

“What Do We Do With Psalm 137 (& Other Troubling Bible Passages)?”

#3 in the “Festival of the Bible” series
 Texts: Luke 6:27-30, Ephesians 6:5-9, Psalm 137:9
 Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill
 Sunday, May 22, 2011
 8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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Jacob Bronowski, famed host of the long ago PBS series “*Ascent of Man*,” as well as being a scientist and poet, discovered an interesting phenomenon among the sherpas who serve as the guides for expeditions up the Himalayan mountains. The sherpas who do this extraordinary work only know the face of Mount Everest from their perspective, from the valley below where they live. When they have been shown pictures of Mount Everest from other vantage points, they can hardly believe their eyes. *“Their disbelief changes to ... amazement when they realize that something with which they are so familiar can have other sides to it.”*¹

That’s the way it is with us, I believe, and the Bible. Over the course of the three sermons in this “Festival of the Bible” series, I have been hoping and praying that we Community sherpas would experience the transformation of the disbelief into amazement as we “realize that something with which [we] are so familiar can have other sides to it.”

During the past two weeks, you have heard how the Bible is holy to us and how it is *our* Bible now and that it always needs to be connected to the real lives we live as Christians in the 21st century. By the way, I hope you’ve taken your Bible out for a ride this past week and made those connections I suggested in last week’s sermon!

I hope and trust you’ve heard me say along the way that the Bible has untold and immeasurable ways to move us and deepen our faith. If you missed receiving that emphasis, let me say it again clearly this morning: *The Bible has an immense capacity to thrill and to inspire, to challenge and to change, to embolden and to encourage.*

For me one of the most profound examples of the Bible's powerful and nearly limitless capacity to inspire occurred in relation to a man named Otis Moss.

It's almost as if it happened yesterday. There we were, almost three years ago now, in the middle of the sanctuary of the St. Paul Community Baptist Church in the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. On a Wednesday night, the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss II, Pastor Emeritus of the Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, was preaching. I can't imagine ever forgetting the powerful word he uttered to all of us there that evening. He spoke about the *"Three Dimensions of Spiritual Maturity."* He garnered the three dimensions from the first verses in three consecutive Psalms. #1 Anguish - *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* (Ps. 22:1). #2 Adoration - *"The Lord is my Shepherd"* (Ps. 23:1) #3 - Affirmation - *"The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof."* (Ps. 24). The first verses from three consecutive Psalms. Wow! What a powerful preachment it was. What a masterful use of scripture. And what a powerful capacity was revealed in scripture's ability to illuminate what we experience along the journey of faith.

The Bible Not Only Inspires -It Irritates.

Now, the Bible possesses numerous passages which trouble people of faith. This morning let us ask if there is a possibility of discerning new ways of interpreting old passages of scripture in such ways that we can embrace the overall thrust of the Bible without succumbing to the outmoded presuppositions and destructive injunctions posed by certain scriptural passages.

I'm assuming that all of us have been troubled by one passage or another in Holy Writ. It is natural to be so bothered. In fact, it's really a sign of faithfulness to wrestle with scripture, sometimes, Jacob-like, even into the wee hours of the morning, in order to seize a meaningful blessing from a Bible passage. This morning I promise not to keep you too long. But I do invite you to put on your wrestling gear and come along with me as we explore how troubling and how motivating and moving the Bible can be.

Example #1 - Ephesians 6:5-9

A first example pertaining to the bothersomeness of scripture can be found in the 6th chapter of Ephesians. The verses you heard earlier in the service have been used endlessly to diminish one group of people by the domination of another group of people. From the time immediately after the birth of the church and well into the 1700's, slavery was justified by slave owners and slavery defenders by use of this passage and its parallels in other epistles by Paul. *"Slaves be subject to your masters...."* It would be well into the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries before Biblical critics would drive home the point that certain portions of the Bible were culturally conditioned. That is, that certain parts of Holy Writ, including Ephesians 6:5-9, were products of their times. The Apostle Paul was, in significant ways, a product of the Hellenistic culture of his day. And while he gave emancipation advocates some of their favorite watchwords - *"In Christ there is neither slave nor free...."* - he did nothing during his itinerant ministrations, neither in Asia Minor nor along the European frontier he evangelized to dismantle the structures of racism, most especially slavery.

Later on, this passage in Ephesians was used to justify the Confederacy's position regarding slavery in the U.S. Civil War. Families were torn asunder and brothers shed each other's blood over the issue of slavery and the Bible's seeming support for it.

In our day and time, we can say that a critical evaluation of this passage in particular (and others like it) pertaining to slavery leads us to following conclusion: Not all of the Bible is applicable to our lives now in 2011. Our best response to such scriptures can be: To note the best principle, the premier symbolism, the most powerful metaphor, the finest ethic for living in the passage and then to see how it resonates with the teachings and way of life on Jesus.

Example #2 - Luke 6:27-30

Another example of a troublesome passage can be found in the 6th chapter of Luke's gospel. In these verse we find not so much words that are culturally

conditioned and out-of-date for our time, but words that are hard to live out, ideals that are supremely difficult to embody in our day-to-day existence.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you...” In all three synoptic gospels these words fall from Jesus’ lips. Has there ever been a more difficult section of holy scripture to live up to? *“Turn the other cheek....”* Yeah, right?

But yet, even though we find these sayings hard, even though we might say on certain days that these words are impossible to live out and up to, we *still* would say these words surely qualify the good book as “holy.” Yes, these words are hard to hear and hard to live out! And in that hardness we are certainly troubled.

