

THE GOOD BOOK

PART I: ENLIGHTENING THE EYES

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the First Sunday of Lent, February 18, 2018

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

Lectionary Reading: Psalm 19: 1-10, 14.

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

A Model for Christian Charity in the Howling Wilderness

I'd like to begin with two stories: One is a small vignette from something that happened in my backyard. That will come a bit later, but I will start with the other one, a sweeping story that I'm quoting from Peter Gomes, formerly a chaplain at Harvard, who wrote a book under the title of *The Good Book* that I have also used as an overall name for this new series of sermons:

“The process began early. The English Puritans who settled the Eastern Seaboard did not suffer from modesty but saw themselves as the New Israel, heirs of God's promises to the Jews of the Old Testament, and their

leaders as reincarnations of the biblical patriarchs and prophets. They saw the New World as their own New Canaan, into which they would enter from slavery in England, or ‘Egypt,’ by means of the ‘Red Sea,’ otherwise known as the Atlantic Ocean.

“Armed with these self-enabling metaphors, the English Puritans entered upon their destinies. The native inhabitants of the land also fit well into the biblical metaphor. They were the equivalent of the Philistines and the Canaanites, whose destruction was inevitable.

“When in 1630, the Puritan armada reached the outer waters of Boston Harbor, John Winthrop, leader of the

colony and a lay preacher, delivered a sermon aboard the lead ship *Arbella*, which he titled 'A New Modell for Christian Charity.' The ambition of the sermon was to establish the Christian basis for the new civilization to be established in what was then thought to be the 'howling wilderness.'

"The basis of this society was to be Christian charity, where, on the basis of those principles enunciated in the Bible, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, the strong would bear with the weak, the rich would relieve the necessities of the poor, and all would strive to construct an exemplary so-ciety that would be like a city set upon a hill.

"This was not meant to be only for the comfort and consolation of the inhabitants but a beacon to the whole world, to prove to the old and tottering kingdoms of Europe that it was possible to construct a Christian society that would work. New England was not to be a retreat from the world, it was to be an example to the world; and of the three hills upon which the city of Boston was built, the principal one was named Beacon Hill, for not only would the light on its summit guide ships into the harbor, but that light would illumine the Christian world.

" 'The eyes of the world will be upon us,' Winthrop said. If the colony

succeeded, the credit and glory would go, of course, to God. If, however, the colony and its Christian mandate failed, 'Then,' said Winthrop, 'we shall be a by-word among the nations,' a laughing-stock, another failed utopia."

The other story is rather different. I used to have an interfaith theological discussion group that gathered in my living room for a few years. Among the participants were an Imam, several Jews, one Hindu, two Buddhists, and any number of Christians, about a dozen of us meeting together in friendship for social conversation followed by hours of melding our various faiths in exchanges of views. One nice spring day, rather than meeting in my living room, we met in the backyard around my picnic table.

As the meeting concluded, we had rounded up about a dozen various versions of world scriptures on the table, and I picked up five or six books to bring inside the house. The Imam stopped me and asked me to put the stack of books down, at which point, he took from the middle a Koran and placed it on the top of the pile. He explained to me that no book can be placed on top of the Koran. I don't know if he realized it but also in that stack was my Bible.

What to do? I had to make up my mind right then and there, but I wasn't prepared to make a decision. Do I say, "Excuse me," pull out the Bible, and put it on top of the Koran? Then he would say, "Excuse *me*," retrieve the Koran and firmly place it back on top. Shall we pretend we're in junior

high school? Flustered, I didn't know what to do, and I ended up doing nothing. To this day, I don't know if I did the right thing or not. I just brought in the books.

A Sermon Series on the Bible;

Fascinating Stories About How the Bible Came to Be

We're going to be looking at: uses and abuses of the Bible, the Bible and women, the Bible and homosexuality, the Bible and money (that will be interesting), and core principles. The series will then take us all the way through to Easter, when we're going to look at the Bible and miracles.

But today is more like Bible 101. Where should I begin? I wrestled with this because it's logical to start at the beginning, and there are some fascinating stories about how the Bible came to be. This is particularly true

for the New Testament, up to the time of Constantine, when he finally pressed the bishops to get their act together and decide what's scripture and what's not. Constantine and the bishops did decide, and that led to the whole issue of Rome and the Middle Ages.

In the Old Testament, there's story after story about how the chronicles were compiled and edited, recompiled and messed around with, added to and subtracted from, resulting in what we have today.

There are accounts of the discovery of older texts because of the synods trying to base the Bible on the oldest narratives accounts possible. But when the King James Version came around in 1611, it was largely based upon the Latin edition that had lasted for a millennium, called the Vulgate Bible. Then, in the 20th Century, the Codex Vaticanus was found, hidden away in the library in the Vatican and dated around 400 or so years A.D. At the time, that was one of the oldest manuscripts known, and it prompted the need for a revision of the Bible from the King James into the rendition that we had in the 20th Century.

