

WORDS . . . AND THE WORD

I married a poet, which means, as I have learned, *a person who cares about words*. My respect for the sheer force of words themselves has therefore grown exponentially since marrying Don. His poetry forces me to read everything differently, to slow down and hear the music, for his poetry is often aural rather than visual. Every word carries its own weight. Whereas I may demand conventional syntax and connecting pronouns, articles and verbs, his poetry requires that each word stand on its own feet—iambic or pentameter or free form. This careful attention to words is what Don has brought to my appreciation of "The Word," as the Bible is often referred to.

The Word of God—the Bible

Shortly after we met, Don came with me to his first Bible study. He was interested in the way the group approached the text. His background in Judaism familiarized him with a very different way of examining Scripture. The Rabbis delight in finding as many meanings as possible—something that would give some conservative Christians apoplexy, since they insist there has to be a right (read "true") meaning.

Over ensuing weeks, he also saw the limits of that approach and asked, "Why can't I see the entire Bible as my own life?" I don't think people in the group grasped his meaning fully at the time, but they were intrigued.

Just last year, one of the monks at the monastery offered a similar suggestion—that the Bible could be seen as a dream—full of mythic allusions and symbolic images, probing the labyrinthine peregrinations of the unconscious.

What is this fascinating, bewildering, powerful, misunderstood, controversial volume—printed on delicate onion skin paper edged in gold, bound in leather, that I have carried about reverently for years, and revered as the "word of God." My first Bible was given to me six months after my baptism, and had pictures interspersed with text. It got well-marked, sometimes with dates to indicate the connection of certain passages with significant events. Over time I owned a succession of Bibles—new translations, more compact editions convenient for travel, pocket-sized New Testaments—one of which unceremoniously fell out of my jeans pocket at a particularly inauspicious moment on a camp overnight trip as I was unsteadily perched over a hand-dug latrine.

The Bible was to be memorized as well as read—first in Sunday school, but also at home. Our family set out to conquer the entire New Testament book of Philippians one year. In high school, I carried around little cards with verses printed on them supplied by a group called the Navigators. They were arranged by topic so that we students could use the verses we learned in "witnessing" of our faith to others.

I was quite young when I undertook to read the Bible through from cover to cover. By the time I was 21, I would hazard a guess that I read it through more than three or four times at least. My own reading, plus teaching both at church and at the Christian school I attended, etched the words of the King James version firmly on mind and heart. The words became almost too familiar, losing some of their punch for me as I grew older. And yet, snatches of poetry or wisdom often came back to me at times when I needed comfort. I do not regret my immersion in the Scriptures.

I was encouraged to read the Bible devotionally—as part of a daily "quiet time." In camp, we called it "Morning Watch." The emphasis on this ritual shaped my approach to the Scripture more than anything else. I was to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the words of Scripture (as one Episcopal prayer states) and somehow this was to result in an experience of God that would send me out into each day "armed with the Spirit" to face that day's demands. Having such an experience on a regular basis was a tall order, and not one I ever have found easy to fulfill.

As you might expect, therapy began a process of liberation in this area of my life too. Legalism was first to drop away. It would not be the prescribed rituals that would produce an intimate relation to God. In fact, the immediacy of my experience of transformation in therapy revealed more of God to me than hours of Bible reading had ever done.

I would have to discover the mystery of God's love in drastically new ways. The Bible, once seen as rock-like and solid—a foundation of certainty—now seemed much more fluid, containing the juxtapositions and non-sequiturs common to dreams. If the Bible could serve as a narrative of one's life, as Don suggested, I could come to see myself in its pages. I certainly knew something of walking in the innocence of my own garden of Eden, of wandering in my Sinai wilderness desert of aching loneliness, and of standing before the empty tomb of dashed hopes only to turn and experience the awe of resurrected life.

