



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Mythbusters: Biblical Literalism
Taking Scripture Seriously*

Deuteronomy 6.4–6

By Pastor Pam Reist

Message from February 24, 2019

777 South Mount Joy Street
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022
717-367-1000
www.ETOWNCOB.ORG

DEUTERONOMY 6.4–6

1

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

On the door jamb, in my office, there is a mezuzah that I got in Tel Aviv a few years ago when I traveled there with the denominational leadership team. It serves as a reminder to me of that significant trip to the Holy Lands, of the wonderful Palestinian and Israeli people that our group met there and a dream for peace on earth in that war-torn land. It also helps me to remember the passage of scripture featured on our bulletin cover. The decorative case of the mezuzah contains a tiny scroll of parchment called a klaf, which is inscribed with Hebrew verses from the Torah. These verses, found in Deuteronomy 6.4–6 in the Hebrew scriptures, are the Jewish prayer, the Shema. The Jewish people were instructed to **keep these words** in their hearts, to recite them to their children, to talk about them pretty much all the time and even bind them on their hands and foreheads. Keep these words...

And so as we come to this sermon about biblical literalism, or reading the bible literally, I've been thinking a lot about words and which words we are to keep.

Words, even everyday words, are funny things. Consider the following...

- Pulling one's leg—not literal
- It Clicked
- Head above water
- Guess... I got your back.

Hardly literal. We totally miss the meaning if we read them literally. Here are some other expressions, too.

- Escape by the skin... (Job 19.20)
- A drop in the bucket... (Isaiah 40.15)
- The apple of my eye (Deuteronomy 32.10)

2 These idioms have survived the centuries and translation from the original language. Words are funny things—sometimes they can just be like a fly in the ointment! (Ecclesiastes 10.1)

A nationwide survey by the Barna Group shows that many Americans might be skeptical about any number of things, but they remain confident that the most amazing stories in the Bible can be taken at face value. This survey shows that six well-known Bible stories are accepted as literal truth by an average of two out of three adults. The most widely embraced is the Easter story, including Jesus' bodily resurrection. The creation story, in which God created the universe in six days, was accepted as literally true by 60% of the population. We looked at that story a couple of weeks ago to better understand, given the explanations of modern science. Probably the most well-known bible story is Noah's ark. It is thought that between 73 and 87% of adults accept the Ark as a factual story, as if it were lifted from the front page of the New York Times with a roving reporter live from the scene, rain-gear and all. It is a story that doesn't add up to our scientific sensibilities and our experience of God. More about that later.

Biblical literalism typically goes hand in hand with an understanding of the Bible as the inerrant and infallible revelation of God. These two words, inerrant and infallible, claim that each and every statement of the original text is without error of any kind. The scriptures are dictated straight from God.

Nowhere, does the bible itself claim to be inerrant—in fact the word inerrant is not even found in the bible. At no place in its more than 30,000 verses does the Bible claim that it is factually accurate in terms of history, science, geography and all other matters. Jesus did not take scripture literally either. Or, as equally authoritative. Which explains why he frequently said "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..." Jesus quoted a teaching from the Hebrew scriptures and/or oral tradition that would have been very familiar to the original audience, and he brought a new level of consciousness to the

interpretation of that scripture. It's what author and theologian Marcus Borg calls a surplus of meaning.

The early Christian church did not embrace a literal understanding. Most Christians throughout history would not have read the bible literally. It's a relatively recent thing. The factual inerrancy of the Bible was first promoted just over 300 years ago, as a reaction to the Enlightenment, which ushered in modern science. It led to comparing truth with factuality—and the assumption that things are either factually true, or they aren't true at all. The early Christians—along with everyone else who lived before the advent of modernity, simply didn't imagine that for something to be true it had to be factually accurate.

And then, in the early part of the 20th century, a popular pamphlet about the fundamentals of Christianity made its way through the American church. It spawned a whole movement, fundamentalism, committed to the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture and other supposedly bedrock doctrines. It was only then that biblical literalism became part of mainstream Christianity. We have no reason to believe that the authors of the Bible ever imagined that what they were writing was somehow supernaturally guaranteed to be factually accurate. Rather, biblical authors wrote in order to be persuasive, hoping that by reading their witness, people would learn to know the love of God and the good news for all of God's creation. The bible was not written to us or for us, but within and for those ancient communities.

The truth is, that the Christian church does not serve us well. About half of American protestants belong to churches that teach a literal understanding of the Bible. Biblical Literalism is the most visible form of American Christianity today, proclaimed in fundamentalist and more conservative-evangelical denominations and in many megachurches. It dominates Christian television, radio and the Christian political right.

