

September 2, 2018

National Presbyterian Church

Finding your Part in the BIG Story

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; 24:17, 19, 22

Dr. David Renwick

In a great book called *The Written World: The Power Of Stories To Shape People, History, Civilizations*, Harvard professor, Martin Puchner writes (p.1: emphases mine):

Alexander of Macedonia is called the Great because he managed to unify the proud Greek city-states, conquer every kingdom between Greece and Egypt, defeat the mighty Persian army, and create an empire that stretched all the way to India—in less than thirteen years. People have wondered ever since how a ruler from a minor Greek kingdom could accomplish such a feat.

But there was always a second question, more intriguing to me, which was why Alexander wanted to conquer Asia in the first place. In contemplating this question, I found myself focusing on three objects that Alexander carried with him throughout his military campaign and that he put under his pillow every night, three objects that summed up the way he saw his campaign.

The first was a dagger. Next to his dagger, Alexander kept a box. And inside the box, he placed the most precious of the three objects: a copy of his favorite text, the Iliad.

How did Alexander come by these three objects, and what did they mean to him? Alexander slept on a dagger because he wanted to escape his father's fate of being assassinated. The box he had seized from Darius, his Persian opponent. And the Iliad he had brought to Asia because it was the story through which he saw his campaign and life, a foundational text that captured the mind of a prince who would go on to conquer the world.

Homer's epic has been a foundational text for the Greeks for generations. For Alexander, it acquired the status of an almost sacred text, which is why he carried it with him on his campaign. It is what texts, especially foundational ones, do: They change the way we see the world and also the way we act upon it. This was certainly the case with Alexander. He was induced not only to read and study this text, but also to reenact it. Alexander, the reader, put himself into the story, view his own life and trajectory in the light of Homer's Achilles. Alexander the Great is well-known as a larger-than-life king. It turns out that he was also a larger-than-life reader.

Beginning next week, through next May, in all our Sunday School classes and our preaching we'll be working our way through a selection of stories in the Bible, from beginning to end.

The primary reasons for doing this – expending so much time and energy on this – is our belief that God is a god who wants to be known: God speaks! And one of the primary channels for this self-disclosure of God is the Bible.

- God has spoken in Nature – Creation (Psalm 19 – *there is no speech nor are there words, but their voice goes out*)

- God has spoken in Jesus – Incarnation (Colossians 1:15 – “*He is the image of the invisible God*”)
- and God has spoken in the book (the Bible) – Inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16 – “*All Scripture is inspired by God*”)

Of course, in many ways the Bible very human. It was written by people whose personalities God did not obliterate. It needs to be read with great care, as our Presbyterian constitutional documents state:

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

Confession of 1967

The book is human, but ultimately, it's God's Book: the book God wants us to read in order for God to become real to us, to enter a relationship with us that begins now, and never ends.

AND Over the years God has used the Bible to do this for millions of people. This week and yesterday in our nation there were two great funerals! --celebrations of life and faith in God: for Aretha Franklin and for Senator John McCain: both believers in Christ

On Thursday, correspondent Maeve Reston wrote these words about Sen. McCain's faith:

She shares that Sen. McCain rarely showed his faith in his public life, and refused to flaunt it on the campaign trail, but “John McCain spent a lot of time thinking about the moment when he would face his final judgment before God. Few knew that the Episcopalian could quote Scripture at length and served as the "room chaplain" to his fellow prisoners of war in North Vietnam.

His longtime friend Charlie Black, recalled

"When he was out of solitary his captors wouldn't give him a Bible, so he would come up with verses from memory that they could study together,"

In a 2008 interview about his faith, McCain told me that he was "very slow in maturing." He said he knew right from wrong, the Bible, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, and the tenets of his faith, but neglected them -- until that five-and-a-half year period in Hanoi.

(After Vietnam) he found a home at his wife, Cindy's church in Phoenix, where he came to love his pastor's message about grace: (said McCain): "we're all sinners, but we can benefit from God's grace if we recognize those sins and move forward."

