

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book
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When I came out to my parents when I was 19, they called me home from college. After dinner, and the dishes, they called me into the living room, the room only used for visitors and family discussions. My dad had his Bible out and opening it, he told me of the sin of homosexuality - thus opening a long gap in our relationship - I thought he loved the Bible more than me. *

The bible has been thus for us, used against, or we have used it against others for judgment, to decide who is in and out. Is there anything scarier than a white person coming toward us with a leather-bound, gold leafed bible in their hand?

The Bible as an object has been used in many ways - as doorstops, to prop up a projector to just the right height. Family Bibles were once such a household item in Protestant households, and maybe Catholic households too, as a place to record births, marriages and deaths, that when I worked for the Social Security Administration, the family Bible was listed in our government guidelines as evidence of birth, marriage or death in lieu of a government issued certificate.

For some, the Bible as an object is sacred and is venerated in various ways. In Judaism, the Bible is never put on the floor. In the Catholic Church, Episcopal, Lutheran churches, there is a gospel book held high in sacred procession, sometimes surrounded by candles, sometimes by incense - the gospel lesson read for the congregation in the middle of the people. In our own congregation, we offer the option to stand during the reading of the gospel, to acknowledge the special status of the gospel in the life of our congregation, but also it's a chance to take a break from sitting - to wake up.

In some places and some times, the oral scripture - the scripture read aloud has been and is the people's only access to the Bible - for reasons of literacy, or power wielding, or for the pleasure of being read to - the mind of the ear processes information differently than the mind of the eye. It's why we ask our liturgists to read the Psalm like a poem, and the gospel like a story, so that the ear's mind can receive the scripture.

In the church I grew up in, every child had a Bible. The Bible was often the first book we owned that was our own - not shared with siblings or parents. We considered it lucky if the Bible we received or later bought ourselves had a zipper - such fun to slide that zipper around the corner of that book - and had pictures in it of Jesus holding a lamb, or standing at the door (of our hearts) to knock, a picture of the head of John

the Baptist held up by his hair - and always a picture of Jesus on the cross, with the thieves crucified on either side, and a glimpse of the back of women huddled together in pastel hijab and long dresses, looking up to Jesus there on the cross. I found it comforting to find the words of Jesus highlighted in red because the bible seemed to me to be a lot of words unconnected to my bicycle riding, ukulele learning, school bus riding, Gilligan's Island watching self - the red lettering of Jesus words indicated to me there was perhaps a personality lurking there among the commandments in the bible, commandments such as keep your knees together, act like a lady, and don't talk back. In my church and community, everybody had a bible, and the bible was special and common as dirt.

What about what's in the Bible - what do we do with all that stuff in the Bible - and how is it organized? Do we have to obey all those commandments - and what are they and what if we don't, and who gets to say, and is God the enforcer, God the Terrible, God the Smiter, or is it God the Lover, or God like some crazy abusive parent, God the lover and also God, the irrationally pissed off, God the abusive enforcer. If that is so, then what are we doing here, holding this book?

This is my answer, and it's only mine - we will come to have our own answers, you and I, and as a congregation, our collective answer will be the breadth of our collective answers - there will be no one answer - for how could there be?

My answer is this - the Bible, in 39 Books in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible and 27 books in the New Testament or the Christian Bible, a total 66 books (or collection of pamphlets as Marcus Borg calls them) are the stories, the realities of the people in response to the idea of Divine Presence, a particular strain of Divine Presence, a mostly monotheistic presence - though that seems to be an ideal and not a reality.

Like the Sioux Indians in the Americas, like the Hindus in Asia, like every organization of humanity, our Bible contains a creation story. This is how we explain what happened before we got here that helps us make sense of this reality here.

In less cosmic reality, but in the vein of the universality of humanity, if I may claim universality for a moment, the Bible is full of the stories of people like us - people who long for children, but can't or don't have them, who have suffered unspeakable harm to the bodies of women, children and men. There are stories of people longing for too much or too little.

