



BIBLICAL DIMENSION

[INTRODUCTION]

In our first session, we talked about the analogy that Phyllis Tickle invented to describe religion: as a rope of three cords - **corporeality** (or the material aspects of religion); **morality**; and **spirituality**. This class, of course, focuses on spirituality and Jesus brand spirituality, in particular.

But Phyllis Tickle's analogy includes one other element we didn't mention. The rope of religion (made up of the previously mentioned three cords), she says, *is surrounded by a casing to keep it all together*. The casing of the rope, according to Tickle, is the **story** any religion tells about the world and our place in the world.



Christianity is no different than any other religion in this respect: it too has a story to tell about the world and our place in the world. In fact, one could say that Christianity's main feature is its story, what is sometimes called "the gospel story."

For the sake of clarity, and given varying levels of familiarity with the idea of "the gospel story", we need a working understanding of Christianity's main

story. Try this on for size: the Christian story is *the love story of God in search of humanity.*

The Bible is the source book, the earliest compilation in written form, of this story.

(Note: please read chapters 7 & 8 in Jesus Brand Spirituality for background on this class session.)

[A STORY RUNS THROUGH IT]

To follow Jesus means **joining our two stories**; the story of our life intersecting the story of his life to make a new story.

The biblical dimension is an important dimension of Jesus brand spirituality because Jesus was a real historical figure; his story comes to us in the Bible as part of a bigger story, the story of Israel, which in turn is part of the biggest story: the love story of God in search of humanity (and of humanity in search of God.)

The Bible, then, is: the story of **Jesus**,
the story of **Israel**,
the **love story of God & Humanity.**

[Leader's Note: there may be some students for whom "story" connotes "fiction". To clarify, it is worthwhile defining in what sense we are using the term story. By story, we mean: has a beginning, a middle and an end; has twists and turns; is unfolding, is going somewhere. Perhaps give other non-fictional stories as an example, such as "the story of Microsoft" or your "life story".]

Jesus brand spirituality has a biblical dimension because Jesus was shaped by these sacred writings. They were his sacred writings. He came to understand his messianic mission through engaging them; he understood himself in reference to them; he treated them as sacred writings, quoting from the Psalms, the Prophets, and Law all the time.

Jesus understood his mission as the dramatic climax of the love story of God in search of humanity.

In one heated exchange with the Bible scholars of his day, Jesus said this: *"You diligently study the scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."* (John 5: 39-40)

In fact, NT writers understood Jesus as "the word" (God's creative word, by which the universe was made – see Genesis 1) appearing in the flesh.

"In the Beginning ["once upon a time"] was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.... All things were made through him and without him nothing was made that has been made.... The word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:1, 3, 14)

It's as if the author of the story, the playwright himself, has entered the stage as the protagonist – the lead character who shapes the direction and outcome of the story. Like William Shakespeare entering one his own plays as the lead character to direct the play from within the play.

[THE BIBLE: A CHALLENGING COLLECTION OF WRITINGS]

The Bible is a collection of many different types of writings – poetry, historical narrative, parables, wisdom writings, prophetic writings, a quirky ancient genre called apocalyptic, etc.

The Bible comes from a culture and time very different than our own. The "patriarchs" (founders of Israel) date back 2,000 years before the coming of Christ, which in turn is 2000 (give or take) years before our time.

The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew, the New Testament mostly in Greek. Most of us read both books translated into our native languages.

Reading the Bible, in other words, isn't quite like reading "Chicken Soup for the Soul".

The Challenge of Interpreting the Bible

Given the complexities of the Bible itself – its various forms, its cultural distance (written in a time when the earth was viewed as the center of the cosmos, with the sun revolving around it, written before science had even been invented, in a time and place very different than our own) – **how do we go about the task of interpreting the Bible?**

*The Bible is a **living** word interpreted under the **guidance** of the Spirit in the **context** of community (past and present) with the **aid** of reason and experience.*

One of the important issues we face in following the Jesus path is this one: how do we find our way forward? (How do we know where to follow?) The question connects to the age-old issue of authority....

Throughout church history, Christians have taken different approaches to this question, but these are the players in the "discernment process", especially as it relates to the Bible.

