

TEXT: Lectionary readings
THEME: Rightly explaining the word of truth
SUBJECT: Sensing the scriptures
TITLE: Why the Bible

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Messiah Moravian
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For Christmas, two months before my second birthday, my paternal grandparents gave me a Bible, a leather bound KJV, two columns per page, small print. No pictures. This is not a children's Bible story book. This is the real deal.

On the title page they wrote Ephesians 6:1, 2, 3. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth." I don't know if this was precautionary or a response to perceived proclivities they thought questionable.

I know my grandparents knew of children's Bible story books. I have the one they gave my father for Christmas in 1936 when he was eight, complete with pictures, some in black and white, some in color. They didn't write Ephesians 6:1-3 in his Bible.

But why give me a KJV before I turned two and not give my father a Bible story book until he was eight? Because before he was eight, my grandparents were not church-going folk. Let's just say they lived hard and fought even harder. They were burdened by destructive habits of heart.

An old professor of mine, now in his 90's, retired but still going strong, has recently published a little book on interpreting scripture. He begins by saying "the integrity of the biblical word seems to be dissolving in the experience of our generation."

"One natural reaction to the insecurity about the authority, integrity, and normality of the Bible has been the phenomenal growth of fundamentalist groups in the United States and elsewhere, and their enormous influence on public life and opinion.

"Such an attitude joins them to a longstanding anti-intellectual undercurrent in American culture, one that finds intellectually demanding debate unnecessary and sophisticated argument repulsive." (Karlfried Froehlich, *Sensing the Scriptures*, p 3f)

Those of us who can't seek security in fundamentalism are left to wonder, "Why care about this ancient book containing stories more frightening than anything Stephen King ever imagined, stories children should never be permitted to read, stories to make even the worldly wise cringe? Why care about this conglomeration of uneven texts that is often used to justify injustice? Why care about this, according to some, irredeemably patriarchal narrative?"

After all, the Bible, contrary to what you may have been taught, is not absolutely needed. It is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. The end is a transformed life, life in the Spirit, life in the presence of God, union with God or Christ. For this the Bible is not absolutely necessary.

St John Chrysostom, 4th century Bishop of Constantinople and Doctor of the Church, called the Bible the second best course. The first is “our hearts written on by the Spirit.”

In the West, also in the 4th century, Augustine embraced a strikingly similar view. “A person supported by faith, love, and charity, with an unshaken hold upon them, does not need the Scriptures except for the instruction of others.”

Even Martin Luther, with all his love for Scripture, was under no illusion about the Bible’s secondary character: “That one had to write books is always a great deterioration and a limitation of the spirit . . .”

The Bible is not absolutely needed, totally indispensable. But the Bible - its stories, its prayers, visions, admonitions, and words - can help us in our personal experience find our own language. It can interpret us. It can reveal us to ourselves.

As Letty Russell puts it, Scripture functions as a ‘script’ or prompting for life. It is the story of God’s invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace and justice in the world.

The Bible bears witness to the Word of God, a Word that transforms the one who hears and acts upon it. The ten men with leprosy are cleansed on the way; transformation happens when they act on the word heard.

In the story of Namaan the prophet speaks the word of the Lord to the general who is at first provoked by it, as many of us are initially. When the general finally acts on the word given to him, he is cleansed. The skin of the general becomes like “baby flesh,” soft, supple, sweet smelling, a new gift of innocence.

The Hebrew phrase used to describe the general’s new “baby flesh” is the same phrase, in its famine form, used to describe the young Israelite girl. The girl is presented as an innocent, trusting, whole person, a foreshadowing of what the general will become when he acts on the word of the Lord.

What I want to know, what the Bible doesn’t tell us, is what happened to the young Israelite girl? Was she thanked? Set free? Returned to her people, her family?

We are left with an embarrassingly imperfect Bible in the garb of human language. Sensing the scriptures remains a never-ending task for Christians. It needs time and effort, and it is not always successful. But it is worth spending our time on.

It is worth our time for it is a means to our transformation into the likeness of the One whose image we bear. That is the work begun in my grandparents, by no means completed in this life, but sufficiently realized for them to live productive lives.

It is the reason I was given a leather bound KJV of the Bible for Christmas two months before my second birthday. It is never too early to learn the “mother tongue” of Christian faith, to grow in a sense of Scripture, to begin the process of transformation, as Paul puts it, from one degree of glory to the next.