

## Four of the Strangest Books of the Bible

### I. Ezekiel

Texts: Revelation 10:8-11, Ezekiel 3:1-11

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*"He said to me, 'O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.'" Ezekiel 3:1*

Billy Collins, former United States Poet Laureate and English Professor, has written a poem about his experience of teaching poetry to undergraduate students. It is appropriately titled "Introduction to Poetry,"

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.<sup>1</sup>

All too often, I fear, this is how we preachers treat the word of God. We study the text and search for *the one thing* that it means. We use language like, "what Jesus really meant to say was..." assuming that if only Jesus were as smart as we are, he would have been a little more direct. Rather than allow the scripture to speak its sacred message through us, we tie it to a chair and torture a confession out of it. Before you become too critical of us, I must hasten to add that our intentions are innocent. We do this out of a sneaking suspicion that no one reads

the Bible anymore and therefore the congregation needs us to explain in simple terms what it means.

The great 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish revivalist preacher Andrew Bonar used to shame his congregation by asking them what their response would be when they arrived in heaven and, in the course of conversation, the prophet Ezekiel asked what they thought of his book? Most, of course, would have to admit that they had simply never gotten around to reading the strange story.

For the next four Sundays, your pastors will be preaching on Biblical books that don't get much attention in the contemporary church. Our goal is not to reveal the singular meaning of these complex texts, but to encourage all of us to look again at neglected parts of the sacred scriptures. Today the story is of the prophet Ezekiel, surely one of the strangest characters in the Bible. During his distinguished prophetic career, Ezekiel is commanded to build and destroy a model city, to lie on his left side for 390 days followed by 40 days on his right side, and to cut his hair and beard using a sword. And, in our passage this morning, Ezekiel is told by God to eat a scroll.

The Book of Ezekiel is written to a community that has lost its direction. The people of Israel have fallen into idol worship and have abandoned the commandments requiring justice and equity. They have chosen to worship wood and stone rather than the living God, and it is Ezekiel's call to be the mouthpiece of the God they have left behind. He must speak painful words of judgment to his own people, as they are taken into exile in Babylon. Once in exile, he is called to speak words of hope and restoration to a despondent people. Through strange symbolic actions and long speeches, Ezekiel is called to communicate the very word of God.

It may be tempting, with our modern tendencies toward psychoanalysis, to sign Ezekiel up for some testing. Indeed a number of writers through the centuries have attempted to diagnose his condition—the German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers suggested that Ezekiel was schizophrenic.<sup>ii</sup> But to focus on Ezekiel's mental health is to miss the deeper message behind these actions, which were powerful symbols to the people of Israel. The image of eating a scroll before prophesying to the people was in fact so powerful that it is repeated a second time in the Bible, in another strange book, Revelation. There, John of Patmos is given a scroll to eat before the angel of the Lord gives him his vocational instructions: “you must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.” **Digesting** the word of God is a necessary prerequisite to the fulfilling the call. And while the particular action may belong in the list of strangest moments in the Bible, I believe that the symbol is worth considering in the church today.

It has become commonplace in mainline protestant churches to speak of the Biblical illiteracy of most people in our culture. Reading of the Bible is no longer a

part of the fabric of our lives the way it was for folks in previous generations. While most of us have Bibles, they have become in many ways relics, artifacts of a bygone era. This is, of course, not true in all circles of American society, and certainly not true in many other parts of the world, where Christian devotion is increasing at an even faster rate than its decline in the western world. But I do think it safe to say that, for many of our friends and neighbors (perhaps even ourselves if we are honest), the words and stories of scripture do not hold the high place of honor that they once did.

There are many reasons for this, just as there is no one cause for the dramatic decrease in professed faith among young people in the United States. For some, the ancient texts of the Old and New Testament are simply too ancient in a culture that chiefly prizes what is new. Two weeks ago, I used a phone upgrade earned by my fidelity to AT&T Wireless to purchase an iPhone 3G (I'll show you after the service). When I told the customer service professional my plan, she seemed surprised; "Do you know about the iPhone 3GS? It comes out on Friday—you might want to wait a few days for the newer one." I went ahead with my purchase, now aware that the brand new phone I had been waiting for would be outdated by the weekend. We are fascinated with the newest, the shiniest, the most contemporary, and the Bible does not fit the paradigm.

Others in our time have put their Bibles on the shelf for more personal reasons. Some were deeply wounded by the words of scripture as interpreted by their parents, their pastors, their teachers, their churches. I also think that there is a fairly sizable group of Bible avoiders who are afraid that the Bible might actually say what they think it says, or what they have heard from others. Partially due to the success of the media strategy of Fundamentalist Christianity in recent decades, many non-fundamentalist Christians have tossed the Bible aside, convinced that it reinforces a viewpoint that they reject. The approach is something like, "let them have the Bible, we'll take the New York Times," which is precisely the opposite of Reformed Theologian Karl Barth's advice to preachers that we enter the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.<sup>iii</sup>

All of these seem likely causes for the lack of Bible reading in 21<sup>st</sup> Century American mainline churches, and they also point to what is perhaps an almost-too-obvious answer. If we want to discover the contemporary significance of the scriptures, if we want to overcome trauma from past abuses of the Bible, if we want to know what the Bible actually says and how it speaks to us, the only thing to do is **read the Bible!** We have to take our Bibles off the shelf, dust them off, and read them. Reading the Bible might just be the most revolutionary and rewarding action a Christian can take.

