

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Reformed and Always Reforming: Scripture
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Psalm 119:9-16; Luke 4:16-30

This past Wednesday Cindy and I tuned into an event we had never watched before. This event was the counting of the electoral college votes. We were interested because we knew there was going to be a debate about accepting, or rejecting, some of the votes. But as the event wore on, we watched in horror as rioters stormed the capitol intent on disrupting the counting of the electoral votes and possibly overturning the election results. Though we knew that the counting of the votes would be contentious on the floor of the House and Senate, the violence of the insurrectionists was beyond our imagining. What made it even more concerning to me was to learn that as the rioters entered the building, many were chanting, “We love Jesus.” It was a powerful reminder to me of the ways in which Christians have used and abused this book for the last two millennia. It reminded me that the Bible has been used to defend enslaving people because of the color of their skin, oppressing women, jailing members of the LGBTQ community, dehumanizing persons with disabilities, killing Jews and Muslims and exterminating entire races of people. And last Wednesday the Bible and the faith derived from it were being used to justify an attack on our capital where one Capitol Hill police officer was intentionally killed, and many others injured. The question before us then is how ought we, as people who believe that the scriptures are authoritative, interpret the scriptures in a way that does not lead us to these same conclusions?

In order to answer this question, I would like to make a proposal. This proposal is not the only way to answer this question, but it is a way I believe is faithful to the scriptures and to our tradition. This proposal comes in three parts. Here is part one: we get out of the trenches and view the scripture from the high ground. When I say trenches, my image is of the trenches in World War I, where soldiers on each side hunkered down and shot at one another. In terms of scripture, this is what I find many people doing. They hunker down in the trenches of their tradition and load up their spiritual six-shooters, or perhaps their spiritual machine guns, with Biblical bullets, meaning individual cherry-picked verses, that they then shoot at each other, hoping to either morally wound their opponents or to at least disable them so that they can be victorious. They say this verse says this about women. Or this verse says this about LGBTQ persons. We hope that if we hit our opponents with enough Biblical bullets our opponents will give in. Instead of doing this, what I suggest is that we leave our bandoleros of Biblical bullets behind and move to the higher ground. The higher ground here is not some moral ground, but it is the place where we can survey the entirety of the Biblical story; where we see the scriptures as a single story, rather than as a series of divisible verses selectable for every attack.

Now for part two. Part two is that when we are on higher ground looking at the scripture as a whole, we see that it tells us two things. These are who God is and who we are supposed to be. Let me say this again. When we look at the whole sweep of scripture, we see that it tells us two things; who God is and who we are supposed to be. Let’s look at these two discoveries. The scripture tells us who God is. God is the giver and lover of life. God is the one who brings life into being and loves it; loves all of it. There is not a part of God’s creation that God does not passionately care about. We see this when the story begins with God declaring that all of creation is “very good” and ends with God recreating the world in such a way that all of life is invited to flourish. What this also means is that God is displeased with everything and everyone that attempts to diminish or destroy any part of this creation. And not only that but God acts in ways that liberate oppressed creation to flourish.

If we want to see that this looks like all we have to do is look to Jesus, for in Jesus we see the fullness of God in human form. Jesus is God with us. Now listen again to Jesus' words in his first sermon. *"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 favor."* But Jesus doesn't stop there with words about God setting people free to flourish. He continues with two stories that get him into trouble. These are the stories of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman. These are stories of foreigners, of enemies, who are liberated by God, meaning God's love of creation is unlimited...which is why his audience wants to throw him off a cliff. God is the giver and lover of all of life.

Next, we learn who we are supposed to be. Again, from the beginning to the end of the scriptures we are called to be those who are God's co-workers in loving and liberating God's creation. From Genesis where Adam is entrusted with taking care of Eden to Revelation where human beings are to remember their first love, meaning love of God and neighbor, we are to be those who have been entrusted with being God's hands, feet, voice and arms. We are to be those who create communities in which all people can flourish in the process of discovering their true selves as God has created them to be...and we are to oppose those powers that diminish and destroy God's creation, including human beings. Again, if we want to see what this looks like all we have to do is look to Jesus. We can look to Jesus because not only is he God with us, meaning fully God, he is also fully human, meaning he is who we are supposed to be. If we look to Jesus what we see is God's co-worker. We see the one who heals the sick, casts out the demonic, feeds the hungry, welcomes the strangers, eats with all the wrong people, forgives people for breaking the rules and ultimately on the cross sets humanity free to discover the abundance of life. This is who we are supposed to be.

Finally, the third part of my proposal is to make a pair of Biblical interpretation spectacles...or glasses. Into the frames I want you to fit two lenses. The first lens is the image of God that we have discovered in our sweeping view of the scriptures. The second lens is the image of who we are to be, as we have discovered in our higher view of the Bible. Then once we have those spectacles in place, we view all scripture through those lenses. We ask ourselves of every scripture we read, or Biblical bullet that is shot at us, how should we interpret them through these two lenses. In other words, we are to ask ourselves, does this interpretation align with a God who gives and loves all of life, or does this interpretation diminish and destroy life? Does this interpretation align with me being a coworker with God in loving and liberating life, or does this interpretation cause me to be allegiance with those who diminish and destroy life?

We live in a moment of time filled with hate, fear, lies and violence. The tendency of human beings in times such as this is to return to our trenches. Our tendency is to reload our spiritual six-shooters with our Biblical bullets and begin to attack those with whom we disagree. The challenge for us is to stay on the high ground; to continue to see the scriptures as a whole story in which we discover who God is and who we are to be, then allow those understandings to not only drive how we see scripture but how we interact with the world around us. My hope then, is that on this day my three step process for interpreting scripture will assist you in seeing what is in this book (the Bible) through new eyes and find in it God's love story for creation and God's love story for you. I hope as well that it will allow us all to come out of the trenches and continue to work for the wonderful world God desires for us.

My challenge to you then is this, to find a book of the Bible that has long disturbed you and reread it this week through the lenses of who God is and who we are called to be, and then let me know if your new glasses allowed you to make new discoveries in your understanding of the scriptures.