

**United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

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WHEN INK SHEDS LIGHT

Proverbs 31:10-31; Revelation 22:18-19

As we begin our programming year, and particularly our strong education programs for all ages, I thought we might do well to reflect on why study, particularly of scripture is important for people of faith, no matter how long or brief a time they have been at it. All of us, but especially those of us in the protestant traditions have, what might understatedly be called, a complicated relationship with our scriptures. Presbyterians claim that scripture is “the rule of life and faith.” Preacher Fred Craddock says, “Whenever I heard the words, ‘The Bible says,’ I know someone is going to get hurt.”

There are those who say that all you have to do is read the Bible. Its meaning is as plain as the nose on your face. A short list of the wide-ranging topics in which the Bible is invoked, inside and outside the church, includes marriage, women, men, creationism, stem cell research, church officers, domestic violence, social justice, racism, welfare, homosexuality, euthanasia, divorce, evolution, abortion, environmentalism, genetic engineering, medicine, capital punishment, computers, the ecumenical movement, the green movement, international relations, commerce and finance, war, peace, elections, family values and salvation. While the Bible offers guidance on all of life, only eleven of those words or phrases actually appear in scripture, and one can find contradictory texts even on those. Preacher and peace activist William Sloane Coffin says, “Too many Christians use the Bible as a drunk does a lamppost – for support rather than illumination.” Columnist Ellen Goodman writes, “I have known dozens of people who use the Bible as if it were a Rorschach test rather than a religious text. They read more into the ink than they read out of it.” I was confronted by all that when I first read this morning’s Hebrew Scripture lesson, known as the “Ode to a Capable Wife.” Because it seemed antiquated, because it and texts like it, have been used to condemn some women’s choices, or limit their options, I was tempted not to preach about it. The text and the temptation to pretend it (or any other text that makes me or you uncomfortable) isn’t there, came together as an invitation for us to consider what it means to take scripture seriously, as a religious text and as a source of illumination. I invite you to join me in exploring when ink sheds light on the lives we lead.

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Have you noticed the communion table this morning? Let me give you a brief tour. The gold and burgundy books standing in the center are the Old and New Testaments in the original Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. Immediately next to them are tools for translating them into English. The rest of the books on the table are some of the various English translations and interpretations of scripture currently available. The books on the floor are a collection of dictionaries, sociological and archeological resources and commentaries to help interpret those translations. (They are merely some of the scholarly works in my office and the church library – not even a shadow of all the ones available.) Included in the stack is the Book of Confessions, Part I of the Constitution of the PCUSA denomination, which gives us my tradition’s historical understanding of the authority and interpretation of Scripture, as well as a Baptist guide of the

same genre. The protestant traditions have long held: that the Bible needs to be available in the common languages of the people so that everyone, not just church leaders, have access to Scripture's guidance; that the social and cultural conditions of the time, the nature of the passage, and the cultural conditioning of language are all brought to bear in determining the "plain sense" of the text. The plain sense is not always obvious and rarely literal. The Presbyterian Church's position paper on the *Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* made this comment: "Epic poetry is not historical chronicle; symbolic stories are not science; and admonition to a particular person or community is not general law." The astronomer Galileo put it another way, saying, "The Bible tells us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go."

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So we've brought all these resources to bear; we have prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us lift the ink off the page and make it a living Word, shedding light on our lives and choices; and we think we've got the "plain sense of the text." Then what? We still have two things to take into account.

The first is to remember that we believe that every interpretation, no matter how scholarly, how faithful, how Spirit guided, how well researched, is human, and therefore possibly mistaken. In John Robinson's send off sermon to the Pilgrims in 1620, he said, "We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind – by notions of our day and sect – crude, partial and confined. No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred, for God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the word." The Confession of 1967 says, "As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and every form of human culture."

The truth is this: Good and faithful people can be wrong, and good and faithful people can disagree. We need a humble awareness not only of human limits, but belief in the unfailing love and inspiration of God – one who continues to work in the world, even if we don't understand how – for happily God is not limited by our understanding.

