

The Problem with the Bible

First Sunday after Epiphany – January 11, 2004

Special Edition!! Bible Academy starts tomorrow!!

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Psalm 139:1-7

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

Hebrews 4:12-13

¹²Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Last week, we looked at how we might begin to do a better job of interpreting the Bible as we seek to apply it to our lives. But we might have gotten a little ahead of ourselves. There is an even deeper problem with the Bible!

The Problem

The problem with the Bible is this. Nobody actually reads it. Sure, we read bits and pieces in church each week. We might even go to a Bible study. But few of us simply pick up a Bible, sit down, and read it. We'll read a Patricia Cornwell mystery or the latest by Stephen King. But rarely (ever?) do we sit down and read the story of Esther or of Ruth or Mark's Gospel or the stories of Abraham. But in keeping the Bible closed, we cut ourselves off from much of the rich faith God has given us. As the psalmist writes, God knows us completely. We can't escape his presence. The writer of Hebrews knows that God's word penetrates to the very thoughts and intentions of our hearts. In the pages of Scripture, we can meet God and he can speak to us. But only if we open our Bibles!

Several years ago, we at St. Andrew created the Bible Academy with the goal of helping us all to overcome our biblical illiteracy so that we might incorporate Scripture into our discipleship. Simply put, we wanted to make the Bible less intimidating to us all. We've made real progress. Last fall,

All Those Translations!

There is no getting around the fact that the Bible is a library of ancient writings, from cultures and times far removed from our own. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Few people can read these writings in their original languages. Most of us make do with English translations, and these translations vary widely in their goals and styles.

Some translations, such as the NASB, strive to be as word-for-word as possible. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which we use in worship, is freer, sacrificing a word-for-word translation where needed for the sake of clarity. The NIV is somewhat freer still. Still others, like *The Message*, are not so much translations as they are paraphrases, seeking to render the ancient writings into very contemporary language and idiom. Indeed, there are so many translations that it can be hard to know where to turn. Here are my recommendations.

I urge the students in my Bible classes to use two translations. The first should be the NRSV (my preferred) or the NIV (or the new TNIV). These translations are literal enough to be useful in study but they still make sense to our modern ear. As a second translation, I suggest a free rendering such as the *New Living Translation* (NLT) or Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*. Bear in mind though, all English Bibles necessarily involve some amount of interpretation on the part of the translators and the "freer" the translation, the more interpretation there must be. The key is to use a translation or paraphrase that is appropriate to your needs.

more than 270 of us enrolled in one or more of the nine eight-week classes. These Background Studies are another means by which we can begin to make sense of the Bible. I've taught introductory Bible classes since we created the Academy and I've found that most people have little sense of the larger Biblical story. We have no trouble appreciating the Bible's diversity, but finding its unity is another matter. So, what follows is a brief telling of the over-arching biblical story.

The BIG Story

Putting it as briefly as possible, the biblical story goes something like this:¹

The story is about God and his creation, about humans made in God's image. The humans are given a wondrous place to live and work to do. They enjoy a right and true relationship with their creator. But desiring to be like gods themselves, the humans rebel, fracturing their relationship with God and damaging all of creation. The story is about God's acting, through Israel and climactically through Jesus, to rescue his people and his creation from their plight. The story continues with God acting by his own Spirit within the world to bring it towards its complete restoration.

The Gift of a Story

Sometimes we want to pretend that the Bible is a big rule book, giving us straightforward lists of do's and don'ts. At other times, we go to it seeking a well-organized presentation of what we ought to believe. In truth, the Bible is neither. It is largely a book of stories. And we are blessed by this.

The longer I teach the Bible, the more I appreciate God's wisdom in giving us these stories. We can identify with the people whose stories are told; we can see ourselves in them and participate in their journey with God. Stories preserve all the ambiguities and mysteries of life. Life is never so simple as a list or a creed. Stories resist a single meaning. Stories are easy to remember and to tell. Stories can engage our imaginations and instruct us in ways that lists of rules or systematic theologies never could.

