



We Are Part of a Long Amazing Story

TEXT
Luke 4:14-21

April 29, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

My point is simple today. We want to want what God wants, so it helps to know God's story. It's our story too.

Jesus went home, to Nazareth, to his home synagogue. They handed him the scroll, and he read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. ... He has sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, to set the prisoners free, to open the eyes of the blind and to proclaim God's promised day."

These words from Isaiah were written during the Babylonian exile, about 500 years before Jesus walked into that synagogue. Jesus was reading from the Bible in his day. The Bible was important to him — because in these old words, he finds his calling. He finds his name written in the story of God's work of redemption in the world. He says, "Today this good word is fulfilled in your hearing."

Is that still true for us? Can these old words written thousands of years ago, can they live in us today?

The church has given us this book to aid in curating our hearts to want more clearly

what God wants for us and for the world.

For that reason, I value the Bible, but I also know it's complicated. It's complicated because it was written a long time ago in different cultures. In one sense, it wasn't written for us; it was written for those who have gone before. It's complicated because it sometimes argues with itself. Deuteronomy promises if you are faithful, things will go well for you, but Job knows firsthand that even the most righteous will suffer.

It's complicated because there are too many times through the ages, and in our own time, when people have used the Bible to shame or injure or even destroy their neighbors. There are many parts of this book that are not kind to women. There are parts that justify slavery and oppression. There are parts that are not kind to LGBT folks. There are parts that condemn folks who practice other faiths. There are parts where God appears to rejoice in violence and in the destruction of the unrighteous.

And in candor, when we read these portions of scripture, it feels a bit outdated, doesn't

it? It seems that we have outgrown the wisdom of the old days.

We need a faith for today. The world is changing all around us. We are facing issues and challenges that the writers of scripture could not have possibly imagined. We need a faith for today. We don't need out-of-date wisdom.

Can the Bible be fulfilled in our hearing? Can it live in us today?

I have told you before of my grandmother. She stitched her life together with little proverbs and sayings, which she often offered as advice to me. But the truth is, most of them made no sense to me. If I had misbehaved — this is hypothetical, you know — she would threaten to "jerk a knot in my head." I don't know what that means. She would say, "Why are you going around your elbow to get to your thumb?" What? One I heard more than a few times was "Tom, there is very little educational value in the second kick of a mule." And of course, there was, "Bless your heart." That's South Carolina for "You must be the dumbest child I have ever known."

She would often say, "If I could, I would give you my

heart for the hurting times.” She had a saying for everything. But most of it felt confusing or irrelevant. I think the Bible can seem that way.

So, we should notice that Jesus needs scripture to guide him. He goes to the synagogue, and he finds his own name written in these ancient words from Isaiah. He wraps himself in these words and says, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus is curating his own heart with scripture.

How does that happen?

Brian Blount, president of Union Seminary in Virginia — where our own Essie Reinke and Owen Gray graduated last year — says it is not enough for us to worry about what the biblical text means; we must pay attention to what the text does in us.¹ I think that’s right. I have learned that scripture is not just something we understand; it is something we stand under. It shapes our living. And when it does, it becomes the word of God for us.

Several years ago, I read A.J. Jacobs’ book *A Year of Living Biblically*. Jacobs, as a project, commits himself to follow the Bible as literally as possible for one year. He finds Leviticus 19:27, which makes it clear he can no longer shave his beard. As a result, he is mistaken for Moses or Abraham Lincoln or even ZZ Top.

Now I must say Jacobs does not approach scripture in the same fashion that I do. He believes that these writings are to be lived literally. I advocate reading the scriptures serious-

ly, but not literally. Nevertheless, I was not surprised to see that Jacobs finds himself changing. He begins to value things he had not valued before, to long for things he had previously ignored. Psalm 34 says, “Keep your tongue from evil.” He discovers that “refraining from speaking negative thoughts results in having fewer negative thoughts.”²

He begins to pray. He says, “I still can’t wrap my brain around the notion that God would change his mind because we ask him to. And yet ... I love these prayers. ... Every night I pray for others for ten minutes — a friend about to undergo a cornea operation, my great-aunt whose sweet husband just died. ... It’s ten minutes where it’s impossible to be self-centered.”³

