

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Encouragement Along the Way: Scripture
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Deuteronomy 4:1-8; Luke 4:16-21

It began with a few verses. Then it became a few chapters. Then it was most of the Old Testament. Then it was most of the New Testament. They cut them all out. In a slow and systematic manner, they examined the entirety of this book and took out all the passages that they considered to be inappropriate. When they were done they had a rather slim volume, but it would suit their purposes. Then, in 1808 slave owners in the British West Indies published the Parts of the Holy Bible, selected for the use of the Negro Slaves. It quickly became known as the Slave's Bible and was widely distributed. What the editors had eliminated was any reference to freedom. What the editors had kept were any references to slavery being an appropriate human experience. They didn't want slaves reading about Jesus saying that he had been sent to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives and that the oppressed should go free. If slaves read that they might revolt like the slaves on Haiti who won their independence. Even so, we might wonder why the slave owners were so afraid of the Bible?

I say this because the Bible has been an effective tool for the suppression and elimination of tens of millions of people. It has been used to justify the oppression and deaths of Jews, Muslims and other Christians...yes other Christians in which people slaughtered each other over Biblical interpretation and doctrine. It has been used to oppress women, the poor, people of color, the disabled and members of the LGBTQ community. It has been used to argue against teaching evolution in schools and for the recognition of marriage equality. It was the justification for segregation and Jim Crow laws. If you want to see this at work today, all you have to do is listen to Franklin Graham declare that the Bible makes it clear that there is no such thing as a gay Christian and go online to white nationalist web-sites where scripture is used to defend their beliefs and actions. With this sort of historic usage of scripture unedited, why then would the slave owners be afraid of it? The answer, I believe, is that they understood scripture better than most; that scripture was a story of love and liberation. It was a story of God's love for and liberation of all people, and that that story might encourage slaves to desire to be free people.

One of the fascinating things about the Bible is that it is the most widely published and yet least read books in history. Let me ask, how many of you have a Bible you received at confirmation or some other time, and has barely been opened? If you do, you are not alone. Most of us, if we decide to read the Bible, get through Genesis and part of Exodus before we get bogged down in the minutia of that Law and give up. Or if we read the New Testament, we get a

little lost in John, get mad at Paul and give up there as well. This is not criticism, it is a reality I faced when I first began trying to read the Bible. What is important this morning though, is that those slave owners understood the scriptures correctly. The scriptures were a story of God's infinite love for all persons and God's desire for all persons to be free. It is in these two realities that we ought to find encouragement. First we ought to find encouragement in the reality that scripture tells us that we are unconditionally loved. Regardless of our age, race, gender, language, income or sexual orientation, we are God's children, created in God's imaged and cherished by our creator.

Second, we ought to find encouragement in God's liberating power. I want to pause here to challenge us to examine what this liberation means for those of us who are solidly middle-class people. What does it mean for those of us who are not oppressed? What does it mean for those of us who live privileged lives. And by privileged lives I mean we have been given the gift of education, advancement, homes to live in, food on our tables, clean water to drink, teachers and mentors to guide and direct us and a societal structure that rewarded all of that. What does liberation mean for us then? I believe it means removing our middle-class blinders so that we can see the world as Jesus did. What are middle-class blinders? They are those blinders that keep us from seeing and responding to the deep needs of the world around us. They only allow us to see the middle-class world in which we live, rather than the world on the margins. They are what lead us to say things like this, which is a quote from a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. "Nobody [in America] goes to sleep at night wondering if they'll be able to feed their families." It is what led me to assume that all the children I work with at Alcott school have someone at home to read with them. These blinders prevent us seeing those who live on the margins and from working to make a difference in their lives. What scripture will do, if we let it, is to remove those blinders so that we can see the world as it is; in need of our blessing. It will allow us to be agents of liberation for the oppressed, the hungry and the poor. I realize that this may not seem like an encouraging word...but it is. It is encouraging because Jesus lived a blinder free life. He ate with rich and poor, taught men, women and children, cared for Jews and Gentiles. In other words, there were no blinders, only love for those he encountered.

My challenge for you this morning then is this, to read the Gospel of Luke over this coming week, and then asking yourself these two questions: which was my favorite story and which story encouraged me the most? Then with those two questions answered, to practice lowering your blinders and asking, how I am seeing the world differently as I try to follow in the way of Jesus, a blinder free way?