

What Do You Think the Bible is?

Before Mary and I decided to become members of this fellowship, I asked two of the few members I knew at the time this question: Does this fellowship have an allergy to discussing or even mentioning the words Bible, Jesus, or God? The first answer I received was, "No, I don't think so." The second individual responded, Yes, I expect we do." So...with that question settled unambiguously... we decided to join.

Now, to you allergy sufferers in this fellowship I suggest (1) take a deep breath, and (2) be cheered by the realization that your allergic exposure will not last long.

In previous UU talks I have shared with you that at the age of four I started to collect insects and feathers. Why? I have no idea! All I can say is that enjoying and trying to understand the world of other creatures has been a life-long passion. Perhaps it's embedded somewhere in my DNA. Who knows?

I have also mentioned that for a period of four years, my final two years of high school and first two years of college, I was planning on entering seminary after completing college. What I have not previously shared is that while in high school I determined to read the Bible – all of it – from beginning to end. Why? Again I can't say. I simply had to do it. And I did it. Looking back on it I can readily see that it was an act of discipline and determination. It was certainly not an act resulting in significant enlightenment. I didn't have a clue what I was doing. We had no study guides of any kind in the house and, in fact, mine was the only Bible. Why I felt compelled to do this I can no more answer than why I started to collect feathers and insects. Nonetheless, my interest in theology and religion has also remained life-long.

This brings us to this morning's brief commentary on a very unusual book - the Bible.

- It is in one sense not A book but 66 books – some very long and others less than one page.
- It was written over a very long time – about 1,100 years starting approximately 1,000 BCE to roughly 135 CE.
- It contains just about any kind of writing one can imagine – poetry, descriptions of mass slaughter, accounts of infidelity, history, law codes, letters, a play, short stories, proverbs, hymns, descriptions of Divine/human discussion, prophecy and on and on.
- I doubt you could name a sin, a vice, or an example of disreputable human behavior that is not displayed by someone in this book.
- For many years the Bible has been the best selling book in the world. For many years it is also the book most often stolen from bookstores and churches.
- It has been called the most influential book the world has ever known.
- It is found in virtually every hotel room in the world.
- US Presidents from Washington to Trump have taken the oath of office with their hand resting on it.

- It has been translated into more than 500 different languages.
- There are Bibles for environmentalists, Bibles for women, Bibles for children, Bibles for Asians, Bibles for African Americans, even Bibles for single men, fire-fighters, and, believe it or not, Bibles for football fans.

Let's think about this a bit more. Six years ago some of you may have been aware that 2011 marked the 400th birthday of the King James Bible (KJV) of which one authority has remarked, "In a broader cultural context, the KJV has proved to be the most enduring embodiment of scripture in the English language." Scholars have long argued that you cannot be culturally literate without being at least basically familiar with Biblical literature. The vast majority of English authors over the centuries have presumed that their readers were biblically literate – Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Jane Austin, Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King. The same holds true for art and music: Rembrandt's *The Blinding of Samson* and *The Last Supper*, Blue's legend Willie Johnson, Handel's *Messiah*, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, the Negro spiritual "Dem bones gonna rise again." Moreover, in everyday speech and popular culture we unknowingly use Biblical phrases all the time.

Drop in the bucket

Handwriting on the wall

The apple of my eye

Entering the lion's den

A man after his own heart

Out of the mouths of babes

All taken directly from the Bible. Should you be interested, a recent book details 257 common English expressions taken from the Bible. In addition, the Biblical idiom continues to shape our social and political lives. The Declaration of Independence, the Civil Rights movement, the struggle for women's rights have all been shaped by biblical interpretation. Martin Luther King's famous letter from Birmingham City Jail and, of course, his famous "I Have a Dream" speech are steeped in biblical images.

Given all this, one might suppose that this book is very familiar to most of us. I'm reasonably sure it is not. Furthermore, the rate of Biblical literacy in this country is steadily declining. A recent poll revealed that 10% of those sampled thought Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. Thirty eight percent believed that the Old and New Testaments were written a few years after Jesus' death. And then there is the wonderful comment that the epistles were the wives of the apostles. Not surprisingly the president of the polling firm commented, "Clearly, most people don't know what to make of the Bible." Do we?

Now consider this.

33% of the US population believe the Bible is both the Word of God and literally true word for word.

Another 30% of the population also believe the Bible is the Word of God but not literally true word for word.

28% believe the Bible is not the Word of God but was written by men.

We could go on and on in this vein but perhaps two brief stories best symbolize the extremes of Biblical interest. When Frederick Douglass's master discovered that his wife was teaching the eight-year-old slave to read the Bible, he sternly forbade her to continue doing so. As he put it, "If he learns to read the Bible it will ever unfit him to be a slave." This, the renowned abolitionist Douglass later reflected, was the first antislavery lecture he had ever heard, and it inspired him to do anything he could to read more of the Bible. He recalled zealously gathering scattered pages of it from the gutters of Baltimore streets, carefully washing, drying, and collating them to read in secret. Why the pages were in the gutter he didn't say.