In similar fashion, a German scholar by the name of Count Constantin von Tischendorf found in a waste bin in a monastery on the side of Mount Sinai what was called the Codex Sinaiticus, also dated to the year 400 A.D. Additionally, in the 20th Century, we have the discovery of new texts, the Qumran texts, which finally provided parts of the Aramaic original, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Great Stories About Text

Discoveries Are Followed by Great Stories of Translations

There are great stories about translations that should also be part of Bible 101. The Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures of old were finally translated into Greek right around the year 200 Before Christ to produce a document called the Septuagint. This is extremely important in the understanding of

the New Testament documents, also in Greek. That language has basically two versions of itself. There's the philosophical, formal Greek, and there's the everyday, street Greek, which is called the Koine rendition.

Koine Greek is the language used in the New Testament, so that's what all theological students have to study. That Greek version was then finally translated as Rome overtook the Hellenistic world and translated the Greek documents into Latin to produce the Vulgate Version. It's the same root as the word "vulgar," meaning common, which allowed that anybody throughout the Roman empire, at the encouragement of people like Con-stantine, could then read those scriptures, and it would spread throughout the ancient world. It was the Vulgate that Martin Luther translated into German at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was also the Vulgate that got translated at the behest of King James into the beautiful English rendering, the King James Version of 1611.

Then in the 1800's, the discoveries of the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus prompted the need for newer, better editions. So in 1901, the Authorized Version, still a magnificent conflation of the Bible, was made. The Revised Standard Version, now available at no cost, is from 1952, and pretty much from that year on, it was the finest version for decades of the Bible, going back in a very diligent way to those ancient documents. The New American Standard Version came out in 1972. I graduated from high school in 1973, and this is the one that I

studied throughout my undergraduate years in college.

Translating the Bible Is Tough:

Transcribe Word-for-Word or Paraphrase Idea-for-Idea

When translating the Bible, one of the tougher decisions is whether to transcribe word-for-word or to paraphrase idea-for-idea. The New American Standard was way over on the word-for-word end of the spectrum, so a very literal translation resulted in horribly stilted English. It wasn't pretty to hear at all, unlike the King James, which was like music to the ear.

At the other end, paraphrasing gets you a *Reader's Digest* version of the Bible. One example of the idea-for-idea tool was a popular paperback, *Good News for Modern Man*. The New International Version, deeply beloved by Evangelicals, came out in 1978, and then finally in 1989, a New Revised Standard Version appeared, which in my opinion is the best rendering in a combination of very good translation and English usage. (The King James Version continues to excel for its wonderful poetry.) The one we bought for our pews is the NRSV, the one with the brown cover.

Translations would be fun to go over in a sermon, but I can tell that you've had enough. There are great stories about translation in a different way. For example, in Hebrew, there's only one word for both

“palace” and “temple.” Try to imagine that for a minute. To get a feeling for how closely church and state were united in ancient Hebrew culture, they didn’t even bother to have different words for the two of them. Context was the only way that you could tell whether someone was talking about the palace or the temple.

Here’s where it gets tough if you want to know a problem in translation: That is, there is no one word for sexual deviancy. How do we translate that? Somebody came up with the term homosexuality, and that word for sexual deviancy, generalized, became very specifically “homosexuality” for centuries. Thus, all the versions of the Bible based upon generalized sexual deviancy continued to use the word “homosexuality,” even though the deviance might actually have little or nothing to do with homosexuality.

For example, what would sexual deviancy have been in ancient Greek culture? Generally, it’s considered one of three things: Somehow or other, it was sex mixed in with violence like rape or bestiality or pedophilia. But no, it was decided that the best thing to do was just to call it homosexuality, therefore creating some of the pain and anger and hatred of the church by the homosexual community for centuries because of unwise and unthoughtful translations.

There's great teaching about the organization of the Bible. You have the Torah and then the writings and the prophets in the Old Testament. In the New Testament you have the gospels and then Acts, which is sort of

like Volume 2 of the Gospel of Luke and written by the same person, in all probability. Then follow the Pauline Epistles, and the scribes didn’t know whether Paul wrote Hebrews or not, so they tacked Hebrews at the end of what they thought were the Pauline Epistles.

Then it was followed by the general epistles, Titus, Timothy, Peter, James, and John and their shorter letters, followed by the book of Revelations. We also have the Apocrypha, a whole bunch of other scriptures that come from the latter years but before Christ. These were accepted by the Catholics but generally not by the Protestants. And then, of course, the Gnostic documents came to light in the 20th Century from the discoveries of the Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

My Long Love Affair

with the Bible Ended Owing to Unfaithfulness

To speak personally, I have had a long love affair with the Bible. I have studied it. I have memorized many verses. I learned Greek and Hebrew, and got an A in Greek and 100 in Hebrew, meaning that I did perfectly on every homework assignment and every test. I was the only one. I bought commentaries. I have preached from the Bible faithfully for over 30 years.