Which leads us to note that the Bible often reveals just how hard faith can be. And it shows us what our best selves can be like. What do we do with these sorts of troubling passages? Simple.

- Give thanks for them, because they show us what is possible within the human experience when we are at our best. Give thanks that we are not left to our own devices but have been shown “a more excellent way,” the way of love and sacrifice and sharing and mercy.
- We can marvel at those who have lived out this passage of scripture and thereby have transformed the places and the times in which they lived. Think of Jane Adams in Chicago and her work with children. Remember Mahatma Gandhi, who, even though he wasn’t a Christian by birth or by conversion, lived out the love ethic of Luke 6 more vividly than nearly anyone else in the world, during his lifetime. Think also of Martin Luther King and how he and millions of his followers helped our nation live up to its best ideals by using the ethic of love as counseled by St. Luke.

Yes, it is an irksome passage of scripture, but please give thanks for it, because, perhaps in a way supreme in all of the New Testament, it enlarges us to live up to *“the better angels of our nature.”*

Example # 3 - Psalm 137:9

As a final example, consider Psalm 137 which is front and center in the sermon title today. In this passage we encounter that is not simply out of date or ideally hard to live up to. In Psalm 137, in the 9th and final verse of Psalm 137 in particular, we encounter a passage that is insulting. Harry Emerson Fosdick could not stomach this passage at all: *“Even Guonod’s glorious music cannot redeem [the closing words of Psalm 137] from brutality.”*² Walter Bruggemann was likewise stymied by Psalm 137: *“I can not see how such a psalm fits with Christian faith.”*³

While the opening lines of Psalm 137 are rightly famous as words of anguishing lamentation, the closing words in verse 9 are repulsive. Yes, we want to affirm that the experience of exile and the mocking of one’s religion by adversaries are some of the foulest humiliations we can ever know. But we are insulted by the gross brutality that is countenanced in verse 9.

There are three main insulting experiences we can have in relation to Psalm 137.

- (1) We are insulted that such piece of literature was ever found to be acceptable and included in the Bible in the first place. “How in the world did such a piece of vindictiveness ever make it into the Bible in the first place?,” we are likely to ask.
- (2) Psalm 137 is insulting to our understanding of God. It sullies our image of God. Surely God wouldn’t/doesn’t approve of such a wish, such a prayer. And why isn’t there an answer given to this Psalm like there seems to be in other Psalms? Why didn’t God just blast the Psalmist for uttering such violence?
- (3) Psalm 137 is insulting in that it resonates – in ways that are way too familiar – with our own emotions of vengeance and sometimes our own embodiment of violence. How dare the Psalmist remind us of our shadow sides! This may be one of the “undertow” dynamics of this psalms (and others like it) that curse enemies instead of loving and forgiving them.

Conclusion

When we encounter these sorts of troubling Bible passages, let us ask an all-important question: What shall we do with them?

- Know that the way *out* of a passage, even as one as troubling as Psalm 137, is *through* it. It never helps when we evade a piece of scripture simply because we don't like it or don't understand it. Admitting that certain portions of scripture make us uncomfortable can be the first step into an incredibly fruitful season of spiritual growth. It's all right, in fact, it's AOK to have ultimate problems with certain portions of the Bible. Our faith is too important not to have an occasional lover's quarrel with the Bible. If we aren't at least a little bit troubled by scripture, it may be that we're not reading it deeply enough or closely enough. Criticism isn't condemnation.
- Remember that the Bible isn't a recipe book but rather a collection of stories and sagas and poetry and, most importantly, a gathering of testimonies about the vitality and blessings that arise and evolve from knowing God ever more closely day by day by day. And as such it behooves us to admire it but not make an idol out of it. It's consistently a mistake to *"look to the Bible to close a discussion; the Bible seeks to open one."*⁴
- Trust that the God of the Psalmist is the same God whom we worship this morning. And now note that there is not one recorded account in any other Psalm or any other portion of Holy Writ that God answered and responded to the vengeful plea by fulfilling the brutal ending in verse 9. This is, at once, significant comfort and a humbling challenge to us all when our own prayers go seemingly unanswered. The answer of God at the end of Psalm 137 is silence and non-activity. Psalm 137 cries out for God to curse and condemn enemies, but God will not. Psalm 137 says beat the babies against the rocks. But instead God sends a baby who will heal the world of all its bruising and cause all manner of stones to drop from the hands of those who had known only vengeance and hatred. In God's response to the unredeemable brutality at the end of Psalm 137, we hear a holy hush and quivering quietude, a *sacred* silence in which God speaks volumes to us.

Far from being the basis for a justification of vengefulness, Psalm 137 reminds us that as real as our own sense of vengeance may be from time to time, God will not give up on us. God will keep on being full of mercy and grace until we can come home to his heart of grace.

Are you bothered sometimes by what you read in the Bible? If so, you have company. So am I. But if we listen into and through and beyond the troubling passages, we just might hear an invitation from God's heart of grace: *"Come home. Come home to my love and forgiveness and a peace that defies understanding and that only I can give. This is the ultimate message of the Bible. This is why I sent my Son, Jesus, your Christ. This is how and why I love you so much, and I will keep on loving you until you get it right."*

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 In *Century Marks, The Christian Century*, May 17, 2011, Vol. 128, No. 10, p. 8.
- 2 Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), p. 26.
- 3 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 77.
- 4 William Sloane Coffin, *The Heart is a Little to the Left: Essays on Public Morality* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 48.