

## Sermon for January 23, 2022

### Shivon Miller

I have spent this last week in an Interim Ministry/Transition Management class. On Thursday, 6 hours into the day, we were divided into small groups on Zoom and asked to discuss “What Sacred Story impacted your decision to enter your current ministry?” and “What Sacred Story would your current congregation/members identify as influential?” Before sharing our stories our group ended up discussing a few things that were being assumed in this discussion. First, there was the assumption that everyone was Biblically literate enough to recall sacred stories. Secondly, the question assumed belief that these sacred stories indeed directly impacted our lives, that scripture was relevant, speaking and impacting each of us today.

Our scriptures texts today invite us to wonder about these same assumptions. Do we as God’s people seek Biblical literacy; are we able to recall sacred stories alongside of our lived experience? Do we believe that the Word is relevant, still speaking, with the power to impact our lives today?

As the exiled people of Israel return to rebuild Jerusalem, they ask Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses given by the Lord. The book of the law, the Jewish Torah, is the first five books in our Bible. *All* the people gather together and Ezra reads these words of God. They listen from early morning until midday with attentive, hungry ears. The words invoke weeping and worship. Having been exiled and away from the hearing of the word, they long to once again dwell in the Word, to drink deeply from the Word of God. They respond with their whole beings. Why? Because they believe God’s Word is still relevant and speaking, with the power to change their lives as they journey forward into a future.

It says they read with interpretation. The people reading “gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” They hear and wonder about this Word within their current context, not as a word *about* God from the past, but as the Word *of* God relevant, with something to say to us this current day. As William Willimon says “At the heart of preaching is either a God who speaks and who speaks now... or preaching is silly.” The book *Feasting on the Word* states “Scripture gives us a lens to look at this world and our lives through God’s eyes...it urges us to meet God anew today.” This living Word has the power to invoke weeping, worship, lived response.

In our Gospel reading it is Jesus who opens the scriptures, the scrolls of the prophet Isaiah, a book in the Old Testament in our Bible. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, he reads the Word of God “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus, literate in the scriptures, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaims this Word of God, relevant and alive. This Word will become his earthly mission. He concludes “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in

your hearing.” The Word of God made flesh fulfills the Word proclaimed. The scripture is not a word about God from the past, but a Word alive in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today we gather even through these strange new means in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of our worship is the Word of God spoken, heard, interpreted, alive. We too have been filled and anointed. Writer Annie Dillard asks “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.” For when we gather together as God’s people, in the presence of the living and holy God and center our worship on God’s Word we cannot help but be changed. These sacred stories are our stories. We come to hear our story as God’s people. We come not to hear words *about* God but to receive the Word *of* God, still speaking and being fulfilled in our hearing.

The good news: this Word may speak on Sunday mornings but it is not silenced or stored away between services. God’s Word has the power to speak to *all* people at all times of day and night, in all circumstances. May we long and ask for it like the people who sought out Ezra. May we unroll the scrolls as Jesus did and claim the words as our earthly mission. May we seek interpretation believing that God is speaking something new to us through these words—connecting Sacred Story to our lives today.

“What Sacred Story impacted your decision to enter your current ministry?” As some of you may know, Peter is one of my favorite people in scripture. More often than I like to admit, his sacred story brings a word from God to my lived experience. This past year I have reflected on Peter’s quick confession. When Jesus asks “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds “You are the Messiah.” His words seem to reflect that he has it all figured out. He knows who Christ is and he is ready to follow. Yet when Jesus calls the disciples to follow him as he foretells of his pending death, Peter resists, “God forbid it.” While Peter desires to follow, his idea of following is not God’s plan; it will look different than Peter has anticipated. In response, Jesus firmly states “Get behind me.” He then takes Peter away with him to the top of the mountain where Peter encounters past prophets and future vision, witnessing the Transfiguration of Christ. He is given a glimpse of the mystery of God, expanding beyond his comprehension. Then together they come back down the mountain and trudge ahead, Christ in the lead, forward to untrodden paths. Three years ago, as Minister of Congregational Life, in a pre-pandemic congregation, I too confessed Christ with way too much self-confidence in my understanding of God’s plan. When God seemed to be leading me down an unexpected...possibly undesired path...I resisted, “God forbid it.” And Jesus seemed to speak “Get behind me.” I was invited up a mountain to be reminded of God’s scope and ability. Now with Christ in the lead, I trudge on...

What Sacred Story impacts your current lived experience? Yes – the assumption is that we are Biblically literate enough to recall the sacred texts. Yes – the assumption is that we believe that these sacred stories, the Word of God, indeed directly impacts our lives in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God!