

Why Scripture?: The Unique Witness
John 1:1-7 and 14:1-7
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While I was on vacation, I was challenged on Facebook by my cousin Alan's wife, Barbara, to do the literacy challenge. She invited me to post the covers of seven books I truly love without comment over the next seven days. So far, I'm on day six. The books thus far are: the 19th century novel *Cranford*, the 21st century novel *The Fault in our Stars*, Anne Lamott's essay collection *Bird by Bird*, the annotated version of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, the mystery novel *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* and the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*. Those of you who follow me on Facebook will have to wait until tomorrow to find out my seventh selection, but I'll give you a hint. It will be a Newberry Award winning children's book, though my choice was almost *The American's Test Kitchen's Family Baking Book*.

My library is fairly eclectic, no big surprise there, because, like most folks, there are many things that I find interesting and that shape me. Looking at my library will tell you a lot about me.

It's in that spirit that Jessica and I have been presenting this sermon series on "Why Scripture?" This incredible library is central to our understanding of who we are and who God is. And, particularly from our perspectives as those who seek to follow Jesus, the Bible is, in the words of our *Presbyterian Book of Order*, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God's word to us. That's a lot of words to wrap our heads around. So, I like to say it more simply, borrowing the words of the great preacher Emerson Fosdick: "The Bible is the cradle of Jesus Christ."

If you look to non-Biblical, non-church affiliated sources of history, you will find a few references to Jesus, including in the writings of the Jewish/Roman historian Josephus who wrote in roughly the year 93 CE. He makes two specific references to Jesus and his followers. Both of those references together tell us very little, other than that Josephus isn't convinced that James' brother Jesus was actually the Christ. We shouldn't be all that surprised that there isn't more there, though a few historians have pointed out that there are more references to Jesus and his teachings in literature in the 300 years after his time on earth than there are to King Arthur in the 300 years after that gentleman ruled briefly over a part of England a thousand years more recently.

No, if we want to really learn about Jesus, we have to look here. If that's the case, then why do we need more than the gospels? Heck, why do we need more than one gospel? Isn't four a bit of overkill? First, we need to understand that even in the earliest days of the church in the first century, people began to understand that this Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh, served a number of roles for those who, in his own words, "believed in him." We have come to understand those roles as Messiah, prophet, priest and sovereign or king.

If Jesus is prophet—the one who speaks Divine truth to power in his words and actions—how will we know how the people who experienced him as prophet saw him, unless we understand the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, whose lives and teachings and ministry take up most of the last half of the Old Testament?

If Jesus is priest as he himself suggests in today's text—the intermediary aspect of a largely unfathomable God—don't we need to understand the people's understandings about that God and God's relationship with and intentions for humanity in order to understand how Jesus is the link, the intermediary between humanity and God? The questions, who is God and who are we that we need an intermediary are the context for Jesus' role as priest and are the subject of much of the first five books of the Old Testament.

If Jesus is to be our true sovereign, the one who has a rightful claim on our loyalty and fidelity, our king (to use a word we have loaded with lots of baggage), isn't it helpful to understand Jesus' people's long and jaded history with kings and sovereigns? What made a good King and what made a bad one? Exploring what the people looked for in a king and how that compared with what God looked for in a king are important questions, right? They are what makes up much of the historical books between the first five books and the prophets' section at the end.

If Jesus is Messiah—this odd term for the deliverer looked for in Hebrew tradition—don't we need to understand that tradition to understand what the people were looking for and what they got in Jesus? So much of the Old and New Testaments are about dealing with those expectations.

The Bible is the cradle that contains Christ because it is both context and prerequisite for any kind of deep understanding of who this Jesus was and is. That's why we study scripture; that's why spending time in this library is more important in trying to know and understand who we are in relationship to God and one another as any other collection of writings we might explore.

But what about these two specific passages? What do these have to tell us about scripture and its place in our lives? These two passages—from what scholars believe to be one of the youngest books in this holy library, authored by the one we call John—what are we to glean from these periscopes, a fancy word for scripture passages? In one where Jesus is revealed as the Cosmic Word who has been present for all of eternity and one which is an invitation by that Cosmic Christ to trust in him as we are invited to trust in God and so to see them as one and the same part of one whole. But we are to see Christ as the link, the eternal link between God and humanity.

I want to begin with the proposition that these passages demonstrate how scripture is a means to connect God's story to our story. It's a part of that quest for understanding that I mentioned before, a way to understand at least in part who Jesus was and is and who we are in relationship to God and to one another. I want to suggest that these passages illumine and justify the central role of scripture in our Reformed worship, to suggest that in the encounter with the Word written and proclaimed, the Holy Spirit provides both the opportunity for us to look at our own lives from a Godly perspective, and most importantly, the Spirit uses scripture to introduce us to Christ—the Word made flesh.

