

Year C, The Ascension

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Luke 24:44-53

Jesus Shows Us How to Read the Bible

The Bible has always been hard to understand and more often than not misinterpreted. Even the disciples didn't understand their scriptures, most of which we think of as the Old Testament today. In Luke 24 Jesus is preparing his disciples for his final departure, not when he dies on the cross, but when he leaves planet earth and ascends out of their sight. One of the last things he gives them is a way to understand scripture. I think we too might find his way helpful.

He frames what he is about to tell them by saying, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you." By calling them his last words he underlines how important they are. He could have said this is my hermeneutic but people would have complained (inside joke. My church teases me for using big words). He tells them that "everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." He assumes that the entire Jewish scripture is about him. It's the lead up to his cross and resurrection, the event the disciples have been going through for the last 40 days. And we know that this is the last of those 40 as Jesus is about to ascend.

Jesus believes the stories of Genesis, the point of the prophets, and the poetry of the psalms provide the necessary background to what has just happened. There is hidden meaning in scripture and he is about to give them the key so that they can see it. The story begun in the Old Testament must be fulfilled and he has come to be that fulfillment.

With all the components of revelation now finished except the Ascension, Luke steps back and says, "He opened their minds to understand the scriptures." The application of this key has opened my mind so that I am no longer afraid of the violence in the Old Testament and it does not contradict my view that God is love and nothing but love (I pulled out my car keys gestured with them in hand). So just before his ascension he gives them the interpretive key, turns the switch and the engine of understand begins humming for the first time.

He says, "this is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day." That's the key. Like all keys, it's small and does not appear to have the power to turn on such a powerful and complex engine. The entire scripture is fulfilled, brought to completion, achieved when Christ suffers death on a cross and then rises from the dead on the third day. The death and resurrection of Christ is the central event that makes it possible to understand everything, even the violence in the Old Testament. Let me try to explain how I think this works.

All through the Old Testament the writers of the law, like all other cultures in their time, thought God sanctioned their violence and invasions, their genocides and shunning's, their animal sacrifices and human stoning. You see, they tended to make God into an extension of themselves and use the idea of God to justify their violence. We still do this today with our enemies so we can't be too critical. This is why the texts in the Old Testament so often say God told them to do terrible acts of violence. Just because they said it does not make it so.

Along came the prophets with a deeper understanding. We have those too. They opposed sacrifice of all kinds, both human and animal, and saw through the lies the culture used to oppress the poor and helpless. When they were at their best they said God did not want sacrifice but rather mercy, compassion and justice. Usually their voices were silenced because the culture turned on them and killed them.

The Psalms, a different genre, often presents the world through the eyes of the victim, the one cornered and about to be killed. Among other things they tell us how it feels to be the one surrounded by those who hate you for no reason and soon will destroy you though you are innocent. When the psalms were written it was a new thing to portray life from this perspective. It's not new now because we live after Jesus showed us the victimage mechanism but it was new then.

The cross changed the world forever making it impossible to totally ignore the victim after it. In fact the world has changed so much since Christ injected a new knowledge into our midst that now the persecutors often try to convince us that they are actually the victims. It's the contemporary way of justifying violence.

So we have the Old Testament story of how humans used violence to control and limit violence, though it didn't work very well, it was better than nothing. And then in the midst of that story we have outbreaks of forgiveness, like Joseph who forgave his brothers and saved their lives even though they had cursed him. And we have Job who refused to accept that God had cursed him even though his wife and all his friends said God had. Always there is the main story and the quieter story within that contradicts it. The fuss and froth of human agitation subverted by the still small voice of God seems to be the story Jesus sees in the Old Testament.

Jesus ties his story to the story hidden in the midst of the larger story. The larger story sends Jesus to be condemned on a cross. Like so many before and since, he dies at the hands of "the righteous" who think they are doing the will of God and he dies at the hands of empire who sees him as a threat. When it happened to Christ, the son of God, humans were forced to see what they had been doing since civilization began and Cain killed Abel. This revelation fulfills the Old Testament by showing where the major story takes us. Now everyone with eyes to see can see how wrong we have been.

Yes, the larger story found its fulfillment in the suffering of the Christ, but the still small voice of God's love found its vindication when Christ rises from the dead on the third day. The resurrection confirms the power of the story hidden in the tumult of the Bible. On this last Sunday of Easter it's natural to think about the meaning and power of the resurrection. The resurrection contradicts the major story and confirms the hidden one. It reveals God's character; God's love, compassion and mercy.

And so the Bible contains two stories tangled together and Jesus provides the key to untangling them. It's the story of humans filled with the frothing and foam of human ambition, greed, arrogance and violence. We need the Old Testament to tell this major story and to enclose the hidden one, where God subverts it. The suffering of Jesus and his being raised from the dead on the third day gives us the other story; softer, subtler, quieter and hidden in the larger story. His story gives us a way of separating the tragic human story swimming in violence from God's story bathed in love. When we view the Old and New Testaments through the lens of the suffering and risen Jesus, we see things we were blind to before. Now we don't need to be afraid of the violence in scripture because we have a way of understanding it.

Jesus said, "A change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Before Jesus our hearts and lives have been in bondage to the larger story of violence, rejection, and fear. But Jesus has subverted that story and given us a new one. This is the story that we preach and witness to as real. As we preach it to the nations we discover it changing our hearts and our lives too.

To help spread the story Jesus promised to send them a helper. He tells them to wait for it in Jerusalem after he has left. He doesn't want them to panic. The helper will come, he said, relax and trust it.

"He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. (They didn't panic.) And they were continuously in the temple praising God.

Ten days later the Spirit came. We call that day "the Day of Pentecost" and we wear red to remember it.