

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Mark 8:31-39

“Another Day, Another Promise, Another Name”

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I want to take as the subtext of my sermon this morning two questions about the Bible: What does it say? And, why do we read it? As you can imagine, in our efforts to ask these questions, we may be lead to ask other additional questions. Like, what difference is reading the Bible supposed to make in our lives, if any difference at all? And, are there particular times and places where the Bible is meant to be read? And, is the Bible meant to be read by everyone? While we may get around to answering some of these other questions, most of them are sermons all unto themselves, and this sermon wants to ask only two questions: What does the Bible say? And, why do we read it?

When I was a boy, I never asked the question, why do we read the Bible? In my family, we just did. From as young as I can remember, I always had a Bible. It was my own Bible. It wasn't a family Bible that I had to share with everyone else, because everyone else had their own Bible, too. My first Bible was filled mostly with pictures. There was an Old and New Testament, but there weren't so many words on every page. The stories seemed simpler...and fewer. I could read about Noah's Ark and David and Goliath but I was never going to come across the story about David and Bathsheba, and I certainly wasn't going to discover the story about Dinah or Tamar. Come to think of it, most of the stories that were not included in my first Bible were the ones about the women. This, along with the fact that all the stories about the men were about so-called heroism, made it so that I never thought about women as being very valuable tools in the hands of God. Consequently, I would have told you that a woman could never be a pastor or a deacon or leader in the church, and if not in the church, then not anywhere else in the world either. And because the women in my church and in my life didn't believe they could be any of these things either, it wasn't a sign of disrespect on my part not to include them. After all, my Bible didn't include them.

At the end of first grade I remember receiving my first full Bible as a gift from my church. It had all the stories. I carried that Bible everywhere I went, especially to church on Sundays. What I understood about church was that I went there to learn to live right, and that the manual for “right living” was the Bible. Of course, because I didn't want to live right just on Sundays but on every other day of the week as well, I read my Bible every day.

In my bedroom each morning before school, alone and quiet. I had learned to read my Bible as a matter of devotion, of personal piety, to commit to memory certain verses so that if I was ever somewhere without my Bible and I didn't know the right thing to do, I could still know the right thing to do. So, I memorized all ten commandments in their proper order, along with several key passages from the Old and New Testament that provided for me something of an arsenal that I could use against sin and temptation, which would be especially good and necessary for when I turned 12, hit puberty, and started thinking about...ahem...other things.

If you had asked me then why I read the Bible I would have told you it was so that I might know how to behave. Of course, being convinced of what the Bible said about how I ought to behave also meant being convinced of who I should and should not be friends with. Read the Bible like a how-to manual on right living and it becomes easy to pass judgment on others without feeling judgmental, because, well, it's not me who is calling your behavior wrong and sinful, it's God...in the Bible.

This past week we heard and read a lot of tributes to Billy Graham. Arguably, no one in history has become more synonymous with telling the world what the Bible says than Billy Graham. Over the course of some 80 years Billy stood before well over 200 million people on 6 continents. With a Bible in hand he would proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ with trademark passion and simplicity. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." The Bible says so. Repent, turn from your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. For the wages of sin is death. Now you would think that for being Billy Graham, for knowing his Bible so well and for speaking so confidently about what it says, that he would have a sermon or two to preach about those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, those who do not share his concern about their sin. And while we know that Graham did speak with disgrace about Jews and Muslims and members of the gay community at times, when asked once what his Bible had to say about their salvation, Billy Graham responded, "When my Bible says to repent, I don't presume to think that it's talking to anyone more than it's talking to me."

Stanley Hauerwas, professor of Christian Ethics at Duke Divinity School for many years, writes that,

“No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America...North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their 'common sense' is sufficient for 'understanding' the Scripture. They feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read. Instead, they assume that they have all the 'religious experience' necessary to know what the Bible is about. As a result, the Bible inherently becomes the ideology for a politics quite different from the politics of the Church.”¹

I think what Hauerwas means is that for all the reasons we might read the Bible, if we are not reading it with the hope of being changed by what we read—if we find ourselves saying more, “this is what it means,” and never saying, “tell me what it means to you?”—then it’s probably safe to say that we haven’t begun to understand the Bible. That if we are part of families or communities or countries that incarcerate more felons than we rehabilitate, that believes the answer to violence is more weapons, that doesn’t treasure the very young and the very old—that doesn’t take care of those who can’t take care of themselves, and then we presume to continue calling ourselves Christians, then we can’t say we have taken the Bible seriously at all. Indeed, we can’t say that we believe in it as God’s word. For the Bible gives witness to a God who is forever rehabilitating felons and criminals. You remember the woman who was chased to the edge of town by an angry mob. They wanted to stone her on account of her being an adulterer. Jesus told them all to put down their rocks. Is there anyone here who hasn’t done some terrible wrong? He essentially asks us to consider whether we haven’t all punished one another enough already that we must also kill one another. That day he rehabilitated not only the woman

¹ Hauerwas, Stanley (1993). “Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America,” p. 15.

but every last one of her accusers.² And let us not forget the thief who hung beside Jesus on the cross. He asked Jesus if he might remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus said, Truly I will. Because Jesus is anxious that we would remember there is nothing more violent than a cross and a crucifixion and no more powerful a weapon to fight violence with than compassion.

And of course, there's Abram and Sarai, whose story we heard read just a few moments ago. Old and well past their prime, they figure that whatever promises God made to them, God has long forgotten about by now. They have no children, no one to carry on their name after they are gone. Soon they will die and their tombstone will read, "Here ends their story." Until one day God comes and tells them, there's plenty of living left for you to do still. And God gives them another promise and another name.

Whatever the Bible is, it's got to be a story about keeping faith; not so much about us keeping faith in God, but about God keeping faith in us—the adulterous woman, the thief on the cross, Abram and Sarai, me and you. Now maybe it all sounds a bit too good to be true—this gospel of second chances. But if it sounds anything like a story you'd like to be a part of, then it is your story, and you are welcome to step into it anytime you like. Amen.

² John 8:1-11