

THE HIERARCHY OF TRUTH

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 22, 2017

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

What's Needed to Interpret Scripture

Many years ago, I told my pastor that the reason I wanted to attend seminary was because I hoped to learn how to interpret scripture. All I knew at that time was I didn't know how to do it right. I didn't know how to do it well.

Unknown to me in those naïve times was what was necessary in order to interpret scripture competently. For example, seminarians need to know the original languages — Hebrew, Greek, a smattering of Aramaic, and the Latin Vulgate, upon which much of our English Bible is also based. Four languages to learn, but seminarians generally concentrate on two, Hebrew and Greek.

However, anybody who has studied the original languages has a visceral feeling for how helpful it is in interpreting scripture, knowing the original languages as well as the historical contexts. What was going on at the time of Christ? What was wrong with the Roman occupation? Why did the occupiers and the occupied hate each other? Why did David and the Philistines not like each other? Why did Moses and the Pharaoh not get along? It helps to know what was happening in history at the time that the relevant documents were written.

Aside from the Hebrew and Greek languages, even more profound are the differences between the Hebrew and Greek cultures. They are like oil and water, as different from each

other as one can imagine. When you compare the New Testament with Greek culture and the Old Testament with Hebrew culture, they're wildly different.

Having been trained in the sciences, my Waterloo was literary analysis. I have an abiding admiration for English majors because I never really learned how to do that well, so I'll move on. Finally, there's a whole class of textual criticisms that are highly analytical and technical.

The Pentateuch: 4 Authors, 5 Books

For example, the first five books of the Bible, from Genesis through Deuteronomy were apparently written by four different authors, each given a different name. Much later in history, the four strands were put together into what we now know as the Pentateuch, and it helps to know which strand is which if you want to interpret the five books well as to read them.

Similarly for Paul: You've got all these Pauline letters, and the consensus is that only a few of them were really written by Paul. Through literary analysis, the rest of them are thought to have been written by Pauline scholars or Pauline disciples. I attempted to study this stuff to get it under my belt.

Two things happened: One is that I gained an appreciation for the Bible that will last all of my days. Certain aspects of the Bible I find indescribably beautiful: Ecclesiastes, Song

of Solomon, Psalm 23, or the passage I didn't think about this morning, when it was used for the prelude, the Song of Simeon. I have it memorized in the King James version:

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”

There's Dirty Laundry in the Scriptures

However, the second thing that happened is that I found some dirty laundry in the scriptures. Let me give you a few examples:

- **Psalm 121.** This psalm is deeply beloved. As a matter of fact, it's one that David Agard chose for his funeral. Stolen blatantly from the Egyptians, Psalm 121 was really written to the ancient Egyptian Sun God Ra. Verse 6 of the psalm reads “The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.” Well, it's for the Sun God. Don't get a sunburn. It was plagiarized by the Hebrews because they liked it a lot, and they just changed the name.
- **Homosexuality.** What is called homosexuality in our English Bibles often really isn't. It turns out that the meanings of words, later translated as homosexuality, were rather unclear. The only thing that was clear was was sexual deviancy.

In addition, at the time these words were first written in the Bible, homosexuality wasn't deviant. It was common, particularly in the Greek culture, and so it probably didn't have

anything to do with sexual deviancy, even though that was what the English Bible said. It probably referred to sex with children or with animals, but the early writers didn't have specific terms for such variations on sexual matters.

- **Rape.** It says in the scriptures that, if a man rapes a woman, he must pay off her father, and all will be well.
- **Disobedience.** If you have a son who is disobedient or mouthy, sorry, but you need to stone him.
- **Psalm 139.** This psalm causes me to have a little sympathy. The Children of Israel had been captured and deported to Babylon, where they, the Babylonians, wanted them, the Israelites, to sing them songs. Notwithstanding such a demand, it was painful to sing songs when captured and enslaved, so they wrote additions to the songs in their own language about how much they wanted to kill Babylonian children.
- Another is that some of these wicked thoughts were appended to some beautiful songs. Just add dark thoughts to beautiful lyrics. Often at the end of a psalm, two verses were added. Verse one is that God really loves us; verse two is that God really hates our enemies. It's like you've got a lovely song and you throw in a coda of evil at the end. God loves us; God hates you. Just in case we forgot.
- **Proverbs.** Rather interesting. Difficult to preach on. Don't hear this preached on very much at all. For example, here's Proverb 27: 15-16:

“A continual dripping on a rainy day and a contentious woman are alike; to restrain her is to restrain the wind or to grasp oil in his right hand.”

I quoted that one to Tracy, just *once*.

- **Elijah.** We’re supposed to admire Elijah. He has a confrontation at Mount Carmel with 400 prophets of Baal, a different religion. You’ve got the one true God and they’ve got the 400 prophets of some false God. The two sides have a big argument; then they have a contest and Elijah wins. Well of course he wins because his is the one true God, and the prophets of Baal lose because their’s is a false God. And so after this confrontation, Elijah kills all the prophets with the jawbone of an ass.