One thing I haven’t mastered: Some of my fellow students told me you need to preach with one hand and hold the Bible in the

other, and you must buy a very expensive, floppy, leather-bound King James Version of the Bible, and you need to be able to grab it and flip it open. You need to flip it open to the middle, and I can't do it to save my soul because you open up to the middle, and then you hold it while you're preaching, regardless what verse it opened to. I never could learn the lesson.

So I've had a love affair with the Bible, but the love affair actually ended due to unfaithfulness. It was all about three forms of unfaithfulness. One had to do with women, one had to do with gays, and one had to do with slaves. It is crystal clear that the Bible treats women in a second-class way.

It is also crystal clear that the Bible believes homosexuality is a sin. There are places where the text doesn't use the word for sexual deviancy, but they describe it. A man with a man, for example, and they condemn it. And it was hard for me to come to this decision, but I have decided that the Bible is just plain wrong. Men and women are to be treated equally, no matter what, and this is especially true in church. Women are not to be kept silent. They are not to have to cover their heads. They are to be treated equally with men.

Science has shown in so many different ways that there is a Bell curve of different types of sexuality, not just in human beings but across the mammalian phyla. Homosexuality is found in well over 400 different versions of mammals, not just among human beings. And so the Bible is wrong. It's just plain wrong. I will not preach from those passages ever again.

But the one that got me the most was that, if the Bible purports to be a document of world moral behavior, the best it can come up with on slavery is to treat slaves decently. Can you imagine how our world might have been different if that document had instead said having slaves is immoral? Do not ever do it. In my mind, when I look at the big things that one human being can do to hurt another, so you can rape somebody, you can murder someone, and you can enslave them. You might not take away their lives, but you've taken away their hopes and their dreams and their autonomy. And the Bible doesn't bother to say that's wrong.

So that is where the love affair ended — due to unfaithfulness.

To Be Fair, the Bible Is a Product

of Time and Place; We Divorced, Nevertheless Remain Amicable

Every single culture out of which the Bible emerged — ancient Hebrew, ancient Greece, ancient Israel — was antiwoman, antigay, and proslavery. So of course, it's going to reflect that kind of moral compass. The Second Letter of Paul to Timothy, 3: 16-17 says:

“All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

And I have been hit over the head whenever I have expressed my doubts with that verse. “All scripture,” it says, and it’s infuriating. It brings tears to my eyes. Because what do you think scripture meant at the time that it was written? It meant the Torah. The first five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It might have meant maybe the Prophets as well and things like the Psalms and the Proverbs, but it probably meant the Torah. I’m being beaten over the head because I expressed doubt about a New Testament document.

In that love-affair analogy, we fell in love, we got married, and we had many happy years. But then there was this emerging unfaithfulness, and so we divorced but in an amicable way. We became friends, and we shall remain friends, at least from my end, to my dying day.

I look with amusement at churches in particular that like to venerate the Bible. For example, some churches have processions in which the Bible is held high, while somebody walks around with it. There are churches that want you to stand when the gospel is read, and you can stay seated for the rest of it, for some reason. There are churches that emphasize the red-letter edition of the Bible because what Jesus says is more important than what other Biblical figures have to say. There are churches that put the Bible on the communion table and show that it is precious and worthy of being on the communion table. And of course, there are some people who make sure that, in a stack of books, the Bible is always on top.

My present understanding after all these years is that the Bible is a fine tool, but like any kind of tool there are things for which it’s useful and other things for which it’s useless.

The Buddha told a story when some of his disciples wanted to venerate his words, and here’s the story he tells:

“A man traveling along a path came to a great expanse of water. As he stood on the shore, he realized there were dangers and discomforts all about, but the other shore appeared safe and inviting.

“The man looked for a boat or a bridge to cross over and found neither. But with great effort he gathered grass and twigs and branches and tied them all together to make a simple raft. Relying on the raft to keep himself afloat, the man paddled with his hands and reached the safety of the other shore. He could now continue his journey on dry land.

“Now what would he do with his makeshift raft? Would he drag it along with him or leave it behind? He would leave it, the Buddha said. Then the Buddha explained that the dharma [cosmic principles of divinity] is like a raft. It is useful for crossing over but not for holding onto, he said.”**

I would answer, “Like a makeshift raft, the answer is yes, it does do that, not perfectly,

not completely, not always reliably, but yes, it does.”

The passage that Judy Giblin read during the Lectionary was the beautiful and eloquent Psalm 19, verses 1-10 and 14. Here, she reads again the central portion of it, verses 7 through 10:

“The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is
clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than
gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.”

Amen.

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

**The raft parable appears in the “Alagaddupama” Sutta of the *Sutta-pitaka* (Majjhima Nikaya 22).