There have been many issues across the centuries that have divided the church in any number of ways. Currently, for us this is very personal—it's about justice and equality for

4

all, including same-sex marriage. For our United Methodist friends, this is timely as their bishops meet this very week—it is a critical juncture in their journey as well. But it is becoming clearer and clearer that same-sex marriage is not really the mitigating factor...what this is really about is how we view the bible and scriptural authority. Those who read the bible literally find texts that, when taken at face value...

- deny women the opportunity to preach.
- Believe that same-sex relationships sinful.
- And insist that Jesus is the only way to salvation, based on the heaven-and-hell framework that we'll hear about next week.

While these issues are contentious, the underlying difference is really about how we understand scripture. And it has become non-negotiable and threatens to divide us.

Here at Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren, we do take the bible seriously. God's word is completely true, but it is not necessarily literal. We believe that we, the church, are to gather and together study and discern the bible for its insights, its wisdom, its inspiration and direction.

- Not as a rule book to be taken literally.
- Not as a literal dictation of God's word.

We bring our best wisdom and discernment and experience to the bible's limited world view, its frequent ethical inconsistencies and its often contradictory teachings. And in the process, we find that surplus of meaning. When studying the bible, when digging for that surplus, I have never been disappointed. I find that I am inspired and convicted more than ever that this is a living and breathing word and, along with our UCC brothers and sisters, we find God is still speaking!

I've had some fun this week in my preparations. I remembered my very first seminary class—*Interpreting the Biblical Text*. Our assignment was to choose a passage of scripture and write a paper to interpret it, using two new tools—exegesis

and hermeneutics. Very simply put, exegesis is the careful, systematic study to discover the original, intended meaning of a passage, taking into consideration the context of the scripture then. It's mainly a historical task—to get inside the head of the original hearers—to understand the original intent of the words. Not the literal meaning, but the original intent. Hermeneutics then is the task of seeking the contemporary meaning of ancient texts. It is asking the meaning of the scripture... here and now. Rather than what does the Bible say, the question becomes "Given what their words meant for their then, what might their meaning be for our now?"

So I chose Leviticus 19.28. "You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you." My young friend, Myron, had asked if I thought it was OK, in light of this passage, to get a tattoo. He thought the church would frown on it—and he was probably right.

It was fun to read that paper again after all of these years. I still remember my amazement when I discovered a deeper meaning than the literal reading of this passage. In a nutshell, here's what I learned: In the ancient world, there was a pagan custom that was a mourning rite, where a person would gash or tattoo his or her body on behalf of a dead person. This was presumably done to appease the demons from tormenting the corpse when they saw blood. I found that this passage was really calling God's people to hope, not despair, assured that God's love wins, even when faced by tormenting demons. Today, we don't practice these pagan rituals and tattoos are more a personal expression than a fear-filled reaction on behalf of the dead. So rather than forbidding tattoos, I concluded that this verse might really be prompting us to ask, "What customs do we have today that worship gods other than our God of love and light? And how is God calling me today, out of fear and into hope?" Myron felt the freedom to make his own decision, not beholden to a mandate that really didn't translate well from the ancient world. Imagine how exciting it was for me to take a verse that seemed black and white, very clear in its meaning, and explore, given the

6

context, what it might have meant then, and what it means now. Those gashes and cuts and tattoos take on a metaphorical meaning.

According to Marcus Borg, metaphor is about “the surplus of meaning” that language can carry. Much of the bible’s language is overtly metaphorical. This approach to the bible emphasizes meaning, not literal factuality. Why did ancient Israel preserve and tell the stories and traditions that they did? Because they saw them as having a more-than-literal significance—that surplus of meaning.

I’d like to circle back to the story of Noah and the ark. Given that many people take this story literally today, that leaves us scratching our heads...about a God of vengeance, willing to destroy nearly all of life...and a boat, which given the biblical dimensions, could not have held two of every beetle on the planet, much less the other animals that came on two-by-two. As we explore, we discover that this story is a beautiful metaphor for what happens when it seems like it’s the end of the world. It is a story about God’s mercy and continuing love for the earth, for God’s beloved children, and for non-human creatures that are part of this wonderful world. It is also a story about the meaning of the rainbow that always comes after the storm and reminds us that the light of God’s love will always shine through the clouds in the end. There is indeed a surplus of meaning! It’s so much more.

There is a revisioning of Christianity that is already emerging in the world—motivated in part by taking the Bible seriously but not literally. It is a quest for that surplus of meaning that informs and inspires. It is seeking to understand history, culture, and political intrigues that originally drove the content, story lines and theologies of scripture. The core messages and practices of the Christian faith in today’s world are being reevaluated with a love for scripture as its very center. How you or I or we read the bible plays a critical role in our world-view and understanding of a life of faith.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes: “The Bible is an act of faithful imagination. It is not a package of certitudes. It is

an act of imagination that invites our faithful imagination that makes it possible to live faithfully." May we be faithful as together we take scripture seriously and keep these words in our hearts on our journey of peace, service and openness to all.