Eventually I turned back to Scripture—after a time of leaving it on the shelf—and began to read it with new eyes. I was alternately appalled and mystified, horrified and awestruck, by stories I had earlier taken for granted. The textual criticism I had been exposed to, and heard refuted, now made sense to me. I needed a different lens than *inerrancy* through which to perceive the larger narrative, in order to see the Bible as the *word of God*. The Bible we have is not as perfect as I once thought, not always accurate. I began to see that it was not meant to be taken literally—a reliable book in answering all our historical and scientific questions. I was to lean closer, bend my ear to the reverberations underlying the words—to hear the word of God. The mystery that opened up became far more satisfying than the prior emphasis of literalists. As William Sloane Coffin wrote,

"What is literally true is insignificant. What is significant is what is eternally true, and it is eternally true of the Bible that its words come to us not universal precepts for all time to which we must give assent, but as words directed to eternally human situations in which we must decide."

Thus discrepancies between accounts of various events in the Gospels broaden and deepen my appreciation of those events. I am not confused, nor impelled to reconcile them. I can value the differing lenses through which the four Gospel authors chose to look at the material, and stay with what seems to be the point for me at the moment. If I am puzzled by an account, I am patient to sit with my questions, and not insist on a rational clarification.

I am continuing to learn to listen for the voice, the word from God, because I want experiential contact with God. Sometimes it breaks through in the words of the poetry of the Psalms. At other times, I naturally gravitate to the writings of the prophets, especially Isaiah. Their thundering passion is satisfying. I can well imagine the warnings they might be giving to George W. and to Christians in America if they spoke to us in our present times. On the other hand, I find the books of Moses pretty raw. Yahweh (the unarticulated Hebrew name for God) comes across as both crudely punitive and inexplicably patient. That narrative propels me toward the Gospels where the stories of Jesus are told with powerful simplicity—psychological portraits as well as spiritually instructive.

The Word of God—Jesus

For me, it all comes down to Jesus. I am a Christ-follower, a Christian. I have learned charity toward anyone who is a sincere seeker of religious faith or who is concerned with ultimate meanings. I can honor the devout Muslim and the Jew—both of whom praise the God of Abraham I do. I know a few Hindus and a number of Buddhists, one or two purported Taoists—enough to affirm God's embrace of these holy followers of wisdom. I do not see their hearts; I trust God's large heart to hold enough love for us all. I have learned about "mindfulness" and meditation from practitioners of Eastern religions. I have also found it helpful to consult the I Ching in times of decision making.

But my faith is Christian. I learned it at my mother's knee, was saturated with it in my community and schools. Now I embrace it consciously and voluntarily as a sentient being. Although all true religion seeks to provide a meaningful link that connects humans to God, Christianity's contribution to the religious scene is incontrovertibly powerful, providing the ultimate God-to-human link. The Incarnation—God invading this planet in human form as Jesus—gives us Christmas—with a fully human helpless baby, growing up as we do. And there is Easter—where God intervenes through Jesus, conquering death.

This is the scandal of my faith. That the God "in whom we trust" (as every penny we spend declares) was also clothed in flesh, played with siblings in the yard in Nazareth, went through adolescent acne or its first century equivalent, figured out his vocation as a young adult by the Jordan River, rebelled against the hypocrisies of the religious establishment of his day, bonded with twelve disciples, and kept his peace when on trial for his life.

I think it takes courage to believe. So I am in the process of believing. I am not one who "knows" with certainty. I need the mystery—the otherness, the scandal, the non-sense of it all. If I understood God—in the same way I speak of understanding an argument or a mathematical theorem, or even a work of art or literature—then I would not need faith. I prefer not to understand God in that way, for this would be a god of my understanding, my creation. I want to worship. So I need faith. Because for me, religion is ultimately about worship—that deep welling up from within of love, awe, praise, glory. A monk recently preached a sermon at the monastery about "ortho-doxy"—meaning "right glory." So I aspire to being an orthodox Christian—someone who gives the right glory to God. There are moments when this happens in my life. Only moments. But these moments sustain me.