

## Homily: A River you say... Borg Pages 1 - 57

There is a river flowing through my soul.

Those words, the image they evoke, that tune, they touch us and change us for the better. When we are in the spirit of that song we are not thinking of a literal river and we are not debating the existence of a soul. We are allowing ourselves be moved by the metaphor.

A song, a poem a story, they are all containers for meaning. Meaning sometimes interpreted by the intellect... sometimes interpreted by the heart. Sometimes meaning that can be put into words, Sometimes meaning that can only be experienced.

The Bible as they say is the greatest story ever told, the greatest container for meaning.

Marcus Borg has identifies three different ways that the Bible has been read. The first way has its roots in a time before the Enlightenment when there was little scientific understanding that would contradict a literal interpretation of the Bible. Borg calls this a period of Natural Literalism. The Bible was interpreted literally because there was little reason to do otherwise.

The emergence of new ways to read the Bible was coincident with the Enlightenment and the development of the scientific method. The Enlightenment led to the Modern World View, and in the modern world view what we can know became a function of what we could prove by the scientific method. As Borg says succinctly Epistemology (how we know) has become Ontology (what is real.) What is real is limited to what can be demonstrated by the scientific method.

But the Modern World View also sparked a religious reaction. The rise of Fundamental Christianity, which started with a series of essays published between 1910 and 1915, was a reaction to the modern worldview. Fundamentalists adopted a second way to read the Bible, what Borg calls a "Conscious Literalism." Fundamentalism, the intentional literal interpretation of the Bible despite all the evidence to the contrary, is a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon.

Even in the earlier Natural Literalism , some of the most influential Christian thinkers like St. Augustine in the second and third century took the view that the Biblical text should be interpreted as metaphorical, if it contradicts what we know from science and our God-given reason.

However, in both the natural literal and the conscious literal readings of the Bible interpretation is slanted toward a doctrinal, moralistic, patriarchal, exclusivist and after-life oriented understanding. It is no wonder that if we were raised to read the Bible in this way and now we can see the factual errors and contradictions in the Bible; if this way of reading the Bible was no longer coherent with the way we see the world, many of us just stopped reading the Bible.

Borg notes that it is striking how central sin and forgiveness are to the older, conventional version of Christianity. But this way of reading the Bible, this focus on sin and the fear that God

will punish us, is diametrically opposite to a Universalist understanding of God. Universalism teaches that God has already forgiven our sins and we have nothing to fear from a God of Love.

Some would argue that we live in the era of the modern world view and since we cannot prove the existence of God scientifically then there is no point in discussing God or reading the Bible. Borg however, makes the case that we are no longer in the modern era.

The first and second world wars were the catastrophes that ushered in the beginning of our present world view, the post modern world view. The disaster of war, the creation and deployment of weapons of mass destruction put the lie to the modern notion that we were destined to move onward and upward applying science to the resolution of all human problems.

All of this coincided with a revolution in scientific thought. Einstein's theory of relativity has established that time is not what it seems but is rather a translatable fourth dimension. Time and space are interchangeable. Matter and energy are interchangeable. The outcome of an experiment depends on what you are looking for. We live in a universe of literally infinite proportions and this may be only one of an infinite number of universes.

The postmodern world view is marked by a turn to the appreciation of experience and a new appreciation for the fact that stories can be true without being literally or factually true. So we are compelled to change our understanding of the Bible by the Modern World view and we are discouraged from scrapping the whole enterprise by the evolving post modern world view.

There is another way, a third way, to read the Bible. Borg calls it "Historical Metaphorical." In this new way the Bible is read with an understanding of the historical context including the literary conventions, and the point of view, the agenda and context of the human authors. In this historical metaphorical reading there is an appreciation that stories can be true without being factual. And, passages that emphasize outdated patriarchal moralistic doctrinal, after life oriented can be seen in the context that they were written and interpreted, or even totally rejected.

This third way has been taught in seminaries in mainline denominations at least since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In all, but the Fundamentalist denominations, the leaders of the church have been trained to see the Bible for what it is, a human document with sacred potential. But the message has not reached everyone in the pews. I have heard seminary students say that their parishioners are just not ready, and do not want to hear about this third way of reading the Bible.

Borg argues that we can read the Bible in this Historical Metaphorical way and maintain its value as sacrament. A sacrament is commonly defined as a mediator of the sacred, a vehicle by which God becomes present, a means through which the Spirit is experienced. When we are open to this text, if we listen we hear the voices of our ancestors and we can delight in the ongoing drama of God and mankind.

We cannot ignore the Bible. We can choose to let our advertising agencies and television commercials teach us about the Bible. We can leave the serious Biblical study to the Christian Fundamentalists. They would insist that they alone, own and can interpret this

priceless piece of our human heritage. We can grant them the franchise on Bible interpretation, a literalistic, doctrinal, moralistic, patriarchal, exclusivist, after-life oriented interpretation.

Or we can claim the Bible for ourselves, for you and for me, as an incredible gift from our religious heritage; a book that belongs to all humanity. A book that is foundational to who we are and a book that brings with it two thousand years and more of scholarly thought and study and analysis.

Let us embrace the beauty of these ancient stories. Let us hear the music and poetry. When I feel myself close to people struggling over 3000 years to give meaning to their lives I can feel the vibrations of some very old songs. They sound an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

Amen