- **Sacred Scripture**: the writings themselves handed down to us
- **Sacred Spirit**: the living spirit who breathes on us as we read
- **Sacred Community**: the Bible after all is the book of the community, bearing witness to the role of the community in discerning truth
- **Sacred Experience**: God speaks directly to our hearts through experience; examples in the Bible where direct revelation moderates or expands what was understood before (eg. Peter's vision...)
- **Sacred Reason**: Jesus is the fulfillment of "Logos" (reason); part of what it means for us to be made in God's image is that we think and reason. We're not supposed to check our brains at the door when we come to church.

Together these elements form a **mosaic**, and you know you've got it right when the mosaic reveals the face of **Christ**, who holds all things together.

Assumptions about the Bible

“I will simply state my assumptions about the Bible: On its human side, I assume that it was produced and preserved by competent human beings who were at least as intelligent and devout as we are today. I assume that they were quite capable of presenting what they heard and experienced in the language of their historical community, which we can understand with due diligence.

On the divine side, I assume that God has been willing and competent to arrange for the Bible, including its record of Jesus, to emerge and be preserved in ways that will secure his purposes for it among human beings worldwide. Those who actually believe in God will be untroubled by this. I assume that he did not and would not leave his message to humankind in a form that can only be understood by a handful of late-twentieth-century professional scholars, who cannot even agree among themselves on theories that they assume to determine what the message is.

The Bible is, after all, God’s gift to the world through his Church, not to the scholars. It comes through the life of his people and nourishes that life. Its purpose is practical, not academic. An intelligent, careful, intensive but straightforward reading...is what it requires to direct us into life in God’s kingdom. Any other approach to the Bible, I believe, conflicts with the picture of God that, all agree, emerges from Jesus and his tradition.”

From [The Divine Conspiracy](#) by Dallas Willard, Harper, San Francisco, c. 1998 pp xvi-xvii. Willard is a theologian and scholar. He is professor at the University of Southern California’s School of Philosophy.

How do we meaningfully engage the Bible? How do we develop the biblical dimension of Jesus Brand Spirituality?

[FIRST PRIORITY: GET YOUR STORY STRAIGHT]

What is the grand sweep of the story? What are the recurring themes, the main characters, the primary plot line of God's story?

Helpful tools:

- The Book of God, by Walter Wangerin
- Jesus, by Walter Wangerin
- Even a good book of Bible Stories written for children
- Movies: *The Prince of Egypt*; *Jesus of Nazareth*
- An accessible translation of the bible, such as The Message, by Eugene Peterson.

Think of the Bible as....**The Love Story of God & Humanity in 5 Acts**

ACT ONE

Pre-History: Genesis 2-3 // The Primordial Garden

[Leader's Note: see pages 135-144 of Jesus Brand Spirituality for a fuller description of these 5 acts...]

Eden depicted as a garden, with a river running through it.
Paradise: a walled garden, a garden of earthly delights.

Theme: "There's a place for us"

[Leader's Note: Many children have the experience of creating a place for themselves, such as a tree fort, or an old refrigerator box, a tent, etc. Perhaps sharing a personal story from your own childhood or the experiences of your children can illustrate this idea...]

A place where we can know ourselves (self awareness setting us apart from other species), others and God and be known by them all. Lord YHWH, Lord ADAM, Lady EVE

Before first day of pre-history is over, the **tragic breach of trust**. We take what hasn't been given: knowledge we're not ready for. Self-awareness is polluted by **shame**; awareness of others distorted by **blame**; awareness of God obscured by **guilt-fear**.

This is the **epicenter**, the tap-root of injustice, a world gone wrong.

Somewhere in or beyond the garden, the death of an innocent. [LORD YHWH covers nakedness of Man-Woman with the pelt of an innocent animal.]

The human **exile** begins. Humans sent into exile east of the garden...

ACT TWO

Ancient History: Ezekiel 47 // Ezekiel's Visionary Garden-Temple

Eve of destruction: Israel about to go into Babylonian exile.
Ezekiel has a vision of a New Temple....

A visionary temple like a garden. As if God is keeping the hope alive:
"There's a place for us"

A meeting place with a way in (via **gates**); an **altar** of sacrifice (death of innocent); a **river runs through it**.