“A lot of my friends,” he writes, “expect me to speak like a walking King James Bible. They want me ... to spout words like *thou* and *woe unto* and *whosoever shall*. ... A phone call begins, “Verily, I ask thee, would you like to meet us for pizza?” ... I play along, “Yea, I shall rejoice in a feast of pizza. ...” But then he says, “Speaking biblically requires a far more radical change than raising my diction a few notches. It requires a total switch in the content of my conversation: no lying, no complaining, no gossip.”⁴

He was finding his name in the story, and the word was being fulfilled today. He discovered that the Bible is not simply a word we understand; it is a word we stand under.

Of course, what happened first is he had to study the book.

If we want to want what God wants, it makes sense that we would pay attention to God’s story. That’s why what you are doing right now is important. Because every Sunday in worship, we take time to read and stand under these words, trusting that they might be fulfilled in our hearing. That’s why every week there are opportunities to study with others.

I would encourage this: Every year, invest some time in the study of scripture. Some of you do this every week, but most do not. But for all of us, pick an experience at least once a year and invest in learning something about this faith that you don’t already know. Take a class, go on a retreat. Join a Village Connect group. It matters, because once you learn the story, you will discover the words come to life in you.

Dr. Lyman looked at us and said, “It’s a girl.” And she slapped at the air, and I cried. Carol cried. And then the doctor said, “Cindy, how about come get this baby.” Cindy was the nurse, and it seemed a normal thing for her to do. So, it took a minute for me to realize that they were working with her rather feverishly. She wasn’t breathing. They say that babies do that all the time when they are first born. But that didn’t matter in the moment. She began to turn blue. From her head to her toes, she was blue. I prayed, “God make her

breathe. I haven't even said her name yet, make her breathe. Give her my breath. Make her breathe."

She did. And she was fine. But me, I have never been the same. And the first thing I thought was, "Little one, if I could, I would give you my heart for the hurting times."

Sometimes a word lies dormant, powerless, as if it speaks no truth. And then something happens, and that old word rises up and comes to life as the only way to make sense of the new experience. Scripture works like that.

It's not just what it means; it's what it does in us. The grass withers and the flower fades, but when the word shapes our living, it stands forever. I have seen this happen in people. You have too.

When I was a young man, I asked my father once why he tithed. He has always given 10 percent of his income to the church. He said, "Well, it began because it's what my faith taught me. It was biblical. And over time, it became a very important practice in my life."

I'm thinking of Gordon McClellan, a former pastor with us here at Village. Gordon struggled with a speech impediment. He said he couldn't imagine being a pastor and preaching with his speech struggle, but then he read in scripture where God promised, "In your weakness, I will reveal my strength." Gordon said, "I decided to see if that's true, so I became a pastor, and I discovered that the word of God can be trusted."

These old words written to some other people, by the Spirit of God, meet us in the particular circumstances of our lives, and they become the only teaching that makes sense, that gives hope, that helps us to stand tall in the storm.

We want to want what God wants. So, it helps to know God's story. This is also our story. In this book, we learn ... in the beginning, God ... that God knelt down in the clay and shaped the dust and breathed in the breath of life.

God said to Abram, "Go to the land that I will show you."

And God said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go."

And God said to his children, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt; you shall have no other gods before me."

In this book, we learn that God desires justice to roll down like waters and for swords to be beaten into plowshares.

We are promised, when we stumble in the dark valley, God will be our shepherd.

And that the very heart of God was laid in a manger, and angels sang for joy.

And he broke bread to feed 5000 one day, and on another, he broke bread that was his body.

He promised the kingdom of God — the promised day of God — is surely coming.

He opened the eyes of the blind and healed us in the broken places.

And when they killed him, he rose from the dead. And he promised, "I will be with you always."

That's the story of this book that the church has passed from generation to generation, with the promise: Take this, because your name, too, is written in here. Your name is written in the long amazing story of what God is doing in God's world. And this word continues in you.

¹Brian Blount, *Go Preach* (2005), p. 179

²A.J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (2007), p. 157

³*Ibid.*, p. 128

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 99

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.