

“FAITH IS A HABIT: Eat This Book”

Ezekiel 3:1-11

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Billy Collins is a former United States Poet Laureate and English Professor. He has written a wonderful little poem about his experience teaching poetry to first-year undergraduate students. It is appropriately titled “Introduction to Poetry.”

*I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide*

or press an ear against its hive.

*I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,*

*or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.*

*I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.*

*But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.*

All too often, I fear, this is how we approach the words of scripture, seeking the quickest route to their one “real” meaning. In an age of instant gratification, short attention spans, and radical political polarization, we turn these rich, complex, inspiring, diverse witnesses of the Biblical text into lifeless commentary, vapid soundbites, or a means of advancing our pre-formed agenda—tying the passage to a chair with rope and torturing a confession out of it, enlisting the God of all creation for the limited interests of our tribe or defense of our position. And,

perhaps worse, we’ve done the nearly impossible: We’ve made God boring. The picture of a safe, domesticated, powerless God whose message can be reduced to trite greeting card cliches or political rallying cries has almost nothing at all in common with the God we meet in scripture. God beyond our understanding. God whose ways and thoughts are not our ways. Not our thoughts.

Much is lost in this reductionist attitude toward scripture, perhaps most of all is the possibility that genuine heartfelt engagement with the Word of God might transform lives and inspire faith. Change the world. That’s what happened to the prophet Ezekiel. Now I’ll give you fair warning—Ezekiel is surely one of the strangest characters in all of scripture. During his prophetic career, he is commanded to build—and then immediately destroy—a model city. He’s asked to lie on his left side for 390 days followed by 40 days on his right side, and, my personal favorite, Ezekiel is commanded by God to cut his hair and his beard using a sword. And, perhaps strangest of all, in our passage this morning Ezekiel is commanded by God to eat a scroll.

The image is so vivid that it is repeated in scripture in the Bible’s final book, where John of Patmos, who received the revelation, is given a scroll to eat before the angel of the Lord gives him those ominous instructions: “You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.” We might conclude that *digesting* the word of God is a necessary prerequisite to fulfilling the call. And while the literal act may be a bit *distasteful*, I believe that the practice itself holds an important truth for you and for me.

Let’s start here. It has become commonplace in

mainline protestant denominations, like ours, to speak of Biblical illiteracy among many in our churches, to decry that reading the Bible is no longer a part of the fabric of our lives the way it was for folks in previous generations. While I'd wager that most of us *have* Bibles, they have become relics or artifacts, displayed on our shelves as if behind museum glass or hidden away in case the neighbors might mistake us for some kind of zealot.

There are many reasons for this. For some, the ancient texts of the Old and New Testament are just a little *too* ancient in a culture that gives top priority to what is new. We are fascinated with the latest operating system update and most advanced technology, and the Bible simply does not fit that paradigm with its archaic language, its ancient customs, its outmoded assumptions. Much of the Bible was written in the prescientific agrarian age, and we read it in an information age. There is a gulf of time and space that separates us.

Others have put their Bibles on the shelf for more personal reasons. Some in this community were wounded by the words of scripture as interpreted by parents, pastors, teachers, or churches. Others grew frustrated by preachers who fashioned scripture into a rhetorical weapon in the political or culture wars, clobbering the "other side" with Biblical language. In a recent piece on the unraveling of the Evangelical Church, writer Peter Wehner makes this point: "For many Christians, politics has become more of an identity marker than their faith. They might insist that they are interpreting their politics through the prism of scripture, with the former subordinate to the latter, but in fact scripture and biblical ethics are often distorted to fit their politics."

In my own view, this is the most tragic development for the church in the last 50 years, beating scripture with a hose until it is conformed to a self-affirming ideology. Wehner said, "Many Christians today see the world divided between us and them, the children of light and the children of darkness. *Blessed are the politically powerful, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*"

Blessed are the culture warriors, for they will be called children of God."

This seems to me a likely cause for the lack of Bible reading in 21st Century mainline churches, but it also points to what is perhaps an obvious answer. If you want to discover the contemporary significance of the scriptures, if you want to overcome trauma from past abuse of the Bible, if you want to know what the Bible actually says and how it speaks to you, the one thing you must do is *read the Bible!* Take it off the shelf, dust it off, and read it. Reading scripture might just be the most radical and rewarding practice a Christian can take up. In a powerful essay on how we Presbyterians read scripture, the late theologian and beloved professor at Wabash College (congrats on the win yesterday) Bill Placher suggests that when we are troubled or confused by certain passages, we should read them in the light of the whole witness of scripture—the witness of scripture which tells of God's unbreakable covenant, God's plan of redemption, God's intent to bring more and more outsiders into the covenant. The story of scripture is the story of God's widening circle of love and grace. And that's good news!

