

*Beyond the Sacred Page*

John Shuck

Lent One

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Jesus said, "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find.

When they find, they will be disturbed.

When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all."

--*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying #2

Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look the <Father's> imperial rule is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the <Father's> imperial rule is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."

--*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying #3

Jesus said, "Why can't you decide for yourselves what is right?"

--*Gospel of Luke*, 12:57

I love the Bible. It is important that I be clear about that up front. I love the Bible. I have heard its stories, sung songs about it, and have read it since I was a child. I still do. My Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Longnecker gave me a King James Version Bible when I was about six years old. I still have it. She wrote in it the following words from a song about the courageous Daniel:

*Dare to be a Daniel,  
Dare to stand alone,  
Dare to have a purpose firm,  
Dare to make it known.*

I have been shaped by the stories of the Bible more than I know. I find personal inspiration in its pages. I credit the Bible for my own passion for justice, goodness, truth and compassion. I fall short in all of those areas, and I cannot blame the Bible for that, but I credit it for giving me the desire to seek and to live out in my life that which is beautiful and eternal.

As you know (I have spoken about this often enough), I am intrigued by the historical person of Jesus. I am interested as well in the creedal Jesus and the devotional Jesus, but I am most interested in the real guy. I try to keep up on scholarly work about Jesus from a variety of perspectives. Tomorrow I leave for a continuing education week with the Jesus Seminar which seeks to understand the world of Jesus and to understand early Christian history. I even serve on one of the seminars, the Literacy and Liturgy Seminar which serves as a bridge between scholarship and the public. We try to find ways to get the public to become interested in scholarship of religion, if for no other reason than to be aware of the danger of any religion that is not critical of itself.

I went to seminary, learned Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Bible. I studied higher criticism of the Bible. I took courses in theology, ethics, and history. I think I received a good education. The reason I say that is because when I graduated I realized I did not know much. The mark of a good education is that it should instill humility and a desire to be a student of life for all of one's life.

I say all of this not to claim authority. No, I say all of this to say that I am not an enemy of the Bible, or the Church, or of God. I am in the fold. I love the Bible and the Church.

But I am angry.

Augustine said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

I don't know if I have much courage, but the angry daughter has a few words this morning. I am angry that the Bible has increasingly become a vehicle for oppression and ignorance not only in the church but in other institutions in America, such as our educational system and government. It isn't the texts in the Bible themselves that are the problem, but the dogma attached to them. That dogma is the dogma of divine authority.

The three most dangerous words in America today are these: "The Bible says..."

The Bible says that all non-born again Christians are going to hell.

The Bible says that America needs to be a Christian nation.  
The Bible says that women should be subservient to their men.  
The Bible says that gays should not be ministers, or be married, or have any protections.  
The Bible says “abstinence only” sex education should be taught in schools.  
The Bible says that evolution is a lie.  
The Bible says the end of time is coming and a big war is brewing between the righteous and the unrighteous and that Jesus is on our side as long we believe and force our Christian nation to believe what the Bible says.

This is not simply a religious or a church issue. “The Bible says” dogma is bigger than the church. It affects and it will continue to affect all Americans, perhaps the world.

However, those of us who are in the church have a special responsibility. We have a responsibility to come to terms with the Bible. The Bible has become a text of terror. We criticize the moderate Muslims (and rightly so) for not speaking against their extremists. But we mainline moderate or liberal Christians are harboring extremists because we are ourselves are not critical of the dogma surrounding our text.

We blithely say the Bible is the Word of God. I think it is time to cut that dogma at its root. I have a couple of stories to illustrate that.

In my first congregation in upstate New York, a physician worshiped with us. He was a Jain. Jainism is a form of Hinduism that predates Christianity by about 500 years. He married an American, a Roman Catholic. He told me that in their house they have an altar—a sacred space. On that altar were symbols from his religion, various gods and what not, as well as symbols from her religion, Mary, Jesus, the saints and so forth. He said, “All of our gods get along wonderfully.” He told that as a Jain he could worship anywhere and he liked our church.

Our worship was a little more liturgical than here. We followed the lectionary and included several readings from the Bible. After each reading, the liturgist or I would say, “This is the Word of the Lord.” The congregation would dutifully respond, “Thanks be to God.”

After one worship service, one of the texts was about YHWH or the Lord getting upset about the other deities of the Canaanites or whatever and

commanding the Israelites to smash their idols and so forth. I didn't think much about it. It's the usual stuff you find in the Bible. After the service he came up to me and I could tell he was disturbed. He said, "I like what you say, but that passage in the Bible about smashing idols was very upsetting to me."

