

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Luke 4:14-21

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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MAKING SENSE: READING THE SCRIPTURES FOR DAILY LIVING

When he came to Nazareth where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. . . . Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." *Luke 4:16-17a, 21*

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. *Nehemiah 8:8*

Life is a journey, and every journey needs a compass, a map and a destination. Otherwise a journey is just aimless wandering. It is a sad thing indeed for a life to have no goal or sense of direction. The Bible is that map which marks out the rough places and the smooth, the treacherous and the sublime. Jesus is the guide, the one whom we fix the compass by, and in whom we discover how to live and be toward God, each other, and our best self. The destination is to be at rest in the heart of God, here and hereafter.

All scripture, like us, stands at the confluence of the divine and human. As we are made with the imprint of the divine and the human, the teachings of God through human words, have the same convergence, human authors divinely inspired because they found their way into the heart of God within, and lived there.

The Bible is not a safe haven. It will often ask us to go, as the Paul Simon song says, "Where the ragged people go." Like Jesus in Luke 4, who tells the homefolk—later in that story that Wanda read, that God loves even those whom we secretly despise, like the foreigner and the alien. The Bible requires us to confront ourselves, and in finding our best self we discover that that is where God is and has been all the time. The Bible also provokes us to confront God, like Job in the Old Testament, a confrontation that ends not in punishment and rejection but embrace—like the father welcoming the prodigal home. Many years ago, on a voyage west in the Atlantic, I got news that a dear friend had died in an apartment fire on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. I left the music and gaiety in the ballroom and climbed to the QE2's observation deck 110 feet above the Atlantic. On a dark, storm tossed night with that great ship heading at thirty knots into a thirty knot wind, I took hold of the forward rail and screamed into the night at the God who had taken my beloved friend. It wasn't until years later, reading Luther, that I understood that God was big enough, wise enough, and compassionate beyond measure to take my anger and still embrace and love me. The Bible is very familiar with hard times; hardly a story omits this. It knows both the nature of hard times, and more importantly, the way through them, by God's incomparable grace.

Such are the stories with which our own life journey is familiar, falling down, getting up and falling down again. Each time trying, by Jesus' example, to get it right. These are the stories of the Bible's elite, too: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah and the prophets, Peter, Paul, and John. They were no different than us, often more extreme, even to murder (Moses, David, Paul). They are us. All encountered the same dark and also sun drenched places we inhabit. The Bible is their story because it is our story.

So, which Bible should you read? Very simply, the one you like best. Instead of shelling out for a whole new library, go to *Biblegateway.com*. Pick a text you'd like to read, say Luke 10 with its Good Samaritan parable and that perennial favorite of the ladies, the Martha and Mary story (just kidding, ladies). Sample a few of the twenty or more English versions and see which appeals. I have about that number in my office (just inside the main door on the left). Come by any time, take your pick, and have a seat. If I'm there, and free, I'd love to help you. Ideally, have at least one Bible with good study notes.

Now, how to go about reading the Bible.

The Bible is not one book but sixty-six books composed over about 1,100 years. Everything in the New Testament, and much of the Old, was intended to be read at one sitting, out loud, as a dramatic presentation to a gathered congregation. This makes a lot of sense in an oral culture because most people could not read and therefore may only have one shot at a hearing in years. No Gospel need take longer than two of three hours to read and listen to, at the most. There was no such thing as silent reading in the ancient world. After all, a silent reading has no life. The words had to be given life in the air. The very idea of silent reading would have been absurd. There's a lovely story about the beloved Bishop Ambrose of Milan in the fourth-century, sitting cross legged near the doors of the cathedral, with an open Bible on his lap. But the people were astounded he sat staring at the open pages but his lips were not moving, and they imagined he must have had a stroke, or worse. It's the first instance of silent reading that I know of in the ancient world. You might try reading out loud, in private. I wouldn't recommend it on the R-5 or over lunch in the cafeteria. Oral reading gives a very different life to the text.

Let's say you decide to study Mark's Gospel. Read all of it at one sitting, as it was first intended. It helps enormously—I'll tell you why in just a minute. Beside, you already know the ending, it isn't a mystery. A complete reading gives a context for later study. You'd also benefit reading a synopsis of the book first, such as many study Bibles provide.

The next phase, devotional reading, is slower, more sponge-like. As Nancy Davis wisely suggests, preface the reading of scripture with prayer, asking for pearls of wisdom that might increase your faith and practice. Pray, as before a meal with thanksgiving for what we are about to receive. Like a meal, sacred reading calls for manageable pieces to be chewed slowly and savored for their flavor. No scripture qualifies as fast food. It's too richly dense and layered. You'll never exhaust its nourishment. Almost all of scripture is composed in short pieces of ten to twenty or so verses, precisely so it can be taken into memory. Hearing aids memory much better than silent reading, because hearing also evokes seeing, visualizing. You might listen to your few verses on an audio version, or watch a DVD. All the gospels and Acts have full text film dramatizations, and are quite good.

Then read. Try to read as if for the first time. An unfamiliar version, like Peterson's *The Message*, helps tremendously here. If you're fluent in another language, consider reading that. Again, Biblegateway.com offers the Bible in a score of languages from Icelandic to Mandarin.

