

Old Book, Fresh Wisdom: Why the Bible is Worth Reading (again)
Ambiguity is Plan A
Deuteronomy 5:1-5

Peter Gomes, the late Dean of the Chapel at Harvard Divinity School, used to tell a story a conversation with someone who was a regular attender of the church he led.

‘I don’t know anything about the Bible,’ she said.

‘How is that possible?’ he asked. ‘You’re in church every Sunday; you hear a passage from the Bible every week!’

‘I know’ she said. ‘But listening to the lessons in church always feels a little like eavesdropping on a conversation in a restaurant. It’s like the people at the table next to you are speaking fluent French, and you’re trying to make sense of it with what you remember from your high school French class. You catch a few words, but after a while you lose interest. It takes too much effort, and the reward is too small.’¹

I heard that story many years ago and I’ve never forgotten it, because it sounds true to me—that even when you hear the Bible read regularly in church, there’s something elusive about it. I think many people feel like there’s some code that preachers and a few others have been given to understanding what’s in this book, and you don’t have it. Like maybe you missed church on the one day the key got handed out. I get it.

It’s not true. There is no code. There’s a story in the Book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples on that day we’ve called Pentecost. There were a whole bunch of people milling around who were there from different countries. The author of Acts went out of his way to name them: Parthians, Medes, Elamites; people from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya. Kind of a United Nations gathered in Jerusalem that day—all people who understood nothing of the native Hebrew those disciples spoke. When the Spirit of God showed up that day, powerful like something they’d never seen before, here’s what happened: suddenly the disciples started talking about God in the language of every person there. All those people who had felt out of place, foreign, a minute before suddenly heard Jesus’ disciples talking *to them*. In *their* language. In words they understood.

Last week we talked about the Bible as a wisdom book: that its stories are meant to give us wisdom for living *now*, rather than instructions for trying to act like people who lived *then*. Here’s the wisdom I take from that Pentecost story: when God is present, no one gets left out. God doesn’t speak a foreign language. God speaks your language, in words you understand.

There is no secret code or hidden language. You just have to pay attention, not give up or leave town when it takes some effort.

And it does take effort. Pete Enns, the author of *How the Bible Actually Works*—the book we’re following this Fall—says that the Bible is meant to be ambiguous. Always ambiguous—not by accident, but by design. I think he’s right. This book begs for conversation with us. There’s some improvisational dialogue that has to happen before we can hear what it’s trying to say. If its

meaning seems obvious, or like some platitude you can find on a Starbucks cup, we've probably missed something. Let me see if I can illustrate.

The Ten Commandments include one that says, "Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy." God rested on the seventh day of the week; you should rest too. The Israelites who first heard that commandment from Moses got the idea, but what exactly does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? This they had to figure out. And they did. Taking one day away from work each week became one of the cornerstones—a litmus test—of faithful Jewish life. They didn't do their jobs, or cook, or even push elevator buttons on Saturdays. But you know what happens when humans and legal systems get hold of laws? We double down on them, put our energy into enforcement. We rarely go back and say, 'Let's think about this one again. Is this law accomplishing something good?' By the time Jesus came along a thousand years later, it was illegal to cut a sandwich in half to share with someone who was hungry, or put a splint on a neighbor who broke an arm, or pick up a hose to put out a fire.

There are stories in the Gospels where Jesus says about those strict Sabbath rules some version of, "Are you kidding? *That's* not what God had in mind!" In other words, even commandments were not meant to be the object of mechanical, blind obedience. Think about who God is, what matters most, Jesus was saying. Love your neighbor no matter what—also on the Sabbath.

And so right there—in the Bible itself—we see the pattern: listen to Scripture for wisdom rather than rules. 'The way your ancestors observed the Sabbath is helpful,' Jesus was telling them. 'But think about what this means for *your* life,' Is the result of your obedience actually taking you closer to accomplishing the love of God in your place, your time, with the people right in front of you? That's the question. If it isn't, then think again. You know who God is. Look past the words themselves, for what God would want to say—not then, but now.

That's what Moses was telling the Israelites in those verses from Deuteronomy you heard this morning. This passage comes years—decades—after Moses read to the people he led out of Egypt from stone tablets. Now he stands in front of those people's grandchildren. Now they're not starting a forty-year camping trip; they're standing at the edge of a city where they'll get jobs and make permanent homes. Their lives will be different than those of the people who heard the commandments the first time. And just like us, they're looking for a word from God that they can hear and understand, a message relevant to what's ahead of them. 'It wasn't just your ancestors that God made a covenant with,' Moses said to them. 'It's us. All of us who are here and alive now. Listen to the commandments again, because they have something new to say to you--here, now.'

And that, my friends, is what I think it means when we say that the Bible is 'divinely inspired.' It doesn't mean God held the pencil that wrote these words. It means God breathed life and meaning into words written by human hands. And God is still breathing into them. New life. New meaning.

Here's what I think is helpful about acknowledging that the Bible is meant to be ambiguous. It means you don't have to worry about that secret code you don't know. When someone points out to you a verse in the Bible—Old Testament or New—that says homosexuality is wrong, or that mentions slavery as if it's a normal thing, you don't have to remember all those fancy arguments that suggest the words don't mean what they say.

Does the Bible say that homosexuality is wrong? It actually does. The people who wrote it thought that a lifetime commitment between a man and a woman was the only way to honor what God had created. They had no idea that two people of the same gender, with equal power, might also enter a long-term, faithful relationship with one another. We know something different now. I can't think of a thing I know about God that would not encourage that kind of loving relationship—not because the Bible says this directly, explicitly, but because I know this God—who God is, how he loves.

Does the Bible say, 'Slaves, obey your masters'? It does.ⁱⁱ That sentence was written in a world in which slavery was a given. Almost everyone who lived two thousand years ago thought that ownership of other human beings was normal. We know better.

In the Bible's creation story God said to the first human beings, 'I give you all the plants and animals and resources on the earth. Use them to support human life.'? Does that mean the same thing today, when the earth is suffering from over-use, that it did before the Industrial Revolution? Absolutely not.

The Bible's stories and lessons are ambiguous because life is ambiguous. There's not a rule we lay down for ourselves, or our children, or the organizations we're part of, not a word we say, that doesn't need to be re-considered and adjusted from time to time. The same is true of God's word. As Christians we are bound to this story. Not to swallow it whole, but to respect it enough to transpose it, adapt its wisdom to the reality of our lives. The Buddhists say, 'Seek not to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; rather, seek what they sought.' Seeking wisdom: that's the sacred responsibility of faithful living. Theirs; ours.

If you're someone who finds great comfort, everything you need, from reading the Bible as God saying, 'Because I said so,' hold onto that. I'm not trying to take away the solid ground under your feet. But if you've had difficulty finding the God you know, or want to believe in, in this book, I'm inviting you to think about it differently. Imagine a God who says to you, as you spend time with these stories, '*Can we have a conversation? Here's how people have found me before. This is where they looked for me, how I showed up in their lives. Ask your questions. Tell me about your life—what matters, who matters. And I will tell you about mine.*'

In that conversation there is a deep well of wisdom. I know it.

ⁱ From Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, at p. 6.

ⁱⁱ Ephesians 6:5