I don't remember what I said, but I thought, "Well, it isn't my fault. It's the Bible. I am just following the lectionary." That conversation got me to thinking. I began to realize that it is my responsibility as a worship leader about these texts, how they were presented, and what they said. I couldn't pass off responsibility by saying, "We follow the lectionary." It took me awhile but I no longer use that phrase "This is the word of the Lord." And I don't use texts of terror in worship unless I am making a point against them. I don't just follow the lectionary like a soldier taking orders any longer. But it took a while for me to get to that point.

Second story. A few years later in the same church I realized that the lectionary had other problems. The texts were read without context. People would hear something from Deuteronomy or the Gospels or a letter from Paul and have no sense of the larger setting. I realized that many people in the church really didn't have an understanding of the Bible at all. They didn't go off to seminary and read all the time. They had real jobs.

I felt the need to raise the level of biblical literacy. The motivation was initially worship-centered, but as I got into it, I realized the implications were larger. The Bible, like it or not, is *the* text of Western civilization and people should be familiar with it to survive in our culture. I knew that Bible studies wouldn't be enough. Only a few would attend and those who did already knew the Bible better than I did.

I also wanted to introduce higher criticism in a way that non-specialists could understand. So I made a big deal of my plan. I gave away cheap paperback Bibles in church, and decided that we would read the Bible in a year. I divided it into 12 parts, 100 pages a month. In the newsletter and bulletin I wrote a little synopsis of what they would read, and a take-home quiz for each month. I gave away prizes to those who turned in the quiz. Once a month, I summarized the section we just read in a sermon. I wanted to make it as fun and painless as possible. I gave permission to skip the boring parts. No prize for doggedly reading each word. Get a flavor for the genealogies or the tiresome cultic rules and skip to the narrative. At least

read enough to answer the quiz questions. I also did the same with a children's bible so parents could read and answer the quiz questions with their children.

It was really a good experience. I did it for both of my previous churches. Who knows? Maybe you will be game enough to indulge me here as well. The quiz questions were sometimes content-oriented, but mostly thought-provoking. Many people got into it and read the assigned text and wrote answers to me and I dialogued back with them. About a third of the worshipers did it, which is pretty good. I gave away a big prize at the end to all who completed the quest.

In my first church in New York, around March or April we were reading Joshua. Joshua is the story of the conquest of the Promised Land. It's a bloody book. One Sunday a man came up to me and he was upset. He had two kids. He and his wife were both teachers in the elementary school. He said something to this effect, "I grew up in church but didn't ever read the Bible through. But this is awful. God tells them to kill every man, woman and child. It isn't that they do it and it was wrong that they did it. God tells them to do it! This is the Word of God?"

I think I gave one of those answers that are annoying, "How do you feel about that?" The real question was, "How do I feel about that?" What is this Bible I represent? What is this Bible that we give to our children at confirmation and tell them it is God's word?

God tells Abraham to kill his son, Isaac. Abraham is going to do it. He has the knife, ready to thrust. God stops him. But he would have done it as a sign of his blind obedience to God. We are told that Abraham is an example of great faith. He trusted God enough to give up what was most precious to him. Wait a minute. That doesn't fly. What would you say to a woman who out of great trust in God decides to drown her kids in the river or who for the love of God kills a physician who terminates pregnancies?

But again, these are ancient texts, not unlike Homer's epics. The gods are fickle there as well as in the Bible. If we could read them like that, that would be one thing. They are stories of crazy gods. The gods must be crazy. But the Bible is problematic not because of the stories in them, but because of the dogma attached to them. They are the Word of God. Perhaps it is time to let the dogma out.

Presbyterians are part of that Reformed family. The Reformed understanding of the inspiration of scripture is subtle and nuanced. It is not simply “the Bible says.” It involves interpreting scripture through the lens of Jesus. It involves using our reason, understanding the texts in their historical settings, and having conversation. A correct interpretation of scripture leads to compassion, to love, to justice, and ultimately to humility and trust before the Mystery that we cannot fathom.

But there is no subtlety or nuance for the neocons. For them, the Bible is all on a par, the bad texts and the good. Every word is the word of God. That means that the most ugly passages are given the same status as the beautiful ones. All of it is covered over with a simplistic creedal formulation. “The Bible says.”

There is no real interest in the Bible. It is really about the dogma about the Bible. Ultimately it is about discipline. Armed with the Word of God, they seek to create soldiers for the Lord (this is the language) to make America a Christian nation. What happens to the non-Christians? Convert or be second-class citizens I guess.

