

# THE GOOD BOOK

## PART II: A HARD CONVERSATION

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Second Sunday of Lent, February 25, 2018

THIS IS THE SECOND ISSUE OF A NEW SERIES  
OF SERMONS ON THE SUBJECT OF THE BIBLE  
UNDER THE TITLE OF *THE GOOD BOOK*.\*

*Lectionary Reading: John 3: 11-17.*

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

### CC onversations with God

#### Rocked My Theological World and Estranged My Best Friend

Early in my first pastorate, I had a best friend by the name of Greg. He was a member of my church, down in Pennsylvania, and we had a lot in common. Our wives and children were friends with each other, and he was what I would call a righteous man. He did well by his family, his business, his community, and his church.

Greg's home was on a hill, and it had a bay window with a view that overlooked the valley from an overstuffed chair. Given to being very devout, there he sat with his well-

worn Bible as well as probably two dozen Christian books. He would spend at least half an hour every day there with his morning devotions.

During our friendship, we had dozens or perhaps a hundred, theological conversations. He was raised Catholic but sort of gave up on the strictures of that faith, moved toward Lutheranism, and later, when our paths crossed, he was Presbyterian. Finally, he went toward an independent Evangelical church.

While I knew Greg, he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. There are four variations of that disease, and his was one of the bad ones among those that eventually get you. We remained friends for many years, but the time finally came for Tracy and me to leave that little town and go to the big city of Binghamton. Here, I was handed a copy of

Book I of *Conversations with God*, and it rocked my theological world. I was never the same after having read that book, and so I was anxious to give my friend a copy of it.

## **H**e Gave Me a Sucker Punch

### **and Shot Back at Me: “Well, What About John 3: 16?”**

A couple years passed, and finally we went back to his house for a visit, and I gave him a copy. About a month later, when we were together again, he was not amused about the book. Evangelical Christians have a *big* problem with *Conversations with God* and *A Course in Miracles* and virtually all literature of that genre. Using two phrases, Greg accused me first of apostasy, a technical term meaning standing away from the faith, having left the faith, and that wasn't enough. He also accused me of being a worshiper of Satan. That was a sucker punch to our friendship. It was hard to be friends after that.

More years passed with very little conversation, little contact. However, our wives were still friends, and our kids were still friends with his kids, and so the day arrived when we were down there visiting again. My relationship with him was pretty chilly, but we found ourselves in his living room alone for a moment, and he began the conversation with this question, “Art, are you still preaching a false gospel?” At that point, there's not much left of the friendship,

and there's nothing left to lose, so I replied, “Well, I suppose so.”

Then we entered into yet one more theological discussion. Let me tell you a little about that because he was an avid believer in the standard doctrine that we're all miserable sinners, we're all doomed to hell, and Jesus, by dying on the cross, is our redemption. God accepts that 100 percent perfect sacrifice on our behalf. By believing in that, we are covered, and we're allowed into heaven after all.

I admitted to Greg that I see that doctrine in the writings of Paul, for example, in the Book of Romans and the Book of Galatians. I see that, I don't argue with it. I don't subscribe to it, I don't believe it, but I see that it's there in the writings of Paul. However, I also remarked, I don't see it in the Gospels. I see lots of spiritual teaching in the gospels, the Parables and so forth, but I don't see that program of redemption, that system of substitutionary atonement leading to salvation in the Gospels.

He shot back at me like he was prepared for me to say that, and now he's going to tell me the truth, so he shot back at me and asked, “What about John 3: 16?”

## **I** Want to Look at Use and Abuse

### **of the Bible; a Flood of Memories Came Back upon Him Saying That**

This is my second sermon in a series about the Bible, and today I want to look at both the use and the abuse of the Bible.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

A flood of memories came roiling back to me upon Greg’s question about John 3: 16. How do we interpret a passage? My New Testament professor, Johann Christian Becker, was a hard man. His grades were tough, but I was the teacher’s pet. He had a good idea about the Bible, the whole shebang, in that you’ve got what he called a coherent core, the Gospel with a capital G. And then you have hundreds, maybe thousands, of contingencies — other things that are in the Bible that have to do with time and place and culture and things that are going on. But those things are peripheral. They’re contingencies. Within all of that, there is to be found a coherent core of the Gospel, and it is the task of the theologian, the minister, the preacher, to figure out what that core is and to apply it to the next generation. Good luck figuring out what it is. But that was his theory.

There were other theories in seminary as well, marvelous ones. For example, two of my favorite theologians were Germans who expounded strong theories that attracted heavy study on my part. One of them was Gerhard von Rad, an exponent of the notion of what was called *heilsgeschechte* (a German term literally meaning “holy history”). The implication is that there is an interrelationship between holy God and human be-

ings, and you have a history of holiness breaking into our world, a salvation history. What the Bible is, then, is a recounting of that interaction, that holy history of breaking into our mortal lives.

My favorite professor of all was Walther Eichrodt, and his notion was that the whole Bible — Old Testament, New Testament, all of it — is the story of a covenant. God shall be your God. People shall be his people. It’s a story of a relationship. It’s a story of an understanding between him and us. It’s the story of a marriage with all of its ups and downs.