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The other thing to keep in mind is that even the best interpretations and understanding can still leave us uncomfortable or confused. We are helped in dealing with those texts by understanding the nature of the community for which they were first written, and insofar as we were able, discerning the intent of the original author in the writing.

The Confession of 1967 says, "The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current." That understanding helps us to put the Ode to a Capable Woman into perspective. It is antiquated because being faithful and being guided by the Holy Spirit does not give anyone the ability to measure up to standards of an age 3000 years after they are dead. It would therefore be an abuse of the text to say that "The Bible says, 'The only faithful woman is one who does these things.'" On the other hand, we must always be cautious of the other end of the spectrum of scriptural abuse, ignoring, deleting or disregarding texts because we don't understand them, like them or the way others have used them.

It's not just dated texts but there are others that give us difficulty in keeping the Bible fresh and alive in our time. We have all no doubt noted that sometimes the Bible contradicts

itself. From the beginning, when Genesis tells the story of creation, it tells it two different ways. The Book of Proverbs spends most of its time telling us that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people; Ecclesiastes says the rain falls on the good and the bad. It's not a whole lot better in the New Testament – in lots of places Jesus goes around breaking the law, and in others he says he won't be satisfied until all the law is fulfilled. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the stories of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, and they have got a lot in common, but on the other hand their itineraries, crowd counts, calendars, quotes and cast lists don't match. Paul says, "We are saved by grace alone," and James says, "Get to work."

Then there are the texts that make us just plain uncomfortable. In Job, God has a bet with Satan, and so begins Job's suffering. Jesus says, "I am the way..." and we wonder what that means for people who have never heard of him. Jesus says, "If you have enough faith you can move mountains," but no one here wants to say that to someone who doesn't get the miracle they were praying for. One church I served started a bible study class on "The Hard Sayings of Jesus." I asked them to agree on an easy one. I am still waiting. Some people say, "I don't believe in the God of the Old Testament – too judgmental. I'll stick with the One in the New Testament." That would be the One who didn't prevent God's Son's death?

Ours, of course, is the first generation to notice these little difficulties. The ones who wrote the Scriptures, the poets, dramatists, priests, the masters of rhetoric, the storytellers and editors who formed and shaped what remains some of the world's finest literature – they wouldn't have noticed. Then the people of faith over the years who saved and read and handed on these manuscripts, assembling them until they resemble the book we call the Bible – they never would be expected to notice that one book never mentions the name of God, one is full of erotic poetry, and another is clearly written by a cynic; or that the Paul portrayed in Acts doesn't sound anything like the one who wrote all those letters. Then, those Reformers who translated the entire Bible from Greek and Hebrew into languages that were still forming themselves, while preaching three times a week and writing fifty commentaries, they never noticed. Because if they had, they would have left all that problem stuff out. ...

Our alternative theory is that those fine minds of every age did notice and left it in anyway.

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We've inherited a Scripture filled with almost as many shady characters who cheat their way into God's promise, as the ones who get there by invitation; the heroes and heroines all come with clay feet and personal agendas; two or three or forty faithful people hear God's word in the wind or find it written in stone on the hearts of people, but the words are different and its less clear than we think it ought to be. There are the texts we cling to as though our lives depended on it, and often they do. And there are the passages that make us writhe with embarrassment, the ones we would cut out if we could, the ones that don't make sense or seem to have pieces missing. There are days when the news of someone quoting Scripture in defense of some act of hate makes us cringe with shame. There are also days when people acting with courage and joy and sacrifice in the name of God fill our eyes with tears and our hearts with renewed commitment.

The truth is our ancestors in faith have handed us a messy complicated rule of faith and life. Which is a good thing – because the lives we lead are messy and complicated and the world

we live in is challenging. That we might meet the demands of our lives, we must also meet the demands of our faith – to take scripture seriously but not literally. For it is then, that lifted off the page by the Holy Spirit alive in every age, the ink can shed light on our lives. It has always been so. Our ancestors in faith were not afraid of that. Our God is not. Nor need we be.