Who are these neocons? They aren’t your sweet little next door neighbors except to the extent that they have been drafted into the Lord’s army. They are the political power players, James Dobson, Pat Robertson, D. James Kennedy, and Jerry Falwell. And of course the boys in the Institute for Religion and Democracy or IRD who are funded to the tune of a million dollars a year by politically conservative organizations to move three denominations, The United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian USA, and the Episcopal USA into fundamentalism. Their mantra is that the Bible is the Word of God. They are slick and effective.

The Bible is not as important for them as is the *Book of Order* in the Presbyterian Church or the more austere sounding *Book of Discipline* in the Methodist church. Discipline is the word. Punish and purge those whom they call heretics, of course the gays, and anyone who advocates for social justice. They want obedience to their version of God’s Word. These three little denominations are some of the few that are left in American Christianity that still hold out for an intelligent and gracious faith. As I said, this is bigger than the church.

I think it is time to let Augustine's daughters of hope have a say. It is time to get angry and be courageous for our institutions and our future. The responsibility of the church is to come to terms with our text of terror, the Bible.

Of course, I am not saying don't read it. I say the opposite. Read it if for no other reason than that what you don't know can and will be used against you. I suggest that the belief the church needs to give up in order to mature is to give up the dogma of the Bible as divinely inspired. It was written by human beings for human beings. It contains human genius and folly. It is not God speaking but human beings speaking about their understanding of God and their own history.

About a year and a half ago, I wrote an essay for the Liturgy and Literacy Seminar of the Jesus Seminar. The essay was entitled: What to Preach? The Challenge of the Jesus Seminar for Contemporary Homiletics. I want to share just a portion of that with you about Preaching and the Word of God. I wrote:

*"I believe that many clergy are overdue for a heart to heart with their congregations about the metaphor "Word of God" especially as it applies to the Bible. I have found that this metaphor more often stops creative thought than inspires it. The question we might ask our congregations is, "If the Bible is the Word of God, what makes it so?"*

*Modern scholarship has eroded the foundations for this metaphor. We have come to a time in which it is incredible to assert that our canon of scripture is objectively true or authoritative for all of humanity. Appeals to the Bible's historical or scientific accuracy are naive. The claim that our canon has been dictated or inspired by supernatural revelation amounts to little more than special pleading. There is no magic power that makes the Bible or any text within it superior, truer, or more divinely inspired than any other human writing, religious or secular. The hands of human beings through their own imaginative power made every jot and tittle of carving and of script. The Bible is a collection of the writings of humans for humans. Once we dismiss the assumption that our book or library of books is more authoritative than any other collection, we can finally take our seat around the table of humanity.*

*When faith communities begin demythologizing the Bible, some interesting things will happen. The Bible's authority will shift away from the text and toward the individual interpreter or community of interpreters. No longer will the Bible be considered an authoritative source of truth that contains infallible propositions about God or the human condition. Rather, it will become a resource for wisdom. Since authority is earned by the truth it tells, the Bible will have whatever authority the individual or community gives to it. People may find through its narratives, poetry, and song, an oasis of spiritual refreshment. Or they may not. It will be up to the people (both collectively and individually) to draw out what is meaningful and good and to discard what is not meaningful and good.*

*The preacher's task will be to offer permission and encouragement for the congregation to engage in this discipline of freedom. The preacher can no longer assume that within a biblical text is a Word from God that needs to be teased out through exegesis and delivered to the waiting faithful. The preacher can no longer assume that just because a text is in the Bible that it is from God or is even valuable. A preacher can, however, provide information about a text using such tools as literary and historical criticism. The preacher can also provide an opinion regarding the text's value for the community of faith. The preacher may even use the text as an impetus to speak about a contemporary concern. But I believe it is unethical for a preacher to make the claim that what s/he is saying is true, good or of God because it is based on his or her interpretation of a biblical text. In other words, a preacher cannot use a biblical text to prove a point. Anything a preacher says must stand on its own terms. This ethic will free both the biblical text and the preacher. The text will be freed from the preacher's misuse of it. The preacher will be freed from the constraints of needing to "preach from the Bible" or to have everything s/he says to be backed by scripture.*

*Preaching can do a great deal of good in a community of faith. It can inspire, comfort, challenge, and inform for the betterment of humanity. Preaching can also do a great deal of harm. The harm results not so much on the content of the message or its style of delivery as on the implied authority of the preacher because s/he supposedly preaches the Word of God. I believe that Word of God is not only a meaningless metaphor; it is also a harmful metaphor for both the Bible and the preaching act. I recommend that preachers discontinue its use and have this conversation with their congregations.*

