

Lenten Study

John 3:1-17 and Deuteronomy 6:1-9

March 15, 2020

I love to read. I don't really remember learning how to read; as far as I know, I've always known how. When I was a little girl, we would go to the library branch near our house at least once a week, and I would search the bins of children's books for ones I hadn't read, and we'd take home a big stack each week. I would finish them all within about three days, and beg to go back to the library. I'd be happy reading anytime, anywhere. When I was little, I was required to attend my little brother's soccer games. I found the loophole in that requirement, and toted my current library book along, paying no attention at all to the action on the field. I was not allowed to read at the dinner table or at church, and reading in the car made me car sick. Other than that, I was reading.

I read in all kinds of ways—I skim the newspaper headlines pretty quickly, I can devour a good novel, I can work my way through some nonfiction, though it's not my favorite, I read nice emails over and over again. I read something differently if I want to remember it later than if it's for pure entertainment. Because we read for different purposes too—to learn something, to escape for a few hours, to connect with someone we love.

We bring all of these reading skills and methods when we come to the Bible. We read it in different ways and for different purposes. And this only makes sense, because it is really a book of books, a library of different kinds of literature. There is poetry and stories and letters and visions.

As we think about studying the Bible, in our series of spiritual disciplines, I'd like for us to think about how we read the Bible and for what purposes. This next thought isn't original to me, but I found it helpful in thinking about this. We come to the Bible and read it in two different ways. Maybe more, but these two ways are the most common and the most important. We read either for information or for formation.

What I mean by information, is that we read a particular passage wanting to know, what happened in this story, or what did Jesus say about working on the Sabbath, or what are the Ten Commandments. We want to be informed, to learn more about the Bible, the writers, the people it describes, the world in which it was written.

What I mean by formation is something entirely different. We come to the Bible in order to be formed, to be changed, to be made into what God wants us to

be. We come to the Bible, hoping that we will never be the same again, and at the same time fearing that we will never be the same again.

So as we think about undertaking study as a Lenten discipline, or as a spiritual discipline that will last far beyond Lent, let's think about studying the Bible in those two ways, as a means of information and formation. First, studying the Bible as a way to get information. It helps us understand the setting and culture of what we are reading. Reading the Bible for information may require some tools, but the most important thing is that it requires paying attention and asking questions. Pay attention to the details, who and what are included and who and what aren't mentioned. A couple of things will come in handy: a Bible dictionary and a concordance, either in print or online. When you read about Jericho, for example, take the time to look up Jericho in the dictionary; learn where else it appears in the Bible, what important things took place there. And then look up Jericho on a map. Sure, this will slow you down, but who says we have to be in a hurry?

In a similar way, a concordance will help you understand certain concepts and words and how the Biblical writers use them. Say you are reading in Romans about justification. That word doesn't immediately make sense, so you turn to the concordance and look up justification. It will tell you everywhere in the Bible that word appears, and you can look it up to see how else it is used and start to understand the meanings of justification.

Those are all ways of reading the Bible for information. Reading the Bible for formation may require you to read for information first, to make sure you understand what the writers were describing or the words they were using. But then you turn to read with a different focus of attention. When you read for formation, you are constantly asking yourself the question, "what is God saying to me here?" When you read for formation, you read prayerfully, carefully, always being open to a word from God. When you read about Jericho this time, you wonder what it would be like to live in Jericho, what a Jericho-type place would be for you, whether you are open to God's presence in such a place. This time, when you read about justification, you pray and wonder about how Jesus makes us right with God, what needs to be made right in yourself. And you spend a lot less energy trying to understand, and a lot more energy just being, waiting on God's word to you.

Both of our Scriptures this morning illustrate these types of reading. Nicodemus is an educated man, probably accustomed to reading the Scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament, for information. In fact, he knows the

Scriptures well. But he comes to Jesus with what is a formational question: Teacher, I know that you must be from God...how can I be born from above? He works through it in an informational, literal way—how could a person enter again into his mother’s womb, but he is really asking in a formational way, how can these signs, this amazing possibility, be real for me?

And our Old Testament reading was probably the Scripture passage that Nicodemus was most familiar with, the famous “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” That sentence was a sentence of information, of the theology of the Israelite people. But even more, it was a sentence of formation, a sentence of identity, a sentence that echoed through the hearts and minds of the people.

To think specifically about a spiritual discipline of study, we need to think about how we might study in a structured way. This might include setting aside of a certain time of day, or a certain time of week, to read. It might always happen in a particular place. It might include a journal or way to write down God’s words to you. It must include prayer. It might also include discussions with others about what you are reading.

Like the disciplines of fasting and praying, I can’t tell you, nor you me, exactly how to go about studying. It is not a discipline to be practiced by just going through the motions. It requires paying attention and being intentional about how we read and listen to Scripture. It is a discipline both of the mind and the spirit. If we stick with this discipline, we will find ourselves shaped and formed by the Word of God, so that it is second nature for us to see how our daily lives and the words that we read in Scripture intersect and illumine each other.

To study God’s Word, in its many forms, is to immerse ourselves in the life of God, to allow our lives to become God’s.