

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
9th Sunday after Pentecost, August 7, 2022
(Exodus 24:1-18, Proverbs 18:21)
“This is Who We Are: the Bible” by Rev. Sue Trigger

THE BOOK OF THE EXODUS 24:1-18

Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. ²Moses alone shall come near the LORD; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”

³Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” ⁴And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. ⁶Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. ⁷Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” ⁸Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, “See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

⁹Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

¹²The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS 18:21

*(from **The Message** by Eugene Peterson)*

Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose.

Last Sunday Mitch mentioned the Vision 2020 hymn that was commissioned to express our vision. The name of the hymn is, This is Who We Are. We're going to learn a verse of the hymn each week for the next four Sundays. As we learn the hymn, we are going to focus on some the very basic foundations of who we are as Reformed Christians. Today we're going to take a look at how PCUSA Presbyterians interpret Scripture.

Mitch mentioned that we were receiving phone calls and emails looking for our founding Pastor, Jay McKell, regarding the publicity he put out about the "Value them Both" Amendment. While on the surface, it looked like those who were contacting us were concerned about a political issue, but what was hiding under the surface was the issue that has set people apart for generations, Biblical interpretation. Most of the people contacting us were reflecting a literal interpretation of Scripture. Like the gentleman who was aghast that Mitch doesn't believe that God created the earth in six days.

The recent decision of the Supreme Court to overturn Roe v. Wade and the primary election here in Kansas highlighted that we are living at a time in the US when some Christians are holding up the Bible as the authority for how *all of us* should live. The problem with that view is that it will requires us to choose whose interpretation we should follow. Because the truth is that whenever we read the Bible, we are interpreting it.

Differences in Biblical interpretation have been going on for a very long time. We only have to read the Bible to know that. Ezra and Nehemiah disagreed about how interpret the Scriptures as they returned from Exile. The gospel stories about Jesus were all about Biblical interpretation. He had some heated conversations with religious leaders about how to interpret Scripture. The early evangelists, Peter and Paul, James and John, argued about how to interpret what Jesus said. The result is that the Bible does not express one single interpretation. Great is the mystery of faith!

Presbyterians take the Bible seriously; it is the defining document for our faith. However, the diverse forms and content within the many passages of Scripture have generated a broad range of interpretations. Our constitution names "*the Word of God truly preached and heard.*" (PCUSA Book of Order, Foundations of Presbyterian Polity F-1.0303) as the first mark of a PCUSA

congregation. This came from a response to what the Reformers saw as a major error in the church, when the people could not read the Bible, and often didn't hear the words of Scripture in a language they could understand. Instead they had to rely on what the priests told the people. The Reformers believed that the Bible needed to be accessible to all people. That is why for Presbyterians *“the reading, hearing, preaching, and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship.”* (BofO, W-2.2001) Perhaps the greatest responsibility I have as a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the selection, interpretation and proclamation of Scripture. I am as aware as anyone of how easy it is to take passages of Scripture and twist them to a particular point of view, and so I always approach Scripture with great reverence.

I learned a long time ago that even those people who claim to take the Bible at its most literal meaning, don't. (*Exodus 35:2*): **“Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.”** That's one way to cull the rolls. Or how about this one from *Exodus 21:17*. **“Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death.”** Don't curse your parents, but father's it's okay to sell your daughter according to *Exodus 21:7*. If we were to truly live by a literal understanding of the Bible, we couldn't eat pork or lobsters (unclean & an abomination), we couldn't wear clothes made of two different fabrics (no polyester/cotton blend garments), men wouldn't be allowed to trim their beards, women couldn't wear pants and on and on it goes.

We believe that Scripture is a living word. That means that it is our job together, yours and mine, to look at Scripture to see and hear how God continues to speak to us today, both in the stories of the Hebrew scriptures and the writings of the early Christian church. The stories of the Bible show us God at work, sometimes in ways we struggle to understand. The challenge is to figure out how to interpret the Bible.

Our Reformed tradition, according to the confessions of the church, says that an interpretation of Scripture that is “orthodox and genuine” is one that follows the “rule of love” and glorifies God. In other words, any interpretation of Scripture should lead us to a greater love for God and for our neighbor. When we interpret Scripture in a way that is hurtful to people, we can be sure that we are not glorifying God. **“You will know them by their fruits”** was Jesus' criterion for judging false prophets.