*What approach, lens, angle of vision, or metaphor might we take toward the Bible that will make it a helpful resource in the Sunday morning experience? I consider the Bible to be the family history of our spiritual ancestors. It is a collection of the record of human experiences canonized by various family historians. Our family history gives us rooted-ness. We have a story. We have a past. Our ancestors do have wisdom. I believe that they caught a glimpse of the fire. If we are wise, humble, and courageous, we can see that fire as well. It is out of respect for our ancestors, our need for rooted-ness, and our need to listen to the wisdom of the ancients that we “open and read.”*

*The advantage of this metaphor is that it allows us to appreciate that there are other families on this earth. They have family histories as well. Telling our stories to one another (without the competition about whose is more objectively authoritative) will enable us to engage more positively and peacefully with those of other faith traditions. Also, family histories are never complete. Like the genealogist who discovers great Uncle Albert, who for some reason was not mentioned in the family history, so too, scholars of Christian origins have found remnants of communities whose stories were not told, or at least told positively, in the canon of accepted lore. These “Uncle Alberts” include communities reflected in the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary and numerous others. As we discover the great diversity of our Christian past, we who are charged with adding to the family history for our descendants, will now be obligated to include these voices as well.”*  
<http://www.1stpres-eliz.org/whattopreach.pdf>

You may not be as radical as I am about this. You may wish to retain the doctrine of divine inspiration in some way. And that is fine. I ask then, seriously, not rhetorically, if the Bible is the Word of God, what makes it so? What does divine inspiration mean? How do we discover it and apply it? What about other religious texts or secular texts? To what extent are they divinely inspired as well or not? The church needs to think about this, talk about this, and challenge this dangerous dogma as it currently understood, which could very well change the lives of our children and grandchildren. If we are not vigilant, our democracy could become a theocracy.

I want to stop for a lighter moment. I am going to play a song. I heard part of it on NPR the other night. I bought the CD. This song is not about the Bible. It is a bizarre love song of sorts. As I heard it, I thought of the

church and of America. I thought of it as a parable for how good Bible-believing Christians should behave in a neocon world. This is Mildred Bailey and her Swing Band from 1935. "I Love to Take Orders from You."

*If you're the captain, I'll be the crew,  
'Cause I just love to take orders from you.  
You blow the bugle and I'll jump through,  
How I love to take orders from you.*

*I know that rules were made for fools  
That's one thing I have learned.  
But I'm going in for discipline  
Wherever you're concerned.*

*If you say kiss me, that's what I'll do,  
'Cause I just love to take orders from you.*

*When someone tells me to march or to halt,  
My soul rebels; I'm that way to a fault.  
No rules or regulations would I obey,  
Then I met you and I knew right away...*

*If you're the captain, I'll be the crew,  
'Cause I just love to take orders from you.  
You blow the bugle and I'll jump through,  
How I love to take orders from you.*

*I know that rules were made for fools  
That's one thing I have learned.  
But I'm going in for discipline  
Wherever you're concerned.*

*If you say kiss me, that's what I'll do,  
'Cause I just love to take orders from you.  
From the cd A Date with John Waters*

The Christian faith that is ascending in America is a sado-masochistic one. Punish me with the Word of God. Please sir, may I have another. Give me the answers. Keep me safe. Tell me what to do with my life. Tell me who I

should love, where I should work, what I should think, what I should believe. Punish me when I don't obey your orders.

I am going to take just five more minutes to talk about the personal aspect of beliefs that are worth giving up in order to grow. I talked about the church as a whole and the dogma of divine inspiration and authority in regards to the Bible. On a personal level, one of the beliefs we might consider letting go is the doctrine of outside authority itself. No one has your life planned out for you. No one can tell you how to live your life.

Authority is earned by the truth it tells.

The Bible as word of God obviously meets a need on the personal level. Life is confusing and difficult and we have tough choices to make everyday. Wouldn't it be nice if there was a supernatural grandpa to tell us what to do? It is all in this book. Well, there is no supernatural Grandpa and there is no magic book. There is life. There is Mystery. There is wisdom if we are fortunate enough to find it. But in the end, you create your life. No Bible, preacher, or guru will do it for you.

I close with today's texts. These are only authoritative to the extent that they speak truth to you:

Jesus said, "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find.

When they find, they will be disturbed.

When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all."

--*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying #2

Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look the <Father's> imperial rule is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the <Father's> imperial rule is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."

--*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying #3

And my personal favorite:

Jesus said, "Why can't you decide for yourselves what is right?"

--*Gospel of Luke, 12:57*