Now, to be sure, that occurred some time ago. Here's a very different biblical outlook – an account of a classroom experience recalled by a religion prof more recently. Here's professor Beal's account. "In class the other day, we were discussing the current financial fiasco, asking where the prophetic voices were, those who had the courage to address the ugliest dimension of the matter... I asked my students to take a look at the second chapter of the prophet Micah for a potential model."

"Where do we find that?" someone asked.

"In a Bible," I suggested.

Another student followed up, "Do you actually think we just have Bibles sitting around our dorms?"

"Others nodded, amazed that I seemed to be imagining that a Bible would be anywhere near any of them or that they would deem it remotely relevant to their lives, in or out of the classroom. They had a point. How foolishly presumptuous of me. The cultural relevance of the Bible is not a given. Many, maybe most, would say that ours is a post-biblical age." Would we agree?

It probably comes as no great surprise that many theologians, pastors, and Biblical scholars have somewhat different views although one former Episcopal bishop and prolific author, John Shelby Spong, has expressed some interesting views of popular understanding or lack of understanding of the Bible. Here are a few of his comments.

"None of the authors of the books in the Bible wrote thinking that they were writing the 'Word of God.' That was something decided much later by someone else." Any serious study of religious tradition clearly demonstrates that Biblical literalism has been "burned deeply into the psyches of western people." For example, relatively few of us understand that "the virgin birth was a ninth-decade addition" and that "almost all the details of the Easter story appearing in one gospel are contradicted in another." Sadly, many church authorities not only encourage this blind, unthinking set of beliefs but it is promoted to be "the only possibility for understanding the Bible."

And Spong continues. "The primary response to this mentality, and it is a response that is growing rapidly, is to abandon all religion and to take up citizenship in the 'secular city.' I wonder, is that where many of us are today? Proponents of this stance no longer see any

relevance in religion or the Bible for their lives today...They find the concepts of miracles and magic to be outside their worldview. They dismiss readily ideas like that of a "fall" from perfection into "original sin," which is supposed to account for evil and which requires an external rescuer to save us from our sins." That's pretty straight talk for an Episcopal bishop.

On the other hand, Peter Gomes, the recently deceased minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, said this in one of his books: The Bible "is a result or consequence of a complex process that is both human and divine. Although the scriptures take many forms - poetry, wisdom, law, and history - the subject is always the same: the relationship between God's people and their God."

In line with that view, a recent Gallup poll questioned people who attend church services at least monthly to see what factors they regarded as most important in attending church. Three out of four respondents said they go to church to hear sermons about the Bible or to help them relate faith to their daily living. Three out of four said that.

Marcus Borg, the recently deceased Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, has reminded us again and again of an invaluable thought to remember when reading the Bible. Here it is. "... the realization that stories (understood as metaphorical narratives) can be profoundly true without being literally and factually true." The Bible has many such stories. For example, is the parable of the Good Samaritan 'true?' Did it actually happen? Probably not. Does it have a truth for us even today? It sure does.

This reminds me of a comment by Mark Twain: "Most people are bothered by those passages of scripture they don't understand, but the passages that bother me most are those I do understand." I would suggest that is one hazard accompanying thoughtful reading of scripture. Sooner or later, if you're thinking at all, you will be reminded, if not actually brought up short, with an admonition or example requiring further thought.

I suspect anyone conversant with theological literature owes a debt to one of our best-known and certainly most prolific Old Testament scholars, Walter Brueggemann. In a recent book he poses the following two questions: (1) Why is it that the Psalms hold such a compelling place in our faith, our worship, and our spirituality? "We may quickly respond, "They don't." But for millions they do. Brueggemann continues. "Why is it that often when we have had a stroke and can barely remember or speak, we can still mumble, "The Lord is my shepherd?" (2) The second question he poses flies in the face of the first one. "Given the preoccupation with the psalms why is it that most of us know only fragments from a very few psalms" - "The Lord is my shepherd" (23), "I will lift up my eyes until the hills" (121), "God is our refuge and strength" (46)?

Here's Brueggemann's answer. "We know that the Psalms speak to us of a counter-world that is very different from our current world. We yearn for a world that is characterized by trust and assurance. That is why it is comforting as a patient to hear the psalms at the hospital and why it is assuring to the next of kin to hear them at the graveside. The words speak of a better world, a world of love and trust and assurance."

Now, as helpful as that sounds, I expect some of us, maybe many of us, don't buy any of this. Turning to the Psalms or the New Testament would never occur to us. You may argue, "Dick, for heaven's sake, hold on here a minute. Brueggemann's examples of hospital patients and

graveside services suggest we're dealing with a bunch of old folks - certainly not with youthful guys and gals like us. Not with us intelligent, free-thinking, service-minded folks."

