

**The Word of the Lord?
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
Oct. 20, 2013
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**Texts:
Jer. 31:27-34
II Tim 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8**

[Context: In the verses that precede the text, the author of this letter is reminding Timothy that he lives in a dangerous world. People are sinful and broken, arrogant and selfish. The author was particularly afraid that people with wrong religious ideas would trick innocent, naïve people and pull them away from the Christian faith into new but false beliefs. The author reminded Timothy that Paul the Apostle was a good role model. He patiently taught the truth even in the midst of persecution. Persecution will happen. Dangerous ideas will continue to threaten the faith, but Timothy should ...]

This summer we saw the musical *The Book of Mormon* in Chicago. It is very funny. It is kind of raunchy. It is brutally honest about some of the strengths and weaknesses of religious belief. And it raised some profound questions about the books that we consider to be the word of the Lord.

The play begins with a number of Mormon missionaries ringing doorbells. “Hello. My name is Elder Price. And I would like to share with you the most amazing book. It has so many awesome parts. You simply won’t believe how much this book can change your life.” Such confidence!

But the two missionaries who were sent to Uganda found that their amazing book was not well received. The stories about Joseph Smith did not seem relevant to people who had been devastated by AIDS and civil war. One of the Africans wondered why their book

was so *weird*. So one of the missionaries did some creative interpretation to try to make the Book of Mormon more relevant to the African cultural context. This got him in some trouble!

I've spent several months grappling with some of the stories about women in the Old Testament. And I resonate with the guy who wondered why the texts were so weird!

This week I needed to decide what women I would preach on in November. I was trying to avoid the stories that are in the lectionary. So I ran through the list of other really interesting stories about women, but then had to say, Not this one. It's too much about sex. Not this one. It's too violent. Not this one. It is both sexual and violent! So many of the stories about women seem to be R rated. They are not appropriate for Sunday morning worship. It can be difficult to find any good news in them. So why are these stories in the Bible when they don't seem very edifying or useful? Are they the word of the Lord?

The Bible, the book we love, contains some pretty awful stories. Slavery. Genocide. Vengeance. Jephthah sacrificing his daughter. God telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Women valued only for their ability to bear sons. Women treated badly. I was particularly struck by a story in Judges 19 in which one horrible story of sexual violence leads to a massacre where thousands of people are killed. Uplifting story, right? And yet while I was working on this story, violence was escalating in Syria. The horrible stories in the Bible are often painfully relevant.

But they are still not easy to hear or to read . . . or to preach. The lectionary avoids most of the worst stories. Maybe that is wise. It keeps us from being offended by some of the most difficult passages in the Bible. But it also keeps us from grappling with the fact that the Bible is not only weird, it can be disturbing and even horrifying in some of its stories.

Some critics say that the fact that the Bible includes all this awful stuff means that it really is not a book worth reading at all. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a 19th century feminist who wrote a commentary on all the passages about women. She was horrified by most of the stories because they put women and men in such a bad light. Why would you let children read them? She wrote: “We need an expurgated edition of most of the books called holy before they are fit to place in the hands of the rising generation. Parts of the Bible are so true, so grand, so beautiful, that it is a pity it should have been bound in the same volume with sentiments and descriptions so gross and immoral.”

It can be difficult to simply dismiss the difficult texts, especially in the light of the epistle for today. The author gives this advice to Timothy. Continue in the faith that you have been taught. Value the tradition. Pay attention to the scriptures, by which he meant the Old Testament. And then he wrote something which has provoked all kinds of conversation and conflict about the Bible. “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

The Greek word translated “inspired” here literally means God-breathed. There is a painting by Caravaggio of Matthew writing his gospel, and there is a dove sitting on his shoulder whispering in his ear. Some people think that inspiration means that God told the authors exactly what to write, and that everything in the Bible is there because God approves it. All Scripture is absolutely inspired, true, and applicable for today. So if the Bible affirms slavery, then slavery is acceptable. If the Bible says women should not teach in church, then women should not teach in church. If the Bible commands total destruction of other nations, that is legitimate advice for current foreign policy.

But the author isn’t really making a point about the authority of Scripture here. He is telling Timothy that Scripture is useful. It is relevant. But we might ask, how can these difficult passages like Jephthah and his daughter be useful? How can they be the word of the Lord when they are so offensive? Why should we read these passages?

Sometimes the Bible tells us what NOT to do. It tells us that keeping vows may not be as important as preserving life. It tells us to look for other ways than warfare to solve problems. The people in the Bible were not super saints who always did the right thing. They were often confused, and they made some very bad choices. We are supposed to learn from their mistakes, not repeat them.

For example, in II Samuel 13 there is a powerful, horrifying story of one of King David’s sons, who rapes his half sister Tamar. It is so painful to read. There is no good news there. No redemption. But the story shows a misuse of power. It shows how victims get

silenced. And how sometimes people are allowed to get away with bad behavior. These dynamics continue to be true in stories we can read about today. And we are supposed to learn from their mistakes, not repeat them.

The Bible was written by human beings, who may have been inspired by God in some ways, but were also products of their own culture. Violence was acceptable. Polygamy was acceptable. Slavery was acceptable. But 2000 years later, our lives are different. The advice Paul gave in the first century needs to be interpreted in the light of the 21st century.

Does the “word of the Lord” mean that everything in the Bible reflects God’s will for us today? In the 1960s, the RCA was fighting about this issue of biblical interpretation, and the Theology Commission developed a helpful phrase about the meaning of inspiration. It said that the Bible was inspired in “all it intends to teach.” The creation story did not intend to teach science. The instructions to kill the Canaanites were not intended to teach foreign policy. The advice for women to remain silent in a particular situation was not intended to teach that they could never speak. Scripture is useful, not because it always tells us what exactly to do now, but it shows us how people have wrestled with issues of faith in the past.

When we say “the Word of the Lord” after reading Scripture, it doesn’t mean God approved of everything that happened in the Bible, or thinks it always shows the best way for us to live. “The Word of the Lord” doesn’t mean “you better believe this or else.” It

doesn't mean you are not a person of faith if you question or resist the ugly parts of Scripture. We should always be asking *how* this text is "the Word of the Lord" and what it means.

Finally, Scripture is useful because God continues to breathe through it. In the first chapter of Genesis God breathed into the chaos and brought creation to life. And God continues to make the Word of the Lord come alive for us and mean something.

Scripture is useful because it understands the human condition, our brokenness, our messiness, our desperate need for healing, for grace, for a better way.

When you read the whole story, it becomes more gracious, more open, more welcoming, less violent. God's passion and compassion shine through. God demonstrates deep care for the world and all its people. God uses fallible human beings and their stammering voices to communicate profound truth about God's justice, care and shalom. When all is said and done, God's good news has the last word. And it is good news for all.