Biblical stories nest within one another. The small stories about Abraham and Sarah nest within the larger epic of God's choosing a people. These larger stories nest within the over-arching biblical story of redemption and restoration. Stories help us to find unity within the rich diversity of Scripture.

Part of being human is seeking answers to fundamental questions about life: Who are we? Where are we? Why is our world so messed up? What is the solution? The biblical story as I've outlined it provides answers:²

- (1) *Who are we?* We are humans made in the image of the one true God, creator of everything. We have responsibilities that come with this status. We are not fundamentally determined by race, gender, social class, or where we live; nor are we simply pawns in a game over which we have no control.
- (2) *Where are we?* We are in a good and beautiful world, the creation of God, in whose image we are made. We are not in some inherently evil world nor are we in a cosmos to which we owe allegiance as we would a god.
- (3) *What is wrong?* Humanity has rebelled against God. This rebellion reflects a cosmic dislocation between the creator and the creation. Consequently, the world is out of tune with God's intention for it.
- (4) *What is the solution?* God has acted, is acting, and will act within his creation to deal with the weight of evil set up by human rebellion, and to bring his world to the end for which it was made, namely that it should resonate with his own presence and glory. This action, of course, is focused upon Jesus and the Spirit of God.

You might ask why it is that we Christians claim this story to be a true story, but that is for another day. For now, it is enough to know that our reading of the Bible will be made easier and more rewarding if we grasp the big story told by the Bible's many and diverse authors, even if some of them didn't know they were telling part of this story!

¹I've adapted much of this from a passage in N.T. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God*, Fortress Press, 1992. Wright's telling of the biblical story stands squarely in the midst of the historic, traditional, and orthodox Christian faith.

²All of the world's religions provide answers to these questions. Of course, the answers vary and are often at odds with one another. Some answers conform more closely to the true nature of reality than do others.

Daily Bible Readings

(Some of the Bible's famous stories)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Judges 16:4-31 Delilah and the death of Samson	Day 2 1 Samuel 17 David and Goliath
Day 3 2 Samuel 11 David and Bathsheba	Day 4 John 2:1-12 Jesus changes water into wine
Day 5 Luke 15:11-32 Jesus tells a story about a father and his sons	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

*Our Winter Bible Academy Session begins tomorrow!
It is not too late to register.*

Our fall 2003 session was a big success, as more than 270 adults enrolled in our classes. We will offer a wide variety of daytime and evening classes again this winter: *Christianity and Other Religions, Do What You Have the Power to Do: a study of NT women, Himalayas of the New Testament, Introducing the Old Testament, The Messianic Message of Matthew, The Power of the Prophets: from Moses to Jesus, When I'm on My Knees, and Why all the Fuss about Prayer?*

Get more info and register on-line at www.standrewcccl.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. It seems pretty bold to summarize the biblical story in less than a hundred words! Re-read the summary on the second page of the study. What strikes you first as you look over this paragraph? Is such summarizing helpful to you? Where do you think that some of the major biblical characters fit into this summary? For example, where is Moses in this paragraph? King David? John the Baptist? Paul? Where are we in this story? How do we begin to make the biblical story our own story? What does any of this have to do with the lives we lead today?
2. Why don't we read the Bible? Even a passing acquaintance with Christianity reveals the central place of Scripture in our faith. Make a list of the top five reasons we don't read the Bible. Do the books of the Bible just seem too foreign to us? Are we overwhelmed by it all and unsure where to begin? Are we confused by the diverse types of literature found in the Bible? Are we put off by the ways that the Bible has been misused? [Too often, the Bible is used by people to try to control either the behavior or beliefs of others.] Could it be that we simply don't read much of anything anymore? You might reflect upon the place of God's written word in a culture increasingly dominated by visual media. How would seeing the recent film, *The Gospel of John*, differ from reading the Gospel of John? FYI - the narration and dialogue in the film is simply the Good News translation of John's Gospel in its entirety - nothing added or taken away.