The great scandal and gift of the Protestant Reformation was the outrageous belief that the Bible, in the hands of the people, would change the world. Perhaps the best way to recover reading of the Bible in our churches and our homes is not

more Bible drills but a sharing of our passion and love for the Bible and how it has changed us.

I will start. I was fortunate enough to grow up hearing and loving the stories of the Bible. Like any good story, they were able to transport me from my bedroom floor to spellbinding places like the deck of a huge ark filled with every kind of animal I could imagine (the kids and adults who participated in Bible School this week can identify). When I studied the Bible in Religion classes in college, I discovered the most incredible power of scripture: its ability to describe and re-describe the world in which we live. I read the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus and found myself challenged to be more, to love wider and deeper. Then I read the letters of Paul and uncovered a startling fact—these letters did not make sense *to* me, they made sense *of* me. More than any other reason, I went to Seminary because I had fallen in love with the scriptures. And, perhaps naively, I believed that my love for the Bible would be contagious in the church. I still believe that the word of God has the ability to transform lives, revive churches, inspire movements, and remake the world. But first, we must eat the scroll. We must read the word, study the word, live the word, love the word, proclaim the word, and teach the word to the next generation.

To a people who had lost their way and their faith, Ezekiel opens his mouth and speaks the word of the Lord. To a community persecuted by the empire and marginalized in the culture, John of Patmos records his vision of the word of God. Are they enough? These words and phrases and expressions and stories. Is it enough? This sweet-as-honey scroll on the lips of the prophet?

The question is left open at the end of our passage from Ezekiel. God's final command to the prophet is uncertain "say to them, 'thus says the Lord God'; whether they hear or refuse to hear." Maybe it will be enough. Maybe not. The point is that the word must be spoken. It is buried deep in the heart of the prophet and he has no choice but to speak. It is what the apostle Paul called in Greek, *ananke*, obligation, destiny, compulsion, necessity. We speak because, having been spoken to, we have no choice. Ezekiel knew the feeling, his heart burning within him as the scroll was digested.

Have you ever known anyone who was transformed by the words of scripture? I have. Her name is Deanna and she is an inmate at Metro State Women's Prison, where she will be until 2013. She came to prison an angry, broken, depressed, twenty year-old woman who had endured too much in her short life. She fell in with the wrong crowd until one of the older inmates, an orderly in the chaplain's office, got hold of her. The mentoring began slowly and with much resistance, but when they opened the words of scripture together something like scales fell from Deanna's eyes. She found her bearings and her life's purpose. She read the words of scripture and found there a balm for what ailed her. When I met Deanna she had begun her own Bible Study for young women at Metro.

It doesn't always happen that quickly or that dramatically, but it does always happen. Last March, when my grandfather died, the family gathered in the house that has been my grandparents' home for fifty years. We sat and shared stories and ate lovingly prepared lunchmeat sandwiches. Poppa's chair was empty and I walked over and sat down. Beside the chair where he sat for decades, and for his last week of life, there is a small table. On the table were two books: his large-print Bible and a small devotional. At that moment, I knew exactly what made my grandfather the faithful, loving, compassionate, and kind man he was. He had eaten the scroll and it had become a part of him. Slowly but steadily, the word had become him. Those who are well fed on a steady diet of God's word have a glow that is simply unmistakable. You've seen it.

Last week, two of our church leaders who have been going through the congregation's archives gave me a sermon titled, "We Believe in the Bible." The sermon was preached on November 19, 1961 by Dr. Arthur Vann Gibson, longtime pastor of this congregation and leading light of Southern Presbyterianism. The sermon is excellent, a meditation on the meaning of the Bible in Christian life. It includes these lines: "The word of God can be trusted. You can bet your life on the truth, and the message you find within its pages."<sup>iv</sup> Wise words from one who had tasted the scroll for himself.

After delivering one of the last lectures of his life, the great Karl Barth agreed to take one question from the audience at a Chicago seminary. The question was this: "What is the greatest theological insight you have ever had?" It was a preposterous question asked to one who had written tens of thousands of pages full of theological insight. The elderly man closed his eyes and thought for a few moments, then smiled. "The greatest theological insight I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."<sup>v</sup> That's the message. That's the truth. That's what it says. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> Billy Collins, *Introduction to Poetry*, available through the Library of Congress at <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/001.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> David J. Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993. p. 33.

<sup>iii</sup> As told by William H. Willimon. See forward to Fleming Rutledge's *The Bible and the New York Times*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998.

<sup>iv</sup> Thanks to Richard Brownlee and Philip Hawkins for sharing Dr. Vann Gibson's sermon, which was published in leaflet form by the Protestant Hour in 1961.

<sup>v</sup> From Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story: Life Lessons from Unexpected Plans and Unlikely People*, Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Press, 2000. pp. 22-23.