For example, the story of David in Hebrew Scripture is this. David fell in love with a beautiful woman - who had a husband, so David sent the husband to the battlefield, to the front lines and had him killed. David realized the awful thing he had done and pleaded to be forgiven.

This is a short telling, for such intense longing for another and the cloud of insanity that lowers, the harm of stepping out on a relationship, the mayhem of murder is always a much longer story. You can read the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel, and in the Psalms. David is desolate because of the harm he wrought - the Psalms attributed to David in this time mirror our own anguish. I lie upon my bed day and night and I can't stop crying. My bed is soaked with tears.

In our scripture are the stories of those who fought against outrageous oppression, Esther, Judith, Deborah, Gideon, Jesus.

We have the story of Mary, a child bride, a child mother - who had to get married - lest she be suffer in life long poverty, the property of no one.

In scripture is the story of the mystical experience of Paul - an experience so sweet and compelling, he laid aside everything to try to make sense of the epiphany of God in the person of Jesus that he spent the entirety of his life trying to follow this vision, interpret Judaism for Gentiles.

In fact, the first seven books of our Christian scripture are not our gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but are letters Paul wrote to these burgeoning groups of Jews in synagogues outside Jerusalem, these gatherings that would later come to be called Christians. Our Gospel, instead of being foundational, are actually oral stories of Jesus passed around for 30 or 90 years after the death of Jesus, ways of telling what they might have been about to forget. They are stories and letters not writing to prescribe our behavior but written to describe and make sense of what had happened, what was happening. As Marcus Borg says, the Christian Scripture was not written to us or for us, but to real people

The gospel of Jesus was so radical, equality of women, economic justice, a spiritual way of reacting to oppression so mighty that the people's and the communities psychics were fractured, and Paul tried to convey all this - abundant life anyway.

There's more, I could go on and on. But you can see what is appealing here - 5000 years of oral, then written testimony of people like us who are trying to figure out how to live as spiritual beings have a human experience, as Paul Tillich says.

Reading the Bible is like a 12 step meeting where you sit there and listen and you think as you listen - you did that!?! And then you did that?! What? Oh, that's just like me or I'd never do that or I'd like to not do that.

It's a spiritual program we're working here.

But we have some decisions we get to make here, as individuals and also as a congregation, and we get to make these decisions over and over, day by day or week by week.

Beloved, I recommend the Bible to us - not so that we may be oppressed but so that we may come to decide if we would like to be oppressed by those determined to shame us, judge us, harm us. I recommend we use the Bible instead of it or they using us.

I recommend the Bible to us because the work there is dense - no one should read the Bible solely, alone. There are layers and layers of accreted history, meaning, realities. The Bible isn't set up like a novel with a sweet ending - but there is wisdom in there, and solace. When my father in law lay dying, I read out loud to him the Psalms, starting with the first one and ending with Psalm 96, the Psalm read at his funeral - the one he chose for his funeral.

I recommend the Bible because it was the book of some our ancestors, the ones we want to disown, the ones we want to claim, the ones to whom we are really attached anyway, related by blood or not.

I recommend the Bible because the stories there in offer a great array of the ways possible for a spiritual life - and those possibilities don't depend on getting life right, on being perfect, but on living real human lives pushing and pulling on God and on each other, bending and twisting as we do, but trying desperately to follow our longing for God, the longing that is our connection to the Divine.

Christianity is not the only path, not in the world, nor even of the people in this congregation, but it is the path here at Hope Central. Christianity, Informed by the wisdom of other religions systems, is the decision we have made for ourselves - to follow the way of those who have gone before us, recorded in the Bible and since, to bring reason to scripture and history, and, in the words of the preamble of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, "to affirm the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God."

This is our work.

*That relationship has long been repaired. I thank God for my father, who was and is a pastor himself.