The Scripture readings McCain chose for his services encapsulate the lessons he strove to impart: duty, sacrifice, honor, bi-partisanship, service to one's country and a commitment to a cause greater than one's self – (and God's grace), among them, 2 Timothy 4:6-8 read by his son Andrew:

*"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering,
and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight,*

*I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the
righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all
who have longed for his appearing."*

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/30/politics/mccain-faith-service/index.html>

For some of us it's the short *statements* of Scripture, like this one, that grab our attention. Or the short but powerful *promises*.

When I was 13 God's promise in Joshua and Hebrews that changed my life "I will never fail you nor forsake you" ; or in John 3:16 "God so loved the world – including me – that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"

OR then there are the brief *challenges* in Scripture: "Be thou strong and very courageous . . . be not frightened or dismayed" (Joshua 1:9). And the challenges found in the teaching of Jesus, giving us a life-long purpose when he commands his followers to "Go, and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), or tells them that "As the father sent me so send I you" (John 20:21). Or there are his forceful calls to heal our relationships: "Love God, love neighbor, love one another, and then: LOVE YOUR ENEMY!! PRAY FOR THEM!! (Luke 10:27, John 13:34; Matthew 5:43-48)

Or maybe it's the example of Jesus that impacts our lives: Washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1-20), or marching to his death with dignity (Luke 23:26-31)

Or maybe it's the longer passages that grab us:

- the theology of Paul in the Epistles
- Or, our maker's instructions for life embodied in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5)
- Or the personal piety and comfort in the 150 Psalms
- Or the wisdom of the Proverbs

For different people, Scripture touches and influences them in different ways, and is powerful. But what I want to suggest this morning is that

- Knowing the bits and pieces of Scripture is just a start
- Our ultimate goal should be to know the context, the bigger picture, the bigger story, believing that it is OUR story (just as Alexander the Great did with the Iliad).

This is a way of understanding Scripture that we see "inside" the scripture itself, in our passages today in Deuteronomy 5.

In Deuteronomy 5, when Moses shares the ten commandments, and indicates that resting on the Sabbath Day is not just a commandment about worshiping God, but about treating your slaves (your employees) and your animals, and your immigrants, well – those on the under-belly of society – he gives a reason:

¹²Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.

¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹⁴But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work— you, or your son or your daughter,

And then he adds. . .

1. or your male or female slave,
2. or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock,

3. or the resident alien (refugee, immigrant) in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

But why? Why this extension to the powerless?

Well you have to know and remember the story of the Exodus to know why!

v. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,
and the Lord your God brought you out from there
with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm;
therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

This, of course was literally true for the first generation of Israelites: they were slaves, and God noticed them, cared for them in their powerlessness, and delivered them. But what about the next generation – for whom Deuteronomy was actually written at the end of Moses’ life – OR for US?

Well that’s the point! For Scripture to live, to function, to transform,
we must believe that THEIR story is OURS TOO!

We weren’t there literally; we weren’t slaves, literally, BUT WE WERE!

This is our family story, and this is the God of our family. And the God who heard their cries in slavery, is the same God today who hears the cry of those who are powerless – over whom we now wield power. SO, quite literally, for God’s sake, treat each other as you would want to be treated if you were in their shoes – which except for the grace of God, you would be.

(Oh My! How the history of our nation would have been different if those who claimed to believe the Bible had believed that!)

²²Remember that YOU -- were a slave in the land of Egypt;
. . . we were there . . .
therefore I am commanding you to do this

In other words, it’s not just the commandments or the promises or the pithy sayings that are to shape us (though they are), but we’re to be shaped by “the Story” itself, the larger story, and for that to happen, we need to READ it until we grow in our ability to carry it not just in our hands, but in our heads!

Let me end with a story! I have to admit: some of the stories in the Bible are hard to understand, or hard to explain why they are there in the book. For me – that’s ok! I have no problem accepting the fact that they may not be for me right now, but for someone somewhere, they are exactly what they need.

