

If the Scroll Fits, Live It

A sermon based on Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19:7-11, & Luke 4:14-21

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On Tuesday of this week Willy and Ilona Dyck, Eleanor Neufeld and I were cleaning out the storeroom under the front entrance. In amongst all the junk are various boxes of old church records and documents, and as we were throwing out the junk we came across a really old document. Most of our church records were written in English, but this one is in an ancient lettering resembling Hebrew! Having studied some Hebrew at seminary, and with the help of Dorothy, who took three times as much Hebrew as I did, we managed to make out some of the inscriptions, though some of the lettering has faded with time, and more often than not we had to guess at the meaning.

At first I thought it might be a lost letter of the Apostle Paul, but he wrote his letters in Greek. I began to have doubts about its origin when one of the first things I read was about a woman named El Nor, meaning "beautifier of churches". I thought maybe Eleanor had left it there to draw attention to all the work she and her crew have done this past year, but I don't think Eleanor knows Hebrew! So I don't know.

[Taking out scroll]

The document says nothing about Bill Clinton, thankfully, but it does list a lot of ancient family names. They're hard to make out, but it mentions, for example, that there shall arise out of a clan of Janzenians a learned man who will sit with kings, crown princes, and other heads of state, offering to them wise counsel. He will be a writer of books -- big books, it says -- and he shall, after much thought, marry a maker of music.

There's mention of another clan, the tribe of Ruppisch, which will send one of its sons north to make music. He too shall wed a maker of music, and together they shall beget more makers of music.

Many other clans and families are listed: the Penn Ers; the Rigged Bees; the Due X; a guild named after Christ; ...another group called Sons of Friends, a name later shortened to Friends' Sons which came to mean "lovers of athletic games". There's also mention of a family of Wood Bards, meaning "drawers of pictures".

It also mentions a clan named Sons of the Free -- again, the name was later shortened, to Free Sons -- a fiercely independent tribe, it appears. Out of their midst in the hinterlands shall arise a prophet, it says, but then the letters get fuzzy and I can't make out what his purpose is to be... Something about bringing a congregation to ruin, I think... I can't be sure... Out of the ashes of ruin, however, shall arise a strong community of faith, and in the 21st century they shall... Sorry! The characters are just too blurred to make out.

I'm not sure what to make of this document. Eleanor wanted to throw it out, but it could very well be of interest to our seminary archivists. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it was more legible, and we found in it hints of our individual, family and congregational destinies?

The Discovery of Amazing Documents

Discoveries of manuscripts, if of personal import, are fascinating. I once got hold of the minutes of the church my family attended when I was a pre-schooler. The church no longer

exists, but I found minutes of its meetings in the Conference archives. They were written in German, but Mr. Wiens translated them for me. Though rather cryptic, they are fascinating to read, leading one to surmise about the life and spirit of that congregation. I was hoping I might confirm a family rumour about a serious breach of church protocol by my own brother, but alas, I found nothing.

If it's interesting to look over church minutes barely fifty years old, imagine the excitement of discovering documents ancient in origin. In 1844 a man named Constantine Tischendorf set out to make a tour of the Orient, particularly of monasteries, in search of biblical manuscripts. He visited the monastery of St. Catharine, an out-of-the-way community at the base of Mt. Sinai. The monks there graciously showed him their ancient library, but in glancing around he noticed in a waste paper basket a considerable quantity of leaves on which were written Greek inscriptions of a more ancient character than any he had ever seen. It was a manuscript of the Bible! Rescuing forty- three leaves from the waste basket, he was told by the librarian that two basketfuls of such leaves had already been used to kindle the fire!

Tischendorf was readily given permission to carry away what he had found, but was not allowed to see the remainder of the book from which these had been taken. Convincing the monks of its value, he left for Europe, but when he returned some years later (1853), he failed to secure any further manuscripts. On a third trip, in 1859, he carried with him the sanction and support of Czar Alexander II, but again he met with refusal. Just a few days before leaving, he showed one of the monks his recently published edition of the Septuagint. The monk told Tischendorf that he too had a copy of the Septuagint, and led him to a room where the monk unfolded a bundle of loose leaves of parchment wrapped in a cloth. The dream of days, months and years materialized before his eyes, for in examining the leaves he saw that it contained not only part of the Old Testament, but the New Testament in its entirety! (Ira Maurice Price, "The Ancestry of our English Bible," 1911)

Tischendorf was permitted to examine it in his own room that night, but he writes, "In the presence of the found treasure it was not possible for me to sleep." Later, through the influence of the Czar, who astutely appealed to the monks as the supreme head of the Greek Church, Tischendorf secured a temporary loan of the document. It was carried by Bedouin from Mt. Sinai to Cairo, where Tischendorf, with the help of two others, copied the 110,000 lines of the Codex by hand. The original document, which eventually landed up in the Imperial Library in St. Petersburg, became known as Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest and most complete of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in existence, and therefore considered invaluable in the translation of our New Testament.