So, where does all this leave us? Clearly I can't speak for any of you but let me begin by offering four thoughts I would guess many of us might agree with. Doing so I fully recognize some of these comments would outrage a number of our Door County pastors and upset many of their parishioners.

[1] The Bible should not be read as God's words copied by human hands. In no literal sense is the Bible "The Word of God." Now, having said that I would add some advice from a book we would do well to become familiar with: "A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism." If you don't know this book I recommend it to you. Here's the comment. "Fundamentalism of the right has its whiplash in fundamentalism of the left. When the true believer proclaims that the Bible is the unique word of God - to be accepted without question - the true unbeliever responds by dismissing scripture as a figment of demented imagination." I hope that's understandable. But just to be clear, the point is that for the "true conservative" believer the Bible is the Word of God and every word is sacred. The automatic, opposing view on the left is that the Bible is worthless. I would remind us that the source of the original comment is the book, "A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism."

[2] Thought number 2. Not only is the Bible not literally the Word of God, the Bible's authors were certainly not writing for us nor were they attempting to report historical truths. "They were writing because of a deep commitment to their religious faith."

[3] Number 3. Much religion today and many views of "God" are, at best, unfortunate and not at all conducive to modern, intelligent thought. We need to remember that our word "God" is simply our name for that which is greater than any of us. It is our name for the unimaginable source of everything that exists.

[4] Finally, we cannot deny that the Bible has had an unsurpassed influence on our language, our literature, our art, and our music and we cannot fully appreciate any of this without some reasonable level of biblical literacy. No other book could begin to claim such an influence.

Now, it seems to me not unreasonable to suggest that we UUers should have some familiarity with our UU tradition. In addition to our seven principles that are reasonably well-known, we also have six Sources which, I must confess, I hear nothing about. Several are relevant but I will quote only one: "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." That comment, of course, is taken directly from both the Old and New Testament. In addition to the six Sources we have the UU Association website with this statement: "The Bible and its many interpretations have largely shaped our history." Clearly, the Bible is not a stranger to the UU tradition.

I want to conclude my remarks this morning with two thoughts that are key for me. They reflect in large part the writings of two esteemed authors. We have already met one of them - Walter Bruggemann. The other is Robert McAfee Brown. First Bruggemann. For many people the Bible remains a resource for faith. "It is not a historical curiosity. It is not an outdated advice column." By definition it is a book for, in Bruggemann's words, "the believing community." Then he elaborates a bit. The Bible should be discerned "as much as a set of

questions...as a set of answers." For example, what does the admonition "Love your neighbor as yourself" really imply? Or, how about the command of Jesus, "Follow me." Does that have any relevance for us today? Burggemann continues, "The Bible is not "an answer book or a security blanket." The Bible is not a code of proper conduct or a "collection of doctrine...that need only to be believed." Finally, it is not concerned with "right morality, right piety, or right doctrine. Rather it is concerned with faithful relationships between God" and humans, "between all people, and between us humans and all other earthly creatures."

For me, those thoughts are one of the two most important thoughts I have expressed this morning. They are beautifully captured by the familiar and succinct passage from Micah: "...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

I could stop right here. And yet, Robert McAfee Brown adds a dimension I had never thought of before reading it in one of his books. He suggests that we should read the Bible as actors who are involved in the Biblical drama of God's search for man. As he puts it, "We are part of this drama. We cannot separate ourselves from it. We cannot understand the Bible as an ancient manuscript chiefly of interest " to 'museum keepers.' We must understand it as a living book addressed to us."...Now, here is his key point - a point that for most of my life I never considered. "The fatal error is to read the Bible as a spectator rather than as a participant, to make the faulty assumption that we can sit in a box seat watching the drama, when we actually are on the stage taking part in the drama."

In other words, "this means that when" the prophet "Amos thunders out to the people of Bethel that they are guilty of wrongdoing, we hear him speaking to us as well. He not only tells us what was wrong in Bethel - he is" also "telling us what is wrong in Minneapolis" or Madison or Kewaunee County. Amos denounced the "aggregation of land at the expense of local farmers." He minced few words - some of which might be familiar to us. "I hate, I despise your festivals...I will not accept" your burnt offerings. In other words, no excuses. Don't try to placate me. Disenfranchising local farmers is wrong. Period.

As the people of ancient Israel "walk across the pages of this book their story becomes our story. Their concerns become our concerns. Their call to action becomes our invitation to join with them and to begin to redeem our responsibilities as people who love our neighbors as ourselves and who treasure our responsibilities as stewards of our marvelous planet. We are not spectators. We are on stage taking part in the drama." We stand on stage with the Bible in one hand and the daily news in the other hand.

The title of this talk today is a question. Is the Bible relevant for us today? I cannot presume to answer for any of you. I can only pose the question and add some thoughts.

For me, personally, in a way I cannot begin to explain, the Bible called to me as a teenager. It spoke a language I could only marginally interpret. It still calls to me. It provokes me. It challenges me. It inspires me. I have only begun to understand.