Promise yourself that you'll try to read the Bible *on the Bible's own terms*. Reading on our cultural terms, through a twenty-first century bias, is probably the single most common reason why many of us give up trying to read the Bible. For instance, the Bible often presents what seem to be contradictory accounts of the same event. Take the two creation stories, for instance, Jesus cleansing the temple—early, in John, late in Matthew and Luke. Four quite differently nuanced passion stories, even having Jesus crucified on different days. But these are invariably resolved when we stop asking “What really happened,” and ask instead, “What does this story *mean—what does it intend me to learn?*” If it's just a factual record without meaning, it's useless. The Bible is not a history book, it's ahistorical in that it resonates to every life and moment in history, leading us to discover what we can learn from these things to remake ourselves and our world in God's image.

And here's the clincher for the diligent—the Bible gives us a lot of clues to its meaning. These are very pragmatic aids because the intended audience was hearers, not literate readers who could revisit the text. So, speakers repeat themselves a lot in parallel images:

“The Lord is my shepherd . . . I shall not want,
he makes me to lie down . . . in green pastures,”

It feeds, then examples the image. We find this all through the psalms, proverbs, and all the prophets. Because stories are shaped for the ear they are typically quite short, perhaps ten to twenty verses, which is about the maximum for oral retention. Which leads to a second memory aid. In overwhelming numbers, in stories, teachings, parables, miracles and narrative, the main point is not at the end, where we are accustomed to look after a series of brief episodes, then a climax, followed by a brief denouement, but smack in the middle. And as you find this remarkably accurate center, around this center you will discover how the writer folds a series of balanced pieces, like steps around a pyramid, that either agree or reverse the sentiment. The center is the teaching heart.

Another omnipresent clue to interpretation is how each passage has ties, like connecting hooks, to the one next to it. Like a conversation between partners, often agreeing, sometimes opposed you find a series of agreements or contrasts, each either reinforcing or opposing the theme. Take the partial lection that Wanda read from this morning, Luke 4:14-21. Contrast it with the location from verse 31. There's a stunning contrast between the reception that Jesus got from his hometown villagers in Nazareth, who afterward tried to kill him, and the people in Capernaum who can't get enough of Jesus. Luke thereby sets up a tension between acceptance and rejection that will characterize Jesus' ministry all the way to the cross and resurrection. And what do we learn from this: that being true to God will have its real hardships (the road to the cross), but far greater are the blessings of faithfulness (the resurrection), his and thereby ours, too.

A third thing that helps enormously is scriptures' penchant for *allusion*, drawing inference from things to follow in the gospel (foreshadowing), or things already past, often long ago in earlier biblical stories. So, in the Christmas story in Matthew, Joseph had a dream. That's interesting, Joseph of the so-called coat of many colors in the OT also had a dream—and so Matthew plants an imaginative seed that will draw parallels to Jesus from Joseph to Moses all through his gospel—the wilderness trials, call of disciples, ten commandments, Moses' five great speeches, their faces that shone in transfiguration on the mountain, all to show by contrast that Jesus is far greater even than Moses.

How, then, to increase our faith, through such reading, for daily living.

Each story teaches of a common fabric of daily life that is both ours and the story of those who have gone before. Say you are reading of the call of the disciples, it might speak to you of the trust you are called to place in, and the nurture you need to give to those you work with, and perhaps employ. Miracle stories always speak of the power of faith—your faith—to change the most resistant aspects of your character and really improve. The miracle of the loaves and fishes (feeding of the five thousand) speaks of a vast, untapped capacity in each of us to do extraordinary and exemplary things. Remember that Jesus only gave them the bread and fishes, the miracle occurred *only* as each was willing to give away what they received to their neighbor. Just a couple of nights ago Jane and I were discussing something I heard recently from a lecture by a renowned physicist. He held up a single breakfast raisin to his audience, and told them that in that tiny, shriveled raisin was enough stored atomic energy, if released, to power the energy needs of the five boroughs of New York City *for a day!* Greater things than I do will you do," said Jesus. Do you get his point.

When Jesus tells us not to judge others, like the woman caught in adultery in John 8, he shows us the capacity to give life back to one who, in the eyes of her accusers, was as good as dead (they were about to stone her). That's an astonishing power to be able to exert. And when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he is planting a seed of change that can disable hatred, removing the focus of their scorn and anger. Faithfulness, the parable of the sower tells us, is the one thing in daily life that can build a legacy of goodness, like sowing one seed at a time, and watching its fruits multiply exponentially, with time. If you planted a garden last year, you saw an example of this at work.

The Christian life has no foundation apart from community. It touches everything. Which is why our splendid Supper at St. John's has become so popular and meaningful. Gathering, feasting on the fruits of the good earth, on each other, and on God through the scriptures and prayer—these are the church preparing to reach beyond ourselves. In these things, love of God, love of neighbor, and love of our best selves become inseparable.

Finally, I give you these few verses from Romans 15:4-6. I wasn't looking for them. They came to me as a gift early this morning in my daily devotional, and I simply pass them on.

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.