

“The Place of Scripture in Worship and in Christian Life”

Nehemiah 7:73b—8:3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

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I have told some of you about an ironic experience I had in another setting. Before I moved to this community and church, the sound person installed a new pulpit mic that rested flat on the pulpit so as to avoid visual distraction. The downside was that the pulpit Bible had to be removed. The church still had an altar Bible on the communion table, as we do, but a group of people got upset because the church had “taken the Bible out of the pulpit.” Set aside the reality that a pulpit Bible has about as much of a chance of making a sermon biblical as a clock or watch has of making a sermon end on time, these folks were still upset!

In that same church, there was a group of people who did not like our use of the lectionary, the three-year cycle of readings from different parts of the canon we use here. Their primary complaint was that we were reading too much scripture – three texts plus a psalm each week, even if the texts were long! So, there was a group upset because we had removed a Bible and a group upset because we were reading too much from the Bible, and the irony was that it was the same group. They wanted the Bible to be there, they just didn’t want much of it read.

It is a symbol of how the church in our culture, especially in our part of the country, the Bible Belt, views scripture. We know that church attendance is declining dramatically. So, it doesn’t surprise us that Americans in general don’t know much about the Bible. As Stephen Prothero notes in his 2007 book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know about Religion - and Doesn’t*, only half of American adults can name the four Gospels, most cannot name the first book of the Bible, only one-third know Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount and ten percent believe that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife (p. 30). But the truth is even churchgoers are not very biblically literate.

In a recent devotional, Tracy Jessup from Gardner Webb University references a study which reports that only forty-two percent

of Christians say that reading the Bible or other religious material is an essential part of being Christian. In this same devotional, Jessup notes that with the onset of digital reading, we can track how much of a book people finish and some early data is fascinating. Kobo, an e-book retailer, tracked the purchase and reading of books among British readers. Pulitzer Prize winner *The Goldfinch* was the 37th bestselling book in 2014, but only 44.4% of Kobo's British readers finished it. *Twelve Years a Slave* was the 9th bestseller the same year, but only 28.2% of British Kobo readers finished it. I don't think we want to know what percentage of Christians have read the whole Bible...

All of this is to say that we engage in a lot of pious talk about the Bible, but not many of us read very much of it. There was a time when churches hammered scripture into people without paying attention to the broader themes of the Bible. Many of us remember the old sword drills. Some churches flipped that formula and taught the themes without giving much attention to the texts. The problem was people didn't learn how to shape their own faith.

I can't tell you how many times someone has come to me and said, "I know I don't believe such and such... but tell me why I don't." It's like learning how to manipulate a math formula without understanding how it works. It does us no good in the real world. We need to know the broader themes, but we also need to know the texts.

Contrast contemporary practice with ancient practice as revealed in our readings from Nehemiah and Luke. In the reading from Nehemiah, set in the middle of the fifth century BCE, we have an account of a kind of renewal service. Nearly a hundred years after the exile ended, the people have finally resettled in their homeland. The temple has been rebuilt and now the people gather for a time of recommitment.

They need to deepen their sense of community and offer worship and praise to God. They need to remember who they are and whose they are. And they need to remember why their forebears ended up in exile, how they had gone astray and thus distanced themselves from God. The centerpiece for all of this activity is the reading of scripture, the book of the law of Moses, the Torah. It calls them to worship, it instructs them

in how to live, it calls them to repentance and enables them to experience forgiveness, it shows them how to love God and neighbor.

So, the priest Ezra brings the Torah before the assembly, both men and women, an usual reality in this day, and he reads before the square facing the Water Gate. He reads, the text says, from early morning until midday. That is a lot of reading, more than we take in on a given Sunday or in most weeks. And the people are attentive to the reading. In other words, they don't nod off, they don't start texting their friends, they don't start rolling their eyes in boredom. The text is life for them. It centers their worship and faith. It moves them to tears. Only about 3% of them can read. So, the others are dependent upon those who can. But scripture lies at the heart of their faith. It tells them who they are and who God is. It shows them how to live. And so, they cherish it.

Five centuries later, when Luke is writing, scripture not only still occupies a central place in Jewish worship and faith; it shapes the moment when Jesus claims his identity and calling. We know the story. Jesus has been baptized and tempted in the wilderness. Now he returns home to Nazareth and attends synagogue on the Sabbath, as is his custom. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah is given to him, we believe as part of a cycle of readings just like we follow to this day, and it just so happens that the passage he reads from chapters 58 and 61 refers to the Spirit of the Lord anointing one who will bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. When he finishes the reading, Jesus rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, sits down, as is the custom for teachers, and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

We'll get to the community's reaction next week, but what Jesus is saying is that he is the person upon whom the Spirit will fall. He is obviously the centerpiece of this story, but scripture not only announces the coming of a special leader guided by the Spirit, it describes the nature of this leader's ministry – sharing good news with the poor, healing the blind, delivering the oppressed, proclaiming a whole new era of God's reign. The text does that, scripture does that; it shapes worship and points to the new life Jesus will bring.

And so, in both readings, scripture is central to worship and the life of faith. The interpretation of scripture matters too. It has to be understood and then embodied. But scripture itself matters immensely in these defining times of our faith.