(*Matt. 7:16*) Whether our interpretations of Scripture result in love of God and neighbor is a practical test of whether our interpretation is correct.¹

That is the same approach that Jesus took to teaching Scripture. When the church leaders would have been glad to condemn Jesus and his disciples for picking up grain on the Sabbath, which was considered work, Jesus showed them how to look at the commandment in a different way. “Human beings weren’t made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for human beings.” The need for a day of rest wasn’t important for God, but for us. We need a day to reconnect with God and strengthen ourselves for the week ahead. When people wanted to put an adulterous woman to death by stoning, as it was written in the Scriptures, Jesus made them realize that all of them were guilty of sin in God’s eyes and that if they deserved mercy, so did she. This approach to Scripture is not a “literal” interpretation, but it does help the people see God in a different light.

I preached a sermon on the rule of love once and after the service I was met at the door by a member of the church who was very angry. She claimed that I was a heretic. She said she had never heard of the rule of love and accused me of making it up. She went home and began calling the elders on Session to claim that she could no longer attend the church as long as I was pastor. It became an opportunity for me to talk with the Session about this basic Reformed and Presbyterian teaching about Biblical interpretation. The rule of love is based on Jesus’ teaching, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you go to the PCUSA website and search for Biblical Interpretation you will find an article that says, “Special weight ought to be given to the “rule of love”—that is, “How does this passage help the reader better fulfill Scripture’s highest law to ‘Love your Lord with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself?’”³

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Hart Anderson explained our approach to Scripture this way. “We are not biblical literalists. Anyone who says they take scripture literally is simply saying they have decided their interpretation is the only way to understand a particular text. Another way of reading the

¹ Jack Rogers, **Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church** (2009, Westminster/John Knox Press), p. 61

² Matthew 22:36-40

³ Jack Haberler This column is adapted from a longer article, a “Leader Reader,” published by the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation.

Bible always puts any conclusion we reach about a passage of scripture to this test: Does it reflect the love of God? If not, the interpretation is a distortion of biblical intent.”

Applying the rule of love to the Bible has led to change in the church’s view on a number of social and church issues. For example, Scripture was used to justify slavery, but does that reflect the love of God? The Bible has been used to prevent women from serving in leadership in the Church, does that reflect the love of God? The Bible continues to be used to discriminate against LGBTQ persons, but does that reflect the love of God?

On these issues and more, people have used the Bible to support conclusions that do not pass the test of the rule of love. This kind of Biblical interpretation is what has led the Presbyterian Church to change.

God is a loving God. That is the good news of salvation that Jesus brought to the people of his day and the good news that we are to share with everyone. God offers guidance for our lives in the words of Scripture, but doesn’t keep “score” of all of our wrongdoings. Forgiveness and hope are the gifts of God, not fear and despair. There are many Christians that will take a different approach to Scripture and I’m sad to say, many that will reject fully allowing themselves to love their neighbor as fully as they love God.

If we have any faith in this loving God, any appreciation for the teachings of Jesus Christ, then love will be the foundation on which we not only interpret Scripture, but love will be the foundation for how we live. The fourth chapter of 1 John makes it sound simple: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

There are those who claim that people like us, who interpret Scripture with the rule of love are whitewashing the gospel. The woman who was so angry with me said that I was teaching a gospel with no standards. I responded that the rule of love is the greatest and often the most difficult standard to uphold, because from this interpretation, all are welcome because all are loved.

Biblical Interpretation matters a great deal. It has been said that the image of God you believe in shapes who you will become. If your image of God is one of judgement and anger, you will interpret Scripture in angry, judgmental ways. As a Reformed, Presbyterian, our image of God is rooted in the teachings of Jesus who taught us that love of God and loving others is the lens we should interpret Scripture.

We believe that as students of the Bible, we must not only seek to understand but also be committed to applying the message of Scripture. The writer of James said, “Be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers,” (James 1:22). May we live our lives with the same discipline we apply to our interpretation of the Bible. And may it be that by doing so, we will fight a little less and love a whole lot more.