Now, for scholars engaged in the textual analysis of Scripture, this was a fabulous find! To have such a reliable manuscript of the Bible helps scholars to deal more intelligently with the inevitable textual variants that crop up, and potentially, to help clarify passages of Scripture that are unclear. It's exciting even for amateur history buffs like myself, but like Mark Twain, who said, "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand," imagine discovering a document that actually makes a difference in one's life!

Rummaging in the Temple Storeroom

There is such a story in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings, chapter 22, there is a story of a king known as a "beautifier of Churches". King Josiah, who lived in the seventh century B.C., felt that God wanted him to fix up the house of God. There was a lot of catch-up maintenance to do -- holes in the floor, cracks in the walls, roofs that leaked -- and in the course of this sweeping clean-up campaign someone came across an old scroll covered with cobwebs and dust. The person who found the scroll handed it to a higher-up, who upon reading it recognized it as a portion of Mosaic Law.

The restoration of the Temple was so extensive a project, absorbing the king and many of his servants, that in giving his regular financial report to the king, this man almost forgot about the scroll. "Oh, by the way," he said, "we found this scroll in one of the old storerooms," and when he read portions of it to King Josiah, the king blanched. What was being read, no doubt portions of the Book of Deuteronomy, made the king's own attempts at national renewal seem superficial in comparison. The words of Deuteronomy disturbed the king, but wanting to do the very best for God and his country, King Josiah set in motion a series of consultations in order to learn more fully what God's intentions were, and what course of action he should take in order to please God.

Eventually Josiah set in motion nothing less than a reformation based upon the principles explicitly set forth in the Book of Deuteronomy. Impressed with the program set forth in this scroll, 2 Kings, chapter 23, essentially tells us how the king "got with the program," so to speak. There was, first of all, a big ceremony held in Jerusalem at which the scroll was read, followed by a covenant renewal ceremony in which both king and people declared their adherence to the covenant. Then followed a host of reforms designed to align national programs and structures in accordance with Deuteronomic principles.

It's an impressive story of how the discovery of an old scroll made a difference in the life of a faith community! The old scroll was considered precious -- not so much for its own sake, or for the sake of scholarly analysis, but for what it meant in the life of a community.

Some years later it happened again. It was during the time of Ezra, after the people of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon. Jerusalem was in ruins, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the long process of rebuilding Israel -- rebuilding not only the Temple, Jerusalem and other towns and cities, but also their culture and their faith.

Our Old Testament reading (Nehemiah 8) pictures the returning exiles gathered in Jerusalem. They gathered in the square before the Water Gate, a word that in our culture has connotations of a cover-up, but which for the Israelites became synonymous with revelation. The people sent for Ezra to read the Scriptures to them. We read that Ezra "brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. ... He read from it...from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ...Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and (when) ...Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, ...all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." (Nehemiah 8:2-6)

There were Levites around to help interpret the reading to the people (8:7-8). The reading was in Hebrew, and the Levites were probably translating it into Aramaic, the everyday language of the returning exiles.

It is said that the people wept when they heard Ezra read the Scriptures. They had forgotten the ways of their ancestors. They had squandered their Scriptural heritage. "And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' ...he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; ...do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'" (8:9-10)

Words that Revive the Soul

It's an amazing story. Many of the Jews listening to Ezra's reading had never heard the Scriptures before. They had been born and raised in slavery, but it's as if they were thirsty for this ancient wisdom, hanging on every word as they stood in the hot sun a good part of the day, weeping as they listened. Out of honour they stood when Ezra opened the scroll.

Picturing that large assembly in Water Gate Square makes our reading from Psalm 19 more than a figment of a pious poet's imagination. Says the psalmist,

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. ...in
keeping them there is great reward." (Psalm 19:9-11)

There is something about the Scriptures that is compelling, though we have grown somewhat immune to its potency. It's hard to imagine keeping a modern-day, North American congregation in church long enough to read three short Scripture readings. Even then our minds wander. We would rather be at home watching the preliminary chit-chat to the Super Bowl. Or reading that mystery novel that has us spellbound. Or watching a soap or some other equally beneficial activity. Perhaps, however, if we had been deprived of the Scriptures for decades we too might be willing to stand all day in the blistering sun to listen to its comfort and commandments.

