
The Bible: A Story That You Have to Live to Believe

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Proper 24 – Year C

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A.J. Jacobs is a writer for Esquire Magazine, and he's a very interesting writer, because he immerses himself in what he writes about. He tends to live out the story that he is trying to tell.

He says, for example, that the best month of his life was when he was writing a story about outsourcing. He outsourced to a group in Bangalore responding to all of his emails, arguing with his wife, and telling his children their bedtime story. It was the best month he said he had ever had. He just sat around and read books.

The worst month, though, was when he wrote a story about always telling the truth. He said that was really hard. I'm a journalist in New York. Eighty percent of my day is not telling the truth and always saying what is on your mind is very difficult. The title of the article? "I Think You're Fat."

But the most interesting piece he wrote was a book about a year spent living out the Bible. He said he got all of the Bibles that he could find and he wrote down every rule and law and command that he read. All 700 of them. And then he spent a year living them out.

There were certain interpretive difficulties, of course: he wasn't sure where the corners of his beard actually were so he just let it all grow. He wasn't quite sure what to do about not mixing fibers in his clothes, but he did throw away all of his polycotton t-shirts.

And as you listen to his tale it gets funnier and funnier because, of course, it's ridiculous, and yet somehow, as he tells this tale, you feel a bit set-up. You feel like he's created a straw man just to knock it down. How many of us really believe that we are supposed to live based on a literal interpretation of the Bible? How many of us really believe that every jot and tittle of law is to be followed?

Paul's letter to Timothy may be some guidance here. Paul says, of course, that all of Scripture is inspired by God and it is useful for reproof and correction and training in righteousness, but what does that mean? I want to suggest to you that it means that we should not take the Bible literally but we should take the Bible seriously.

Things are not true because they're in the Bible; things are in the Bible because they're true.

The Bible was first meant to be heard before it was meant to be read, and if you think about that for a minute you will appreciate the difference. Because when we hear something we are receptive to it. We absorb it. We take it in. But when we look at something, when we read something, we are acquiring it. We're exercising control over it. It looks like a possession to us.

The Bible was meant to be heard before it was meant to be read, because in the Bible what we hear is the voice of God. We hear the things God wants us to hear. Because the Bible is more than just law; it's also history and poetry and myth and

fact, and all of these things together are a story. They are a story of God's relationship with God's people. They are a story that we are to listen to.

But that doesn't mean that God liked everything in the story. When people responded to God, their response becomes part of the story but that doesn't mean God liked it always.

There is, for example, a story of a prophet, Jehu, who decided that the wrongdoing of the king and his wife—Ahab and the all-too-familiar Jezebel—needed to be addressed. And so he addressed them by orchestrating a massacre of the royal family, by getting rid of everybody in the family, known by the family, and perhaps anybody who had ever spoken to the family.

Does this mean that God approves of this kind of behavior?

You don't have to wait very long to get the answer. It's Hosea who responds to this and says, "No, perhaps what Ahab and Jezebel were doing needed to be addressed but their massacre is not God's way and should be atoned for."

Scripture has a way of correcting itself, you see. It's not that everything we hear in Scripture God liked. It's that it's part of the story of God's relationship with his people.

And this gives us a clue, I think, about how we are to read the Bible. Because we are to read the Bible by seeing ourselves as part of that story, by hearing what other people have done as they responded to God, and then listening, sitting, being still, and trying to discern how we are different, how have we been changed. The question is, Where are you in the story?

Let's put this to the test. We have in the gospel an interesting but difficult story of an unjust judge. Where are you in that story? At first glance, the story looks to be very simple. The widow goes to an unjust judge, does not receive satisfaction, goes back again and again and again, proving to be resilient and persistent. Maybe we are the widow and that's what we're supposed to do, so that we will still be there with our cause when Jesus comes back.

But if you sit with the story, you wonder why Jesus went to all that trouble to make that point. Maybe there's something else there. Maybe this story is about more. Maybe this story is about the unjust judge and what happens to that judge as he is forced to confront the widow. The unjust judge who wants to dismiss her and yet must deal with her claim. Could it be that her persistence, her resilience, is saving for that judge?

Could it be that that judge has isolated himself from the community, has withdrawn into himself, distanced, and separated from others, but by being forced to deal with her cause is brought back? How has he changed? We don't really know.

But what if we are the unjust judge? What if it's our place right now to recognize how we have separated ourselves from others? How we have not heard the claim of others, and how we actually have the power to do something about it? What if we are the unjust judge and it is the faithful persistence of the widow that brings us back, that gives us a chance to re-enter relationships, that allows us to recognize God's presence? What if that's what the story is about?

The Bible you see is something to be lived before it can be believed.

The Bible is the story of God's relationship—a conversation really—with God's people. We are to see ourselves in that story and then pay attention to how it changes us. Pay attention to how we are different after we have heard the story than we were before. This is why the Bible is read. This is why we listen for the voice of God. This is, I think, why it is inspired—not because God wrote it necessarily, because God wrote it to inspire us. We are inspired by this story to grow in our relationship with God. It will change us. It will be transforming. That is our faith. That is our trust.

A.J. Jacobs is a secular Jew, but he wasn't really very religious. He said, "I am Jewish the way the Olive Garden is Italian, not really." And yet this year—this year that included hiring sheep so he could shepherd them or actually stoning an adulterer (which is a very funny story), it changed him.

Yes, he proved that living the Bible literally is crazy and will make you crazy, but he learned something else. He learned the value of gratitude, of being thankful. He said, "You know, what I learned is that when I finished the day I remember the worst things that happened. And by consciously and intentionally thinking about the good things that happened to me, I started to feel a whole lot better. I started to appreciate that there might be the presence of God in my ordinary day-to-day

life.”

He learned something about the sacred and the rituals that are designed to bring us into contact with the sacred—Sabbath for example. “I was changed by the Sabbath,” he said, “taking one day to do nothing, to be still, to be open, changed me, and I began to see that maybe there was something to that. Whether you believe in God or not I, became more open to life and to love.”

And it made him more compassionate. Part of his research involved going out to every biblically-based religious group that he could identify. And so he went out and met with all of these people: Hasidic Jews, evangelical Christians, creationists, the Amish.

And what he learned is that they weren't dumb. Many of them were quite smart. And they weren't evil. Many of them had very good intentions, wanting the best for themselves and for others. His stereotypes did not last. Engaging them, being in relationship with them, gave him a new awareness that there might be a presence, made him more open to life.

God, we say, is love and Jesus is what love looks like.

That's a shorthand for our faith and yet that's exactly what A.J. Jacobs learned. He entered this project to prove how wrong fundamentalism was, and he emerged from this project transformed because he lived into the story of the Bible. And he asked the question, Where am I in this story? And then he paid attention to how he was different at the end from the way he was at the beginning.

The Bible is a conversation, a conversation between God and God's people and we are called to listen to it, find ourselves in it, knowing that God doesn't like everything his people do in response. And yet God is always present. Love always seems to emerge. A call, however faint, always seems to bring us back into relationship, bring us back into our community, bring us back to be with people we might not even want to be with.

The Bible. It's inspired and it will inspire us, but you have to live it to believe it.

Amen.