It matters to us too in many ways. The question is – how do we reclaim the central role of scripture in our time? Recognizing its significance in the past can help. If we value the essence of our faith, if not all the traditions, we want to hold on to what has enabled faith to remain vibrant through the centuries. Holy Scripture is high on this list.

We do not worship the book, but we do allow it to point us to the God we do. As Frederick Buechner once said, the Bible is a window through which we see God, the world around us and ourselves. If scripture is vital in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, if it is vital in the time of Jesus, if it is vital in the time of Martin Luther and John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, if it is vital in the time of Thomas Skinner and John Lewis, Fannie Heck and Sallie Bailey Jones, it is vital in our time as well. Many things have changed. This reality has not.

But all of this we know and yet scripture still does not occupy the place it should in the American church. And I should underscore the fact that I am talking about the church in our culture, not First Baptist Church, Raleigh. We are not immune from this challenge, we have plenty of room for growth, but we are much more biblically literate than most churches, our children and youth especially are. That is a wonderful gift for anyone who ministers here. But simply recognizing the place of scripture throughout sacred history will not be enough to bring it back to the center of our lives. We need something more.

Perhaps noting the ongoing benefits of scripture can help. For there are certain things scripture does for us that almost nothing else can. To be sure, there are troublesome passages, places where scripture seems to affirm violence and bigotry, sexism and slavery, but there are many more places where scripture calls us to nobler paths of justice and love. Scripture calls us to welcome the stranger, a central concern we struggle with to this day. Scripture calls us to forgive those who offend us, one of the most basic human needs. Scripture points us to the

character of God and the nature of humankind, recognizing our beloved condition as creatures made in God's image and pointing out our flaws, our frailties, our sins. Scripture calls us to love God and our neighbor.

Some of these messages we welcome, others we do not, but we need to hear them all, and where else will we hear them? What else in our culture points to the holiness of God? Where else do we find an affirmation of all people? What else provokes an awareness of sin? Where else do we find a path to forgiveness? Outsiders to the church argue that the Bible remains an authority because the church uses it to control people while insiders argue that it remains an authority because it is God's word. The truth is scripture holds our attention and guides our lives because over and over again we find truth and light in it, we find wisdom and strength, we find things we cannot find anywhere else.

One of my mentors, Glenn Hinson, has talked often about his grandmother's practice of reading the Bible while sitting in a rocking chair on her porch. She would read slowly, pondering every word, savoring every concept, and every now and then, she would stop, take off her glasses and then lean back with a tear rolling down her face. Some deep truth, some word of love, grace or guidance, was just too much to hurry past. That's what the Bible can do, that's what scripture offers us, and once we experience it, no one has to persuade us to read it.

Yet, as helpful as recognizing scripture's place throughout history and noting its current benefits can be, there is at least one other thing we need to do – make room for interpretation. There are troublesome passages, there are dated details that do not negate the core message so long as we don't confuse them with the enduring truths, but we have to separate those details from the truths, we have to find a way to understand the troublesome passages, we have to make room for interpretation so that we not only know but also understand the texts.

Should this seem inappropriate, we need only look at the texts and realize that interpretation has always been needed. In Nehemiah, not only is the Torah read, but the text says they read from the book with interpretation. They give the sense, so that the people understand the reading (v. 8). In Luke, Jesus not only reads from Isaiah, he interprets the passage, interprets it in a way it never has been before, saying he is

the fulfillment of the prophecy. His interpretation stirs various responses which we will consider next week. Interpretation is not always uncontroversial, but it is still necessary, especially with some texts. And to state the obvious, interpretations can vary over time.

There was a time when the faithful not only believed that the earth was the flat center of the universe but that faith depended on this belief. Thus, the findings of Galileo presented a challenge until people interpreted texts in a different way and realized the Bible is a book of theology, not a scientific text. There was a time when the faithful viewed the Genesis accounts of creation not only as theology but science as well and thus were threatened by Darwin's theory of evolution. In fact, some are still threatened. But better interpretations have helped us understand that the Bible tells us who created the world and why, not when and how. Faith and science address different questions.

In like manner, the church has reinterpreted in the light of new knowledge issues like slavery, divorce, the role of women in the church and most recently sexual identity, our relationship to people of other faiths and our calling to care for the created world. Such interpretation is never easy. Some feel like change is motivated by ideology or personal agenda and will destroy faith. But while some have mixed motives, most are motivated by a deep search for truth, and in the end, faith benefits. Genuine faith is not threatened by truth, and in this day, if faith is to survive, some texts will have to be reinterpreted.

In the another church I served there was a dear lady named Nettie Ladd who was in her 90's, she had taught Sunday School for over 70 years, but she came to the midweek Bible study I led and brought the most challenging questions. Her interests were not academic. She had not been to college much less seminary. And she certainly wasn't there to tear down anyone's faith. She was motivated by a genuine love for scripture and a deep yearning to make sense of an ever-changing world.

That's what we need if scripture is to occupy the place it should in our lives and world. We need a love for scripture, an awareness of its place throughout church history and in our lives, and we need a deep yearning for truth and an equally deep trust that scripture contains it.