I confess that there was a time when my mind would automatically wander when I heard Scripture read. For some reason or other -- perhaps the way in which it was used in my youth to manipulate people -- my mind would automatically shut down when I heard Scripture. It took some struggle and few years of seminary education to win back Scripture's appeal. With time some passages of Scripture have become close friends. They know me very well. Some I find as moving as any music. There is something immensely satisfying in handling this bundle of ancient wisdom we have received. It's a satisfaction reflected in the hymn we sang earlier:

"In this world abound scrolls of wisdom numberless,
but the purest truth in the word of God is found;
this the book that points the way trod by the sages long ago.
Study as we may, never can we grasp thereby
all the depth of truth. We must ever watch and pray,
walking on the holy way trod by the sages long ago."
(Hymnal: A Worship Book, #316)

If The Scroll Fits ...

If the "OMC Scroll" found in the storeroom downstairs was anything but apocryphal, it would be an exciting find. Imagine a document that explains much about our present and our future. The discovery of Codex Sinaiticus hidden away for centuries in the caverns of the St. Catharine monastery was an exciting find for biblical scholars. The discovery of the Old Testament Law in one of the storerooms of the Temple was even more exciting, given the impact it had on an entire community. This same community discovered that this received wisdom had much to say to their post-exilic situation, causing them to weep, but to recognize through their tears that it was also cause for celebration.

There is yet another story in Scripture in which a simple scroll, unrolled and read, caused a sensation. There was a man who returned from the wilderness, and out of the wisdom of his wilderness experience began to impart his wisdom. People recognized in his words the wisdom of the ancients, as well as an inherent authority. It was this man's custom to worship in a synagogue, and one Sabbath day, no doubt because of his growing reputation, he was invited to read Scripture. Someone handed him a scroll of thick, bulky parchment -- the book of Isaiah. All eyes were upon this new teacher as he dramatically unrolled the scroll to a particular place in Isaiah and started reading:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."
(Isaiah 61:1-2, cited in Luke 4:18-19)

"And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him," says Luke (4:20). No doubt they were waiting to see what his take would be on this familiar passage. And he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," (4:21)

Jesus astounded his home town audience by saying that those very words were fulfilled in their presence by himself. This was not only a dramatic reading of God's ancient law and wisdom; this was that wisdom personified. As the Gospel of John says, "The Word" -- that bundle of received revelation known to us as Holy Scripture -- "became flesh and lived among us, ...we have seen his glory, (a) glory...full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) Like the shoe that fit fairy-tale princess Cinderella perfectly, so the ancient scroll of Isaiah fit Jesus perfectly.

Jesus read the words of Isaiah to the community of faith, but he did more than that, he lived those words. He was and is "good news to the poor". He was and is the giver of illumination. He was and is a voice of liberation and release to those in bondage. More than a century ago Thomas Huxley (1825-95), an English scientist, strong supporter of Darwin, and progenitor of a long line of eminent scientists, said of the Bible, "(It) has been the Magna Charta of the poor and of the oppressed; down to modern times, no state has had a constitution in which the interest of the people are so large taken into account, in which the duties, so much more than the privileges, of rulers are insisted upon...."

In our own century Canadian Northrop Frye gave the Bible even more prominence. Borrowing William Blake's notion of the Bible as "the Great Code of Art," Frye wrote, "There is no excuse today for scholars who, in discussing cultural issues originally raised by the Bible and still largely informed by it, proceed as though the Bible did not exist." He calls the Bible this "huge, sprawling, tactless book" that sits there "inscrutably in the middle of our cultural heritage, ... frustrating all our efforts to walk around it."

Conclusion

The Bible is central to our cultural and religious heritage, but it's more than that. It belongs to the Christian community. Though it speaks to us across centuries, it speaks powerfully, all the translations and mistranslations notwithstanding. It stuns us with wisdom and insight, speaking "in poetry which transcends all other language in its power to open the doors of the heart". (Buechner) It unites us. It nourishes us. It makes us a community. When we read its story, we learn who we are. It invites us, like Jesus, to live the story.

The book that follows the story of Jesus told in the New Testament Gospels is not entitled, "A Few more Words about Jesus"; it's entitled "The ACTS of the Apostles". Unlike General Custer's last words to the Dakotas Territorial Legislature -- "Don't do anything until I get back" - - Jesus' parting words to us were much more to the effect that even in his absence we should "get on with the program" -- read it, and live it.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.