Abraham, he's just called to wander, if we... And then, finally him and Sarah are given a child. We know he has a child, Ishmael. And here's another moralism I was taught growing up. Well, your Ishmaels are those things that you have done before God, just without God's permission. And God can't bless an Ishmael. But actually, in Genesis God does bless Ishmael. He's not the covenantal son. But God says, "I'll bless all your offspring and they will all become a nation." So Ishmael becomes a nation and all the children Abraham has after Isaac, they become nations. But, Isaac is the covenant one. So, Abraham can only pass the covenantal promise, which is to bless all nations of the earth. He can only pass that blessing onto Isaac.

And if we follow Isaac's story, he pretty much repeats Abraham's story. He's wandering and waiting and his wife is also barren until the Lord opens her womb. And then. She has Esau and Jacob. And now, only one of his sons can bear his covenantal blessing. We know it's Jacob. So,

we get to Jacob's story and we're knee deep in the middle of God's redemption of the world. We're just reading about this one family wandering through the wilderness.

Most of the story in Genesis is dedicated to Jacob. And Jacob... If we thought of this as a native American tale, he's a trickster. He is always tricking people. In native American tales, you never know if the trickster is good or bad. They usually have a reason they're present. But, it's never clear if they're completely good or bad.

Jacob is tricking Esau, he's tricking his father. He goes away and tricks his father-in-law, Laban. Laban tricks Jacob. Jacob tricks Laban at the end of the story. Somehow Jacob figures out a way to make the healthy sheep look like they're sickly sheep. And the sickly she looked like they're healthy. So that, he can walk away with all the healthy sheep, even though Laban thinks he's walking away with all the sickly sheep. So, he's constantly playing tricks. And of course, then the Lord kind of tricks Jacob. And here's this untamed God, he fights with Jacob and cripples him permanently for the rest of his life.

This is how I'm saying he's a dangerous God. I've sometimes told people when it comes to spiritual formation, the first thing you got to know or the only thing you really need to know about spiritual formation is that God loves you. He loves you completely. He is trustworthy. Because, it will at times seem like he doesn't. You read the great saints, they will talk about this. And in the perfecting he will sometimes allow his saints to suffer in unspeakable ways. He tells Peter, he is going to be taken away by... He's going to have no choice in the matter. Peter's looking at John saying, "What about him?" Jesus said, "It's none of your concern. You are going to be taken away. You're going to suffer for the faith."

And yet... God wrestles with Jacob and cripples and then, he changes his name to Israel and this becomes the name. This becomes the covenantal name of the people of God. And Jacob will be the only one that can pass that covenantal blessing to all his children. He doesn't have to choose. Every one of his children will be blessed with the covenant. And in fact, two of his grandchildren will be blessed with the covenant. That's why he's the one who fulfills the promise and he's the one who seems like the least likely. And yet, he's the one.

We come to the end of Genesis. You know this story. Joseph is captured. He ends up being assistant to Pharaoh. We come to the end of the story. Jacob brings his family into Egypt. Jacob a wandering nomad, and he blesses the most powerful man in the world, Pharaoh, which is a sign that he's greater than Pharaoh. Because, that's how blessings work in the Bible. The one who blesses is the greater. So, Abraham is blessed by Melchizedek and Abraham gives Melchizedek a tithe. So here, Jacob blesses Pharaoh. That's the culmination of his life, in a sense.

And now, we know the rest of the story. They descended in Egypt. And of course, Exodus picks up and now, they're slaves in Egypt, 400 years. Moses will have to be raised up to deliver these people. And there is an image, you can see it. I have to change the way we use the language, but all the people in Israel are swallowed up by Egypt and 400 years later they're spit out by Egypt. And they are called to be witnesses to all the nations of who God is.

That's the story of Jonah. He's swallowed, spit up, a witness, retire. That image keeps happening again and again in the Bible, it being swallowed up. The word swallowed up isn't always used, but something happens in there. They were captives, exiled. All Israel sinned into exile. But in exile they're affecting their captors and eventually they're spit out and return to the land and they're witnesses of the glory of God. So, this is how God does it. And then of course, we know the culmination of that story. Christ is swallowed up by all sin and dead and he is spit back out three days later. He is the true witness of all things relating to the Father. And so, these are the kind of stories we're given. And it's not simple, it's not given as simple answers. We're supposed to sit with these stories. Some of the things we might... First off, as we sit with them, we may hear the Lord address us, which has happened to so many people throughout time as they're sitting with the word.

