

To Tell the Story  
Deuteronomy 6: 1-12, 17-25  
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A pastor of mine once told me that when she was a child, she learned from her grandmother that the Bible was a very precious book. A very special book. So special, in fact, that no one was even allowed to touch it! Her grandmother's Bible had a fancy leather cover – deep red, and embossed with gold writing. The pages were super thin. And, most importantly, the cover had a big zipper down the side, and her grandmother always kept the Bible zipped shut, protecting those fragile pages from dust and dirty hands.

I don't think that this pastor is alone. Perhaps many of us were raised to believe that the Bible is an important book, a holy book. But did anyone ever say that the Bible is a page turner? A you-just-can't-put-it-down kind of bestseller? Not necessarily. I don't know where this came from, but somewhere I got the idea that to read the Bible you have to be really holy and sacred. The house has to be completely quiet, maybe you light a candle...perhaps put on some new-agey kind of music...and you have to set aside plenty of free time to really savor the words. Otherwise, don't even bother!!

If you shared any of these ideas about reading the Bible, I certainly hope that this past year has helped you get over them and dig into the good book. If you're visiting for the first time today, you should know that we have spent the past year studying the Bible Stories we can't live without...from creation to Revelation...and it has been quite a journey. We didn't actually bind the word of God to our hands or to our foreheads, but we certainly studied it. In worship, in small groups, and in business meetings alike, we read and reflected on a different story each week.

Last Sunday, Chris Chakoian helped us reflect back on this journey. Today, we look forward, asking ourselves, "what next?" If you were still on vacation and couldn't be with us last Sunday, I hope you'll read Pastor Chris' sermon. Not only was it insightful, but it included a "Cliff's Notes" style summary of the Bible that will help anyone who has no interest in reading 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles or Leviticus!

Her sermon focused on two points that I want to remind us of today. First, she described the Bible as a conversation, often among competing voices. And second, she said that the Bible was still **one** book. This is an important paradox to keep in mind; the Bible is ultimately one story over many

years, and that is the story of God and of God's people. At the same time, there are many voices among God's people, and if the Bible sometimes seems like loosely or even unconnected stories, it is because it was written by many people over at least a thousand years, and these people experienced God in different ways.

So what now? We've heard these stories, but what do we do with what we've learned? As we attempt to answer this question, there are two **more** things I would like us to think about.

First, let's remember that the one story told in the Bible is the story of the **living** God. And these very ancient words of the Bible are living words, not history, or ancient poetry, or myths and legends, but **living words**. The Bible tells stories of God's goodness...God's power...God's mercy...and yes, God's judgment. So when we read a story with competing voices, rather than try to make everything fit together neatly, we can ask ourselves, "where is the living God in this story?...what enduring truths about God do we read in these words?"

The Bible is also filled with enduring truths about living humanity. About people. Our goodness....our sinfulness... our mercy...our cruelty. It's a story with no ending. The end of the Bible, (the book of Revelation) is not the end of the story, but rather the end of part 1 (or part 2, if you prefer). God lives and we live and together we continue to write the story of God and God's creation.

And this brings us to my second point. We have received a very clear call from God. God calls each and every one of us to keep these words alive. To continue to seek the truths in all these stories, truths about the living God and about us, and to relate them to our daily living. And then to share the Biblical story and teach it to our children.

In many ways, this is what today's passage from Deuteronomy says. The Israelites have been on a long and arduous journey – far more arduous than our own year-long journey (more arduous, even, than the week we slogged through 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings) ☺ They journeyed from slavery in Egypt to uncertainty in the wilderness, and to freedom and responsibility in the promised land. The tradition tells us that Moses now stands outside the land, and the words of Deuteronomy are his "farewell speech," as he reminds Israel of the laws they must follow when they inherit their land.

In actuality, the book of Deuteronomy was written many years later...and since hindsight is always 20/20, the author already knows the ways in which the Israelites will fail to uphold God's law. They will begin to forget the stories. They will not always teach their children about God.

With each generation, as the stories become more and more remote, there is a risk that these stories will no longer live.

*That's why these words known as the "Shema" are so vital.* The heart of today's message is what we just heard during the Word for Children. Moses says to the Israelites (and to us), "Listen up! There is only one true God, and that is the God we worship. Because you believe this, you must love God with all that you are. And so that you remember this, repeat these words everywhere – at home or away. Repeat them when you wake up and before you go to bed. Put them on your hand or your forehead if that's what it takes! And write them on the door of your house, so that as you come and go, these words go with you.

In A.J. Jacobs' very funny book, **The Year of Living Biblically**, Jacobs spends one year trying to follow every rule in the Bible – from "love your neighbor" to "don't wear mixed fibers." He binds the words of Scripture to his hand and between his eyes by making Xeroxed copies of the 10 commandments and tying one to his wrist and one to his head.

Jacobs finds this surprisingly effective. "Just try forgetting about the word of God when it's right in front of your eyeballs," he writes. "Sometimes I imagine the commandments sinking through my skin and going straight to my brain like some sort of holy nicotine patch" (**The Year of Living Biblically**. Simon and Schuster, 2007, 197).

This is particularly interesting because although Jacobs is Jewish, he does not practice his religion and describes himself as agnostic. But he embarks on this year-long endeavor primarily because he's a writer and he has a book contract, but also because he has a 2-year old son, Jasper. Jacobs wonders what he will pass on to his son. Even though he cannot fully believe, Jacobs knows that the tradition contains something real and true, and he wants his children to share in that truth. For that to happen, Jacobs needs to read the story for himself.

In his very interesting book, **Religious Literacy**, Steven Prothero shares some disheartening news. It turns out that most of the western world is fairly ignorant when it comes to religion. Many Christians couldn't even answer basic questions about our own tradition and Scriptures. Prothero makes a lengthy argument explaining this, but what struck me, is if we don't even understand our own story, our own Scriptures, our own heritage, how can our faith really guide our lives? And if adult Christians lack basic knowledge, how can we live out the promises we make to the children we baptize? At any point in time, **we are one generation away from losing the strand of our faith.**

*If one generation lives and dies without knowing the Bible and worshipping God, the entire tradition could die with that generation.*

Our friend Patrick Day used to tell parents that if you want faith to be important to your children, make it important to you. I would add that this extends to all of us. If we want to live in a faithful world, be faithful. Begin by heeding the words of the Shema: love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your entire soul, and every ounce of strength you have.

And if we love God, Jesus tells us, then the next logical and faithful step is to love each other. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment of all. Rather than be tricked into choosing one of the 10 commandments, Jesus describes them all in this way. He says, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (12:24-31)

Love God. Love neighbor. Those are God's commandments in a nutshell. Who are our neighbors? What does it mean to love them? These are the kinds of questions we will wrestle with together in the upcoming year as we explore "Christian living in a global age." As we continue into this next series, I hope that we will remember that first, we worship a living God, and that second, we are called to know the story of God and to share it with the world.

Even as we teach our children – and each other – about God, and tell God's story to the world, we know that the story is still being written...that God is still speaking...and that we don't have all the answers. If all we can manage to do is to love God with all our heart, and mind, and strength, then the rest will follow. Amen.