ACT THREE

Jesus in Herod's Temple: John 7

The **Feast of Tabernacles**. Feast of the last ingathering; also called the Feast of Booths because the pilgrims brought branches-sheaves to form little shelters on their journey. **There's a place for us**.

During the feast the Priests pour water from the pool of Siloam on the altar (a river runs through it). Jesus; **"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. And out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."** (John 7:37)

There's a place for us. The garden's to be built in our hearts; the temple, our bodies. The river running through it, the Spirit.

Fulfilling the words of the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah 58: 11 ***“you will be a well watered garden...”***

Consider how the human heart is like a walled garden...
Consider how the human heart functions as a landing pad for the Holy Spirit...

ACT FOUR

The Easter Garden: John 20

It's early morning, just before dawn. The first day of a new week.
Another garden. A burial garden. The place where Jesus was buried on the eve of the Sabbath.

Some women have come to anoint the body of Jesus, now that the Sabbath is over. When they arrive at the tomb, they find it empty, the burial napkin lying neatly folded on the ground.

They are overcome with grief. Who could've stolen his body? The tomb firmly sealed by a large rock and a guard sent from the authorities.

Mary is her name, gives herself over to a flood of tears. All her hopes and dreams for a better life, a better future, broken.

In the corner of her eye, just beyond her field of vision she notices a figure moving near. As she approaches she mistakes for the gardener.

But with one word from this mystery figure, Mary, her world is turned upside down again. She cries out, "Rabboni"--teacher in Aramaic.

They have a brief exchange, and then she's sent to tell the disciples in hiding. And thus begin the rumors of a transformed son of Man--walking in the light and power of new creation. As if God has taken something of the wonderful future at the end of time and broken into the present. Bringing new life, a new beginning, and most of all HOPE.

The Jesus movement begins. A movement that has survived against all odds. Against all our own efforts to sully the Jesus brand with our own mistaken views of God and religion and faith.

Nevertheless, something survives that has life and power and bears with it hope.

ACT FIVE

The Garden City to Come: Revelation 21 // Where's the Story Headed?

A wild eyed piece of apocalyptic literature. A genre unfamiliar to moderns, more like the wildest sci-fi than anything else. High symbolic because it touches on realities just beyond our grasp.

A garden-city without walls coming down from heaven. As though heaven and earth are one day to be fully integrated again, renewed and transformed. Unexpected, surprising. A new creation. The beginning of what comes next.

SUMMARY

This is the casing of the three corded rope, that holds the three cords together, THE STORY.

We are living our lives between Act IV and Act V. We are involved in shaping the story as it moves toward its climax.

So, begin by getting the broad outline of the story straight.

Identify the major themes. See how they help you to make sense of your own life. Begin to see your own life in the light of these themes.

[DISCUSSION GROUND-RULES]

Just a reminder...

- 1. What's shared in the group stays in the group.**
- 2. No one is expected to share on any given topic; it's fine to pass.**
- 3. No unsolicited advice giving.**

4. Take your fair share of the time.
5. Be respectful of the viewpoints of others.

[QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DISCUSSION]

Note on discussion questions: questions are drawn from both the book and the class, so feel free to develop your own questions if class attendees haven't read the book.

1. The Bible can be an inspiring and intimidating book. What are the things about the Bible, as you understand it, that either inspire or intimidate you, or both?
2. What do you think of the idea that there is a common thread or unifying theme that runs throughout the Bible? What was your response to the author's attempt to tell the story of the Bible in five short acts [see pp. 135-144]? Did you find it helpful (or not) and if so, how?
3. Have you ever personally identified with someone's story in the Bible? What was it, and how did it move you?
4. How do you think Jesus' understanding or treatment of Scripture differed from his contemporaries?
5. The author thinks we've underestimated the power of story as a means to convey truth. What do you think about this perspective? How have stories helped you engage the truth in ways that other ways of truth-telling haven't?
6. What are your thoughts on the tension between the certainty we crave and the idea that our knowing is always partial, at best? Have you ever found yourself acknowledging less certainty than you once had concerning a matter of faith or spirituality?