Let me tell you a story about that:

In 2015, Jerome Copulsky, a Prof of religion at Goucher College, wrote an article in The Atlantic about the “Value in Teaching the Bible in Prison.” He writes:

I’m a professor of philosophy and religious studies, but on this night, my classroom is at the Maryland Correctional Institution at Jessup, as part of the Goucher Prison Education Partnership. The half-dozen students in my “Introduction to the Hebrew Bible” course are all in the classroom by the time I stumble in with my bundle of books clutched in my arms a little after 6 p.m.

The passage we are reading is in 1st Kings – and details an attempted palace coup. Israel’s great monarch, King David, has grown old and frail; he lies shivering in his bed.

One of his sons, Adonijah son of Haggith, observing his father’s decline, decides to seize the throne. He recruits his father’s military commander, Joab, and Abiathar the priest to his cause, and arranges a massive sacrificial feast to declare himself king, inviting his new supporters, his brothers, and the men of Judah. He does not summon his half-brother Solomon (DR: the primary claimant to the throne)

“Hey, Professor J!” one of my students says, rising from his chair, “What’s up?” He thrusts out his hand to shake mine. Sekwan Merritt gives me a fist bump as I pass by. “This Bible,” he says, shaking his head in a kind of circle as he speaks, “it’s like, it’s like a book about Mafia, man,” he continues.

I can feel the grin creeping across my face. And I’m sure that they can notice it. I can see where this is going—and it’s going perfectly.

“Okay,” I say. “Explain it to me.”

Merritt begins to present. “The whole story’s about power and deceit,” he says. His casual manner of speaking masks a keen intelligence. I’ve learned not to underestimate him. He told me he aspires to be a community organizer when he gets out; I imagine he could run the show.

“I mean, there’s even a hit list!” he adds, referring to the dark instructions imparted from father to son in one of the passages.

“Yup,” I reply. “That’s all there.”

“It just doesn’t seem all that holy,” a student says.

His age is indistinct—I guess he’s probably somewhere in his 30s.

“Who says it should be?” chimes in TJ Young from his seat by a table at the perimeter of the room. (I can always count on TJ for a healthy dose of skepticism.) He and the others had truly understood the opening chapters of 1 Kings, the last days of the reign of King David.

Then Merritt has a suggestion: “It’s what’s called on the street a ‘soft lean’,” he says, offering his own gloss on the pressure Adonijah exerted on his siblings when he invites them to his feast—one that is both a bribe and a not-so-veiled threat.

The others agree with this interpretation, and the discussion now turns to the correspondences between the biblical story and life on the street—how muscle is displayed in both venues. The guys describe their previous experiences, explaining the manner in which gangs operate to gain and hold on to their turf, the ways in which one makes sure a competitor is aware of his dominance.

When the Bible tells the story of the succession after King David it provides a straightforward portrayal of the brutal realities of power’ it refuses to sugarcoat the struggle and is willing to show even its heroes in a darkly realistic light. In doing

this – the Bible speaks of things that my students in the detention center could immediately understand and relate to -- their attention is riveted . . .

(slightly edited for reading from

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/teaching-the-bible-in-prison/410014/>

And while some stories may not be riveting to you, if you read enough, there'll be some, and before you know it, you'll realize this is MY STORY – the story through which we see the world, and act within it ; like Alexander the Great! As Martin Puchner wrote:

Homer's epic has been a foundational text for the Greeks for generations. For Alexander, it acquired the status of an almost sacred text, which is why he carried it with him on his campaign. It is what texts, especially foundational ones, do: *They change the way we see the world and also the way we act upon it. This was certainly the case with Alexander. He was induced not only to read and study this text, but also to reenact it. Alexander, the reader, put himself into the story . . .*

And we have the privilege of finding our true lives by “putting ourselves into” a far greater story than Alexander. May God give us grace and the will to do this.

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