

“Article of Faith: The Bible”
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, WV
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Luke 8: 19 - 21

¹⁹ Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd.
²⁰ And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” ²¹ But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

Luke 1: 1 - 4

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

“So that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

“Hear the word of God and do it.”

“So that you may know the truth.”

As it says in our Book of Order, a part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):¹

The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit.

And there it is. Why we read the Bible. Why we study the Bible.
 Why the Bible is the central point of our worship. Why we need the Bible.
 Because we want to know the truth. The Truth, the Way, the Life. God.
 The Bible is the place where we are invited to meet God.

In these words (lowercase w), we find the Word (uppercase W) of God,
 in moments when we open ourselves to that which is bigger, wiser, truer than ourselves.

Looking for that which we can trust with out whole hearts without leaning on our own understanding.²

Who doesn't want to be able to lean on the everlasting arms³ for rest and inspiration?

Within these covers we meet the God who parts the seas, makes covenant,
 and loves even unto giving the earthly life of God.

¹ (Book of Order W-2.2001)

² Proverbs 3: 5 - 6.

³ Deuteronomy 33:27

I know that I want that. You're here. I know you want that.

Not an accessory to justify a position, but a foundation for a faithful life, calling us into a deeper relationship with the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us all.

The Bible, of course, doesn't make it easy. **Thank God for that.** It isn't written to be satisfied with an immature faith, it was written to draw us into a maturing faith, and that means a faith that is willing to embrace complexity and uncertainty.

The Bible tells us of the birth of Jesus with angels and stars,
But doesn't it also tell us of the God-commanded killing of men, women, and children?

The Bible tells us of an Easter morning when life defeated death,
but it also tells us that wearing mixed fabrics is a sin.
(Did the people who made my preaching robe not know that?)

Did you know that there are two books of the Bible that don't mention God at all?⁴

The phrase "God helps those who help themselves," isn't in the Bible?⁵

How do we deal with the fact that in the church we believe that women and men are called to all ministries of the church, yet in the Bible there are many places where women are clearly prohibited or discouraged from such leadership.

What about the prohibition on tattoos?⁶ (that same passage is interpreted by some to include ear piercings, like the ones I'm sporting right now). I'm not about to enforce that.

Or the call to stone children who disobey their parents.⁷

And how about the fact that Genesis tells us two different creation stories?
Forget about creationism vs. evolution, what about creation 1 vs. creation 2 in Genesis?

When we read about Jerusalem in the Bible what does it mean?

What does Jerusalem mean?⁸ Depending on the source and the context, Jerusalem can be a literal place. It can be an allegorical reference to the church. It can also be a moral lesson and in other places it has an eschatological implication, describing the world that will be, is to come.

⁴ Esther and Song of Solomon

⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/19/living/bible-not-jesus/index.html>

⁶ Leviticus 19:28

⁷ Deuteronomy 21:18-21

⁸ Sometimes in the Bible, Jerusalem is a literal place. Jerusalem has a literal meaning. 1Ki 2:11 "The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem."

But in other places, the word Jerusalem allegorical meaning, it is used to refer to the church. Psalm 147:12 "Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!"

Jerusalem can also have a moral meaning. Jer 4:14 O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of wickedness so that you may be saved. How long shall your evil schemes lodge within you?

Or homosexuality. When the Bible refers to homosexuality, diligent scholarship tells us that the language isn't referring to same-gender relationships it's talking, instead, about child abuse or prostitution. While not everyone agrees with the church's stance on sexuality, ordination, and marriage, people of faith have argued for full acceptance of LGBTQ individuals **because** of how their faithfulness to the Bible, not in spite of it.⁹

It's not just the scholarship that leads us to different understandings. We do that ourselves, because of who we are. We bring ourselves to the text, too. Our own experiences. Our perspectives. Our opinions affect how we hear and understand the words of the Bible.

Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Beth Johnson, tells the story of one of her classes where:¹⁰

One of her students..... wrote a paper on the letter to the church...in Revelation... which has the image... of the risen Lord who 'stands at the door and knocks;' he says, 'if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.'¹¹ [Professor Johnson] had always understood that image as a reassuring picture of divine persistence. No matter how resistant you are, Jesus continues to knock at the door.

Her student, Milton, though, grew up the son of a black sharecropper in South Carolina. When poor blacks in the 1920s and 30s bought insurance, they were required to pay the premiums every week. The insurance agents were white. The white insurance agents, Milton said, would come to his family's house once a week to collect the premiums and they would walk right into the house without knocking. He and his family would sometimes be at the dinner table and look up from the blessing to see the insurance agent there for the premium. When Milton reflected on the picture of the Lord Jesus, who has a right to go anywhere in the universe he wants, knocking on the door, he didn't see divine persistence. He saw divine restraint. One who can overwhelm with divine power instead stands patiently and waits.

Is God persistent or patient? Both. And depending on where you stand, you can, faithfully, see either in those verses from Revelation.

The Bible isn't a lot of things. It isn't an answer guide or a science text or a history book. It is the story of faith. And in the Presbyterian tradition we're called not to look at one or even a few verses and think we have everything solved, something called proof-texting. We are called to the more difficult task of looking at the whole text.

Jerusalem can also have an eschatological meaning, referring to the next world, the kingdom that will be in place when Jesus comes again. Re 21:2 "And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/opinion/op-classic-gomes.html?pagewanted=all>
<http://gay-sd.com/out-of-the-theological-closet/>
<http://pres-outlook.org/2009/11/2009-covenant-network-gathering-achtmeier-charts-spiritual-journey-on-homosexuality-at-covenant-network-gathering-plenary/>

¹⁰ I have confirmed with Prof. Johnson that this happened, but don't have a documented source to reference. The story was told to me by a colleague many years ago.