Now as a preacher, what’s the take-home message on that? Do you really want me to preach this?

Now What’s a Preacher to Do?

Virtually every seminarian is taught, in some way, that in the scriptures you have a core gospel message, and you also have lots of contingencies, lots of peripherals, lots of cultural considerations. Kerygma is the term for core gospel teaching, and then there’s all this other stuff that has to do with the time when it was written. The trick is to know which is which.

That’s actually one of the problems the church faces in a number of ways. In Paul’s writings, for example, he makes it pretty clear that women shouldn’t speak in church at all. Keep silent, he says.

Now is that part of the core teaching of the gospel? Or is it a reflection of the times in which it was written? Some churches say, “Yes, that is part of the core. Women should know their place.” Other churches say, “No, that’s just reflective of the sexism of the time, and the church hasn’t been able to settle that dilemma one way or another.”

The Revised Common Lectionary

One answer for pastors is how to deal with the perennial problem of prioritization of some scriptures over others. There has been a whole history of lectionaries going back hundreds of years. The latest one, the *Revised Common Lectionary*, used by most Protestant churches today, was introduced in 1992, after a nine-year test period in the churches.

What the compilers did was to choose one passage from the Old Testament, a psalm, a writing from the gospel, and one from the Pauline epistles. Four passages were allotted per Sunday, with a three-year cycle. Considering four passages per Sunday for a year, that’s 208 times three years, equaling 624 passages and representing only 13 percent of the Bible. That’s an issue.

This kind of work helps preachers with a lot of problem-solving. If you choose from among those passages, you’re not stuck with the jawbone of an ass or women keeping silent, or other problematic passages such as one person killing another with God’s blessing. It really helps.

I have some criticisms of the Revised Common Lectionary: There are three books in the Bible for which nothing is chosen at all. And one that really bothers me is my favorite book in the Bible, which is the Song of Solomon.

Only six verses out of three years are chosen from that book, the sexiest one in the Bible.

Considering my advancing age, I noticed something that I wish I'd noticed earlier but didn't. According to Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk and one of my favorite authors,¹ what I noticed was that:

“Jesus consistently ignored or even denied exclusionary, punitive, and triumphalistic texts in his own inspired Hebrew Bible in favor of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy, and honesty. He read the Scriptures in a spiritual and selective way. Jesus had a deeper and wider eye that knew which passages were creating a path for God and which passages were merely cultural, self-serving, and legalistic additions. That becomes self-evident once you know enough to see the ‘comparative meaning’ of an incident or statement.”

If It Isn't, It's Not Worth Your Time

To be forthright with you, what I have been doing for the years I've been here is that I've gone from 13 percent of representation of the Bible in the Lectionary to 1 percent. I'm even more picky about which passages deserve the honor of being addressed on a Sunday morning.

- If a passage isn't about love or forgiveness — how to do it, why we should do it, why it's important — if it's not in some way about love or forgiveness, then:

It's not worth your time.

- If it's not about metanoia — the notion of conforming our minds into the mind of Christ, changing our minds from our primitive ways into a more spiritual way, from our violent ways into a more peaceful way — if it's not about a transformative change of heart and mind or a spiritual conversion; if it's not about repentance; if it's not about what *was* atonement (it really should be pronounced “at-onement”), becoming one with the earth, with our neighbors, and with God; if it's not about that, then:

It's not worth your time.

- If it's not about the Golden Rule in some way; if it's not about how we live our lives on a daily basis as we interact with community and government and neighbors; if it's not about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you; if it's not an example of it, how to do it, why we should do it, then:

It's not worth your time.

- The biggest one of all is the core error of people in our age. It is about who you really are in that Statement of Oneness that we recite every Sunday morning. If it's not about that interplay of the kingdom of heaven being within us, as Jesus emphasized it; and if it's not about “We live and move

¹ See Richard Rohr, author of *Hierarchy of Truths: Jesus' Use of Scripture*, adapted from his book, *Yes and . . . : Daily Meditations*.

and have our being” within divinity, that interplay of who we are as human beings, then:

It’s not worth your time.

- If it’s not about human beings being Children of God, to use that metaphor, or as one of the songs just said, “A branch on the tree”; if it’s not about our being made in the image and likeness of God; if it’s not about being a temple of God, a place where God lives, then:

It’s not worth your time.

We say that “God is still speaking” in this denomination. Now the way some people have

sort of understood that is, well, God spoke 2,000 years ago, then was quiet for quite a long time and then started up again recently.

But through the ages and throughout the world, perhaps in the Bhagavad Gita, given to the Hindu nation; the Tao Te Ching of the East; A Course in Miracles, relatively recent in the United States; a Letter from a Birmingham Jail, one of the most inspiring, devout passages you could ever read.

It appears to me that God has been speaking through saints and mystics and prophets and seers throughout the ages with one unforgettable message — love, self, neighbor, God.

Amen.