In other words, what about John 3: 16? How are we to understand the Bible? I loved those questions. I loved the notion that there is a coherent core that is decipherable, that you could figure out. I loved the notion that it’s like a story of salvation history, holy history. I loved the notion that it’s a story of a covenant. God shall be your God. People shall be his people.

## **I**t Has Been Used as a Blunt

### **Instrument and as a Healing Balm, but It’s a Love Story**

It took me many years to realize that not only is the question an interesting one, it’s a good question, but how you answer it matters. How you answer the question in many ways determines how you use the Bible. We all know it has been used as a blunt instrument, a weapon. It has also been used as

nourishment, a healing balm. In many ways, it's a love story, with all its many ups and downs. It also can be seen as a contract. "If you obey, I'll be a decent God for you. Obey!" Or is it a mystery? Like a mystery novel, toward the end we figure out who did it. Or is it a blow-by-blow account of a battle, a fight between good and evil? Of course, the answer is yes. The Bible is all of those things.

The Bible has been used in abusive ways, and I'm going to give you four examples. Books have been written, articles have been written, sermons have been preached on all four of these. I'm simply going to mention them and not give them any more time.

- The Bible has been used to make sure that a given race is seen as inferior to another race. It has been used that way very dominantly.
- It has been used for anti-Semitism. The fact that Jesus is a Jew has made it easy to say that Jews are Christ-killers.
- It has been used very successfully to make sure that women are seen as second-class citizens relative to men. They must be subservient to men. It has been used that way all along.
- It has also been used to make sure that one segment of the population, homosexuals, has been met with extreme prejudice wherever they go.

The Bible has also been used for wonderful goodness, for fantastic healing, and for remarkable reconciliation.

- It is not a coincidence that Psalm 23 is heard at probably 90 percent of all funerals because that is a time when the bereaved are feeling bad, having lost a loved one or somebody close. Otherwise, you wouldn't be there, in need of the comforting words that there is a good shepherd, somebody to guide you when you are feeling lost.
- It is not a coincidence that you have I Corinthians 13, the love passage, read at probably three-quarters of all weddings:

"Love is patient; love is kind. . . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. . . . And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

What better time to hear that again than at a wedding.

- The Golden Rule. "Do unto others . . . ." It is the rock upon which all of our ethical principles rest.
- The Bible has probably two of *the* most important teachings ever to be found in the history of the world in the form of little stories. It has the account of "The

Good Samaritan” (Luke 10), a story in which you can’t answer the question, Who was neighbor to the traveler who fell among thieves? You can’t answer that question wrongly. It’s as plain as day. It’s not the one who sent thoughts and prayers. It’s somebody who *did* something for somebody else. Who took care of the mugged man and paid his expenses. It defines what being a neighbor means for generation after generation.

- The Bible also has the story of “The Prodigal Son” (Luke 15). No matter how much we bungle our lives, can we ask the question, “Is there something we can do that is bad enough we’re not going to be welcome when we return home? We’ve all had the opportunity to ask that question in the mistakes of our lives. The answer is no. There is nothing that we can do that is so bad, so repulsive, so evil that we will not be welcomed home by our Father who is in heaven.
- The Bible has Revelation 11: 15:

“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his

Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.’”

That is the text behind Handel’s *Messiah*. These stories have been the basis, the inspiration for countless wonderful works of art, painting, music, and literature of all kinds.

- The Bible has Micah 6: 8:

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

There are people out there who don’t give two cents about theology, and they don’t have time to read the Bible. They ask, “Can you condense it? Can you give me something that I can hold onto? Where I don’t have to read all that stuff? I don’t want to do half an hour of devotions every day of my life, thank you very much.” Yes. “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with thy God.”

**W**e Differed on Interpreting,

**but at the End, He Asked  
for Me to Do His Funeral**

So what about John 3: 16? That's the question Greg laid on me the last time we had a difficult conversation after our relationship turned chilly when Greg accused me of being a worshiper of Satan. He was a righteous man who said his morning devotions and engaged me in many theological conversations. I asked him then what he meant, and he had the whole extended passage memorized. I just knew the verse. I was starting off on the wrong foot there.

- Verse 14. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up . . . ." What Greg heard was "lifted up on the cross." And

what I heard was "lifted up in the sense of being exalted."

- Verse 16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . ." What he heard was "giving him up to death." And what I read was "gave to the world to teach and to lead."
- Verse 18. "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already . . . ." And what he sees is that, yes, "If you don't believe that system, you're doomed. You're out of luck." And what I read is that, "If you don't follow those teachings, you're in for a messed up life."

So who is right?

About 15 years after his diagnosis for thyroid cancer, Greg died. His wife called us, and we had a heartfelt and tearful conversation on

the phone. She never called him Greg, it was always Gregory, and at the end of the phone call, she added this, "A few days before Gregory died, he said, 'Be sure Art does the funeral.'"

There are many things that I am unsure of in this world, but I am convinced that, with the Bible, what we're really dealing with here is a love story.

*Amen.*

\*The series title of *The Good Book* is borrowed from Peter Gomes' book by the same title.