In the beginning was the Word. How can a person be a word? How can God be a word? What is a word? In the ancient world and in our own it is something spoken, something that is the product of breath and thought and intention and communication. And Jesus is, John tells us, the very beginning of breath and thought and intention and communication.

Breath is a sign of life. It is the gift God gives Adam out of God's own being in the creation stories of Genesis. So, Jesus is life, the ideal life, the new Adam, the one who shows what life is for.

Thought is a mystery isn't it? We aren't sure where thoughts come from in the almost magical combination of synapses and brain cells and electrical sparks in our heads. But we know that through memory and study we can create the wellspring from which thoughts can be born. The prophet Isaiah was inspired to remind the people that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and our thoughts are not God's thoughts. But if Jesus is the first thought, the first spark within the mystery of God, and it and he seek relationship with us, how special does that make us? How beloved to be connected to the very first thought, the very source of thought.

Intentions are rarely neutral. Why do we do what we do? They are rarely easy to express simply. Why we do something is usually a mixture of our hopes and fears and expectations and plans. They are a messy conglomeration of the good and the bad within and around us. But if Jesus the Christ is the First Intention, the intention that brings all things into being, then shouldn't we be searching for the Good in our intentions and others? And shouldn't we see the earthly actions of this one, who is God and God's first intention, as the ultimate example for how we should be and why and how we should engage the world?

Jesus wasn't just some good man who stood with the outcast, the stranger and the rejected, he was the personification of God's intention to place God's very self there, not to be seen or known in the halls of power, but in the places of greatest suffering, vulnerability and need. The Word's intent then, surely, is for us to do the same, not just because it's the right thing to do politically or socially from a humanistic perspective, but because the very source of breath, thought and intention determined to place the divine self there when the world was not yet even formed.

The Word is breath, thought, intention—and Communication.

It always has struck me as strange that the creation story has God speaking a lot, saying things are good, uttering the Word, releasing breath—the Spirit—over the waters of chaos to bring order and reality into being. Surely God does not speak simply for God's own self. Jesus as The Word from the Beginning is a reminder from John that from the very beginning God was moving everything toward relationship. And so, Jesus is the personification of God's quest for relationship, and how he goes about being in relationship is for us both guide and challenge. Jesus is honest, direct, welcoming, and challenging to those in power, even among his disciples. One of the great gifts of the narratives of Jesus and the narratives of the early church is how much they focus on relationships—whom we eat with, whom we are seen with, whom we welcome.

Time and again scripture will remind us what John hints at in naming Jesus the Word, even remembering Jesus uttering the ultimate words of relationship—no one comes to God except through him. I was taught that meant: become a Christian or you can't know God. But I don't believe that, not anymore. If I ever did, John's cosmic Christ has from the beginning painted Jesus as far more than a human being. I don't think his having Jesus say what he says is a sign that Jesus is a narrow opening into the household of God, but that the second person of the trinity—the one who was and is word made flesh, who was and is the utterance of God's breath, intention, thought and communication, the one whom we have come to see as Priest, as intermediary—serves that role in all human relationships that are linked to the divine. It is not for me to judge how and for whom the second person of the trinity chooses to be intermediary with God, chooses to be the link that connects creature to creator. I am comfortable humbly proclaiming the person Jesus as my understanding of how God chooses to create intimate relationship with us. But if God chooses to act more broadly than that, who am I to stand in God's way? This invites us into relationships with people of other faith traditions with respect and humility, invites us to see the Christ we came to see and know in scripture at work in other traditions.

Gosh, that's a lot to wrap our heads around, Pastor. And it is. But these two passages, this library, they are not fathomable in one 2200-word sermon, or even in one solitary lifetime. But thousands, millions, billions have and do find within these pages a witness to something great, a love great enough to create time, and the universe and every atom and molecule and—you. In this library, together with those billions who have visited here before, we find the Word. The Word is more than we can imagine, but nothing less than the man, the messiah, the prophet, the priest, the king, the Christ we can come to know better and better as we together explore this library, learning from those in the past, learning from one another, learning from the Spirit who helped inspire those who created it. But it equally inspires our fresh encounter with it now. So, come and be a part of our ongoing journey—to know (best we can) and follow (best we can) —as we launch new programs to deepen our understanding and our encounter with the Word, both the word written and the Word made flesh. And may God bless our work together here and as we seek to be doers of that Word in the world. Amen.