

## Ancient Words

Debie Thomas tells the story of how one of the first songs she learned in Sunday school was called, “Read Your Bible, Pray Every Day.” It required the preschoolers to curl up small and tight on the carpeted floor of their children’s chapel—like seeds full of promise—and slowly unfurl as they sang “Read your Bible, pray every day, pray every day. Read your Bible, pray every day, and you’ll grow, grow, grow.” With each “grow,” the children were supposed to shoot up from the carpet a few inches, until finally they were on their tippy toes with their hands in the air, straining for the ceiling.

Verse one, she says, was an invitation. If it didn’t convince them, there was a cautionary verse two: “Don’t read your Bible, don’t ever pray, and you’ll shrink, shrink, shrink.” She actually liked the second verse better; she’d compete with her classmates to see who could shrink the smallest and the fastest.<sup>1</sup>

For some of us, this kind of introduction to the bible may sound familiar. For others, it may sound very strange, as though the bible were some kind of magic fertilizer that when you apply it to your life, you automatically grow more spiritual.

I suspect many of us have a more complicated relationship with the Bible. We’ve gone through seasons where we’ve questioned its value, questioned its truth. We’ve been unsure how to interpret it, or we’ve felt attacked by the way others interpret it and use it as a weapon. So we’d rather shrink away from it.

Or perhaps the problem for some of us is overfamiliarity. We’ve read the stories, and we’ve lost the ability, or the desire, to be surprised by them. When the Bible is read, we smile and nod--we’ve heard this before--and we’ve forgotten how to open ourselves up to let the words into our heart.

Or we simply stick to our favorite, well worn passages so we don’t have to try to make sense of the ones we don’t understand.

Admittedly the Bible can be an intimidating book. In her book *Hallelujah Anyway* Anne Lamott quotes Mark Yaconelli, a youth minister, who says, “The Bible is a weird collection of songs, stories, poems, letters, prayers, rules, dreams, mystical experiences, dietary rules and detailed instructions for building a giant boat. The people who wrote the Bible are trying to express an overwhelming, freeing, terrifying, exhilarating experience that we have nicknamed ‘God.’”

Sometimes we simply don’t know what to do with all that. If it’s any consolation, we are not alone in that feeling.

This morning when we opened up this weird collection we heard first from the book of Nehemiah. Nehe-what? Is that even a book in the Bible? For whatever reason, in our 3-year cycle of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary, today is the only day that we ever read out of the book of Nehemiah. I suspect most of us probably don’t know much about Nehemiah, which is a shame, because it’s actually a pretty interesting book.

Picture this: it’s the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, in Jerusalem. The Israelites, who had been in exile, carted off by the Babylonians, are finally allowed to return home after their captors, the Babylonians, are defeated by the

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas, “When He Opened the Book,” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2060-when-he-opened-the-book>

Persians. So they're not really free—they're still being ruled over by a foreign power—but at least they're able to go back to their city, to their land. Unfortunately, when they get there, it's a mess. It's been utterly destroyed. A generation has passed, so many of them were born in exile. They've never even seen Jerusalem. And they're thinking, "THIS is what our parents longed for?" Sadness and heartache are everywhere.

But under Nehemiah's leadership, the people get to work. And now it's finally starting to look like a city again, with the temple and the city walls rebuilt. But questions remain. Is this really what they're supposed to do, who they're supposed to be?

And the people gather, all of them, at the Water Gate, likely the site of a spring on the eastern side of the city. This is significant because the Water Gate is a place where everyone is allowed to be, whether you're ritually clean or unclean, it didn't matter. Anyone could gather there. The text repeats that phrase "all the people" a number of times and even specifically says, "both men and women," to emphasize how inclusive this gathering was.

So they're all there, and a hush falls over the crowd as the priest Ezra ascends a newly built platform in the square. As he carefully unrolls the scroll, they stand up. They praise God, hands lifted high; then they bow down, faces in the dirt as they worship the Lord. Ezra begins to read. His helpers circulate in the crowd, explaining and interpreting what God's Word says. The people listen attentively. They hear the stories of Abraham and Sarah, of Joseph and his brothers, of Moses and God's instructions for creating a community.

They hear hard words, words that speak aloud their sins and their failures, words that open their eyes to the ways they have failed to be God's people.

And they hear words of promise, words that reveal to them the source of hope. They hear of the God who promised to Jacob "I am with you and I will protect you everywhere you go;" who heard the cry of the people enslaved in Egypt and delivered them from oppression; who forgives sins; who vindicates God's people when their strength is gone.

In their world filled with doubt and despair, and with questions about the meaning and purpose of existence, they hear of God's glory, God's forgiveness, God's mercy and God's love, of God's intention for the world, and of God's promise to make it all good in the end.

And then a strange sound begins to move through the crowd, growing as it spreads through the multitude.

It is the sound of weeping. Something happened to them in that moment, as they realized how far they had strayed from God's intentions for them. They realized they had lost sight of God's law and lost sight of God's promises.

The words Ezra read were ancient, but that day marked something new. Something powerful and transformational happened as they gathered in community and opened their hearts to receive God's Word, savoring the sweetness and the sorrow, allowing those old, old words to speak into their lives anew.

Don't weep, their leaders tell them. Celebrate. Taste the goodness of the Lord in your feasting. Experience the joy of the Lord in your hearts.

Fast forward four or five hundred years and we find another scene of people gathered, this time in Jesus' home town of Nazareth. They were in the synagogue, and Jesus stands up to read. The people are transfixed as they hear the words of Isaiah, Jubilee words of forgiveness and release. Good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. Isaiah's words promise that all the things that have the capacity to hold us captive, all those things that keep us from wholeness, they will have no power anymore.

The words Jesus read were ancient, but that day marked something new. Something powerful and transformational happened as they gathered in community and opened their hearts to receive God's Word, savoring the sweetness and the sorrow, allowing those old, old words to speak into their lives anew.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus says. Because where Jesus is, things happen. Where Jesus is, salvation takes place and communities are transformed.

Jesus' audience responds differently to his sermon than the people did to Ezra's, and we'll hear that second half of the story next week and explore more what that means. But I think both communities are asking the same kinds of questions: Could these promises that we're hearing in Scripture really be for us? Could these old, old words really be alive and active right here, right now, in our very community?

And we hear first Ezra and then Jesus proclaim, "Know those old scriptures that sound so good to be true? Guess what. They're for us. They may seem at first glance to not apply to our current circumstances at all, but God is still speaking through them to us. They still have the power to transform our lives, our communities. God's Word is living, breathing, active in our midst, here and now."

May we, dear friends, gathered together to hear the Word read in our midst, receive the same invitation. To unroll the scroll. To read and receive. To engage with this weird collection of texts and hear these old, old words anew. To experience the joy of the Lord as we are released to share God's abundance.

These ancient words ARE for us, today. Thanks be to God! Amen.