It occurred to me this week that perhaps the best way to recover reading the Bible in our churches and in our homes might be to share our passion and love for the Bible and how it has changed us.

Since I am the one standing up here, I will start. I was fortunate enough to grow up hearing and loving the stories of the Bible. When I was four years old and my sister was six, our parents invited us into their room where they handed us each a children's Bible, explaining that this was an important gift and a book they hoped we would grow to love in time. Like any good story, the stories of scripture were able to carry me from my bedroom or Sunday school classroom to these spellbinding places. The deck of a huge ark filled with every kind of animal. The den of lions with Daniel and his friends. Vacation Bible School, summer camp, youth conferences, and Sunday school opened new worlds of meaning. When in

college, I studied the Bible in Religion class, and I discovered what is to me the most incredible power of scripture: its ability to recreate the world in which we live, to reinterpret the lives we are called to live. I read the challenging words of the prophets and heard a call to seek justice and speak truth. I read the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus and found myself challenged to be more faithful, to love wider and deeper. I read the letters of the Apostle Paul and uncovered a startling fact that these letters do not make sense *to* me, they made sense *of* me.

More than any other reason, I went to Seminary because I had fallen in love with scripture. And, perhaps naively, I believed that my love for the Bible would be contagious in the church. I still believe that the word of God has the ability to transform lives, to revive churches, to inspire movements for the common good, and remake the world in the image of God's kingdom. But first, we must eat the scroll. We must read the word, study the word, live the word, love the word, proclaim the word, and teach the word to the next generation. Not in ways that torture it into confession, but in life-giving ways that open worlds of meaning.

Here's the truth, my friends, and you know it as well as I do. Words matter. The ones we speak matter. The ones we choose to hear matter as well. The messages we choose to hear about ourselves, about the future of the world, about people of different races, cultures, and faiths, about Republicans and Democrats, about refugees, about farmers, about factory workers... Those messages create a certain reality. None of us is immune to the effect of toxic language, for we become what we willingly digest. The words we speak are shaped by the words we hear. And *that* is why we need to be here, why we need to hear and digest words, words like, "You are forgiven." Words like, "All are welcome." Words like, "God is love." Words like, "Child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ forever." We need the words of grace to shape our reality more than the words of hatred that assault us and divide. We need a community of faith that invites us deeper into God's word, and so, into God's love.

Today we baptized two of God's beloved children, and we give them only one thing. We give them a Bible. We trust that over time their faith might be shaped by hearing the stories of scripture, that their hearts might be opened to understand the grace of God through those sacred words. It doesn't always happen quickly or dramatically, but it happens.

When my grandfather died, the family gathered in the house that had been their home for more than fifty years. We sat and shared stories and ate lovingly prepared olive loaf and farmer's cheese sandwiches made by Amish neighbors. Poppa's chair was empty, and I walked over and sat down in it. It was surely the first time I'd ever taken that seat. Beside the chair where he sat for decades, and for his last week of life, there was a small table. On that table sat two books: his large-print Bible and a small devotional. At that moment, I knew exactly what made my grandfather the faithful, loving, compassionate, and kind man he was. You see, he had eaten the scroll, and the word had become a part of him. Slowly, gradually, but steadily. Those who are well fed on a steady diet of God's word have a glow.

Friends, the words that we absorb will be our message to the world. Ezekiel opens his mouth and speaks the word of God. God's final command to the prophet has an air of uncertainty. God says, "Say to them, 'Thus says the Lord;,' whether they hear or refuse to hear." Maybe our words will be enough. Maybe not. The point is they must be spoken. For the prophet, the word is buried deep in his heart, and he has no choice but to speak. We speak because we have been spoken to.

When we digest words of hope and love and courage and compassion, we are compelled to speak those words, speak out against injustice, hatred, and bigotry. Speak for those whose voices have been silenced or denied. Speak because God has spoken to you. Share the words that have been shared with us. For your words can bring healing, spread light, scatter seeds of peace. Speak because you have heard.

The habit of reading and studying scripture can

transform you and draw us closer to one another
and to God. After all, we become what we consume.
We are what we eat. So...eat this book. Amen.

ⁱ Billy Collins, *Introduction to Poetry*, available through the Library of Congress at <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/001.html>.

ⁱⁱ Excerpt from "What do Presbyterians believe about the authority of Scripture?" by William C. Placher