¹¹ Revelation 3:20

All 66 books and some 31,000 words and considering what God is saying in the whole thing, not just in parts.

The Bible isn't a lot of things. And the point is: That's what makes it great, because knowing that allows us to be open to **What It IS**.

The Bible is the place where we meet God.

The Bible is a living breathing document that tells us, through words, about the word made flesh.

We meet God as we read the words, as we study them using scholarship, our minds and our hearts.

As we engage with the words with other believers.

We meet God as we meditate on the Bible, as we use the words for our prayers and pray about what they say. As we let them soak into our being. That is how and where we meet God.

In these words (lowercase w), we find the Word (uppercase W) of God.

The words themselves are not sacred, the God they point us to is.

And that God, and the words we are given where we meet God, can, both save and transform our lives into lives worth living.

Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, in the Christian Century magazine a few months ago, wrote:¹²

My father was a preacher who believed it was important to memorize verses of the Bible. On Mondays he'd give my older brother and me a verse written out on a little white card. We were expected to recite it from memory by dinner at the end of the week when our father would point to one of us and say something like "Romans 8:28." If we didn't start chirping away with "For all things work together for good for those who love God," we'd have to leave the table.

By the time I was a teenager I had memorized a lot of the Bible, not out of love for the sacred text but because I didn't want to be dismissed from Saturday evening dinner. I never paid attention to the words. But they were still in me.

When I was not quite 17, my parents' marriage broke apart. My mother left our home on Long Island and went to live with her sister in Dallas. My father left the church he had started and just disappeared. My big brother dropped out of college, got a construction job, and helped me finish high school. I got an after-school job at a gas station. Together we got by.

Since we had lived in the church's parsonage, it fell to us boys to move the family's stuff out of the house. I don't remember what happened to most of it. I just remember boxing up our family's life.

Oddly, my brother and I didn't talk about how our world had crumbled. This wasn't just because we weren't good at sharing our feelings. Mostly it was because we couldn't afford emotion. We were too worried about the next meal and a place to stay.

The following Christmas my brother and I decided we would go to Dallas to visit my mother. We didn't have the money for a plane or bus ticket, so we did what

¹² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/night-i-learned-take-chances>

young people sometimes do when they're not thinking clearly. We decided to hitchhike from Long Island to Dallas.

By the end of the first day we were somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It was snowing hard, the sun was long gone, and we stood on the entrance ramp with our thumbs sticking out. As the snow got heavier, there were fewer and fewer cars. After two hours, we finally saw a pair of headlights pull over in front of us. It was a Virginia state trooper. We were expecting a lecture about how dangerous, not to mention illegal, it was to hitchhike. Instead he told us that the highway had been closed for two hours and that after attending to an accident up the road he would come back for us and take us to a diner that was still open.

We stayed put on the side of the dark highway in the blizzard. After months of hustling our way through the immediate issues of making life work, my brother and I were finally forced to talk to each other. We took a stab at describing our situation, but it didn't go very well after I mentioned that we were basically disposable to the people who were supposed to love us. We tried to pass the time by quizzing each other on sports statistics. Neither of us had ever been very good at that.

Then my brother pointed to me and said, "Romans 8:28." We spent much of that night asking each other to recite the verses of the Bible we had memorized but never truly heard. At one point I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." By the time I finished reciting those words, I was crying.

That night, when a passage about the sustaining love of God cast out fear that was too deep for me to even acknowledge, became the turning point in my life.

A turning point with "that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" Romans 8, verse 26.

And so, friends, echoing words from the invitation to the communion table last week,
 If you've read the Bible dozens of times
 and if you've never opened the cover.
 If you can recite the prologue to the Gospel of John
 and if you aren't sure if Chronicles is in the Old or New Testament.
 If you are wanting to know God better
 and if aren't sure what this religion thing is all about.

This is a book for you.

There are countless ways for you to engage with the text. Sunday School in the fall will offer at least three different classes for adults as well as the classes for children, starting at 10:00 each morning, (and as an inducement, coffee and donuts will be ready at 9:45.)

I'll be offering a weekly class discussing the text that was the focus of the sermon the Sunday before and previewing the text that will be the focus of the sermon the next Sunday.

There is the Men's breakfast. Women's Dinner and Devotion. Presbyterian Women's Circles. These opportunities and so many more. If you'd like to find one, find me, and I'll make sure you get connected.

Because we are a people of the Word. And we take it seriously.
The parts that we understand
 and the parts that are a mystery.
The words that we hold close to our hearts
 and the words we'd like to drop-kick a thousand miles away.
The passages that tell us we're on the right path
 and the verses that advise a necessary course correction.
We are a people of the Word.

From theologian William Placher:

[Let us] commit ourselves to this: that in our preaching and teaching, our lives and our conversations, we mean to be manifestly Bible-believing Christians, yielding priority to no one in our fidelity to this book.... We vow to manifest ourselves as the people who take the Bible most seriously, who struggle hardest to be faithful to it, recognizing that faithfulness always does involve struggle and the recognition of complexity even as we find this book shaping our lives and our faith and guiding us to the knowledge and love of God.¹³

Thanks be to God for the Bible, the Word, an Article of Our Faith.
Amen.

¹³ "Struggling with Scripture." Address to the 2000 Covenant Conference. Pittsburgh, PA, November 3, 2000. William C. Placher, Professor of Religion, Wabash College.