Saint Anthony is walking by a church. The pastor's preaching on Jesus telling the rich young ruler to sell all you have, give it to the poor, follow me. And he does it. Follows Jesus out into the desert and becomes the first desert father. That's pretty extreme. But, as we sit with these words, we might begin to hear God speak to us. In fact, throughout history, this is why... Why would a book like this keep being read thousands of years if we weren't hearing God speak to us through it. People hear God in the midst of their waiting and suddenly Abraham's story becomes theirs. Or maybe, Jacob's story becomes their story. They themselves are a tricker and they realize their call that they're God's glory in this earth.

So, God begins to speak to us through these stories in our waiting and often in our waiting without answers, or things in life that have been difficult. Part of having the fire as people tell us, traumas. Lots of people we know suddenly begin to tell us, either fires they've had, or traumas like that, some kind of deep trauma.

It's obvious all of us go through trauma in life and we don't have clear answers from the Lord. It seems like he's silent. He leaves us alone. It may feel forgotten. And then, suddenly if we are listening, we can hear in these stories, the God who has not forsaken his people. He is untamed, but he is faithful and lovely. What is it? I can't remember how CS Lewis puts it about Aslan. He's not safe. I think Aslan is not safe, but he's good. So, the Lord is good even though we can and will suffer in following him. And I'm not even suggesting he always is the one imposing this suffering. That's just the nature of this life. But, he's present in the midst of it.

I've read some poems by Christian Wiman in the past. But I'm going to do it again and just in case you are not familiar with Christian Wiman, here is a young man from Texas, intellectual grew up in a fundamentalist church. Goes away to college and discards his faith and becomes a poet. Becomes a very successful American poet. He reaches the height. Now, since most people don't know poets in our culture as high as you go up, it does it for the general public, it still doesn't really matter. You're not very known. But in his world, he was very well known. He was interacting with the intellectual elites of the culture. He was the editor of the poetry magazine and he had no faith. Then. He fell in love. And in the midst of falling in love, he found God again. And him and his new bride began to attend church down the street from then.

I'm not exactly sure the timing, but I think it's within a year of being married, he finds out he has inoperable brain cancer. There's no treatment available today.

And in the grief of this, he learns how to write poetry again. He says he had lost his ability to really write good poetry. He's still alive, but he's like a ticking clock. He has no idea how long he lives. This is an excerpt from one point from 'Love is not a Word,' and this is the end of the poem.

Mild merciful amnesia
through which I've moved
as through a blue atmosphere
of almost and was,
how it is now,
like ruins unearthed by ruin,
my childhood should rise?
Lord, suffer me to sing
these wounds by which I am made
and marred, savor this creature
whose aloneness you ease and are.¹

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But the world is more often refuge
than evidence, comfort and covert
for the flinching will, rather than the sharp
particulate instants through which God's
being burns
into ours. I say God and mean more
than the bright abyss that
opens in that
word.
I say world and mean less
than the abstract oblivion of atoms
out of which every intact thing emerges,
into which every intact thing finally goes.
I do not know how to come closer to God
except by standing where a world is ending
for one man. It is still dark,
and for an hour I have listened
to the breathing of the woman I love beyond
my ability to love. Praise to the pain
scalding us toward each other, the grief
beyond which, please God, she will live
and thrive. And praise to the light that is
not yet, the dawn in which one bird believes,
crying not as if there had been no night

¹ Wiman, Christian. Every Riven Thing: Poems (p. 79). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

but as if there were no night in which it had not been.²

So, in the midst of the dark, he corresponds himself like a bird singing out worship to God. This is the kind of reaction to the Bible that it's difficult in the Old Testament. You find God is present and real, bigger than simple little cliché phrases. He's bigger and real than anything we could encounter, anything we have known. In our humanness, we come to the Scripture not always seeking to feel an emotion, but maybe just to hear, just to listen and read and soak ourselves in these stories. Trusting that God will reveal to us the fulfillment of these stories in our savior, Christ Jesus, who reveals to us the unshakeable love of God.

In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Wiman, Christian (2014-08-12). Every Riven Thing: Poems (pp. 27-28). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.