

LIGHT WALKERS
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Isaiah 9:2-4

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Hear are eight things that I bet you have never heard in church:

1. Hey! It's my turn to sit in the front pew.
2. I was so enthralled, I never noticed your sermon went 25 minutes over time.
3. Personally I find telling people about my church much more enjoyable than golf.
4. I volunteer to be the permanent teacher for the junior high boys Sunday school class.
5. I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!
6. Since we're all here, let's start the service early.
7. Pastor, we'd like to send you to this minister's seminar in the Bahamas.
8. Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment like our annual stewardship campaign!¹

And I wonder if anyone would dare say, "Congregationalism walks in a great light, enlarging the nation, increasing the joy of her people, lifting the burdens of the oppressed." Does that seem a little pompous to you? Does it not strike you as vain or proud or arrogant? Perhaps you find it a little embarrassing in our postmodern 21st century. Does it strike you as the hyperbole of rarefied preaching?

To put it negatively, have we no light to shed on behalf of those who walk in darkness, fear, tyranny, superstition, and poverty? Does it all just boil down to pragmatism, trying to offer the most good to the most people? Do any means justify

¹ Adapted, author unknown. Found at <http://www.cowtown.net/~jhdearmore/neverheardinchurch.html>. Downloaded 1/13/11.

such ends? Is it finally just about finding the best political or economic solutions?
Does faith matter at all?

What does it mean when we say that Congregationalists walk in the light?

There are four essential markers of Congregationalism that shed light on our faith today. These markers are rooted in the dissenting churches of Great Britain in the 17th century, not to mention their deeper roots in the Protestant Reformation. These include Biblical literacy, the primacy of conscience, following the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, and embracing the love of God and neighbor as the foundation of our life together. This morning I would like to focus on Biblical literacy.

Of course our understanding of Biblical literacy is markedly different from what the Puritans of 1600 might have thought. By their standards we would probably be considered Biblically illiterate. Several research groups have shown that Biblical literacy is declining not only in our society at large but even within the Christian tradition. Jay Leno once asked his audience if anyone could name one of the Ten Commandments. Someone shouted, “God helps those who help themselves.”

One of the pivotal assumptions of Protestantism is that the Bible is the source of authority for all matters of belief, faith, and practice. Of course the Enlightenment was over a century away from the Reformation and higher criticism of the Bible was two centuries away. We can hardly imagine that contemporary Christians would read and understand the Bible as our Puritan and Pilgrim forbears did.

It does not help that fundamentalists so distort the Bible that we are tempted to chuck the whole book. This week, for example, we received a tract from Family

Radio that announces the end of the world: “Holy God will bring judgment day on May 21, 2011.” They argue that all of this is based on their reading of the Bible. They declare, “The Bible is the Holy Book written by Holy God...It has never been changed, and each and every word in the original languages is from the mouth of God.” Such literalism makes the Bible entirely unpalatable.

And you might be wondering why does any of this matter? Does it make any difference in American democracy? Is it relevant to the state of religion in these United States? The answer is starkly “YES!” Let me offer you two recent examples of how Biblical illiteracy plays a continuing role in American policy and politics.

On January 17th, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, new elected Alabama Governor Robert Bentley spoke at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery where Dr. King had served as pastor. The governor said:

“There may be some people here today who do not have living within them the Holy Spirit. But if you have been adopted in God’s family like I have, and like you have if you’re a Christian and if you’re saved, and the Holy Spirit lives within you just like the Holy Spirit lives within me, then you know what that makes? That makes you and me brothers. And it makes you and me brother and sister. Now I have to say that, if we don’t have the same daddy, we’re not brothers and sisters. So anybody here today has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I’m telling you, you’re not my brother and you’re not my sister, and I want to be your brother.”

Now where in the world would Gov. Bentley get such an idea? Probably from a misreading of Mark’s gospel, 3:31-34. Listen to Mark’s words:

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (NRSV)

Jesus is not rejecting his biological family. He is expanding his family to include “Whoever does the will of God...” You know the will of God that Jesus was talking about, the one that runs throughout the entire Bible: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all of your soul, and with all of your strength, and with all of your mind; (Luke 10:27 and Deuteronomy 6:5) and your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27 and Leviticus 19:18) Yes, that’s the will of God Jesus was talking about. You know, the will of God who requires of us “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God and the people who are in it he speaks of those who gave food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, clothing for the naked, care for the sick, hospitality to the lonely and lost, and company for the imprisoned. (Matthew 25:31-45) Yes, that will of God.

In none of these passages does Jesus require anyone to accept him as Lord and personal savior.

While I can forgive Gov. Bentley’s run-on sentences, his misrepresentation of the Bible and the gospel is inexcusable. And it is especially offensive that he made such remarks in the church of a man who gave his life for God’s will that all human beings be reconciled to one another. Dr. King died in the walk of justice, kindness, and humility. In other words he was doing the will of God.

I do not begrudge Gov. Bentley’s private faith. But as one who holds public office he might give more consideration to the Jewish, Muslim, and other non-Christian citizens of Alabama whom he is bound to serve. He set a tone of division and exclusivity in the public square in the name of Christ. He has not considered the possibility that people from different religious traditions might, in fact, be doing the

will of God as Jesus called his brothers and sisters to do. At the heart of this gaff is Biblical illiteracy.

In his recent essay, “Biblical Ignorance in Public Life,” Bishop John Shelby Spong, cited another example, that of Democratic Governor Steven Beshear of Kentucky.² Governor Beshear supports a plan that will offer \$325 million in tax abatement to a private company that would build Noah’s Ark Park, a theme park that would prove that the story of Noah’s ark is historically proven. This would complement a theme park already in Kentucky that promotes “creation science.” These parks are developed by an organization called, “Answers in Genesis,” under the leadership of Ken Ham. These people believe that they are the “defenders of the literal truth of the Bible.” Ham has stated that Noah’s ark is one of the “best known historical events in the Bible.”

Creationists follow the thought of Archbishop James Ussher of 17th Century Ireland. Ussher argued that the world was created in 4004 BCE, and therefore is only 6,015 years old. Despite their disregard of science they seem particularly challenged by the discovery of dinosaurs, whose proof of existence does not comply with Ussher’s timeframe. Well, guess what they have concluded? When the Bible says that Noah put two of every kind of animal on the ark, he obviously put two of every kind of dinosaur on the ark. Duh!

Now I am sure that some will argue that Noah’s Ark Park will bring money into the state of Kentucky. I do not doubt that. The problem is that the governor wants to use state tax abatements to promote a religious theme park. It is a theme park

² John Shelby Spong, “Biblical Ignorance in Public Life,” *A New Christianity for a New World* (January 20, 2011), copyright The Center for Progressive Christianit

that represents a fundamentalist Christian interpretation of the Bible that is flat out wrong. I do not believe that the state should be in the business of developing such theme parks, especially with such a misguided understanding of the scripture.

Throughout the world of Christianity there are still people who use the Bible to discriminate against and oppress women, homosexuals, people of different races, nationalities, and ethnicities. I wish I could tell you that we are past that but we are not. There are people whose public agenda is a theocratic America, one by which they define the god of such a state. At the very least there are right wing Christians who use the Bible to justify their intentions with regard to public policy and legislation, including reproductive rights, warfare, capital punishment, and so on. These folks are Biblically illiterate but insist on shaping American life on the anvil of their ignorance.

In every state that I have lived in – northern or southern, eastern or western – my children have encountered both peers and teachers who were Biblical literalists. My hunch is that the friends of your children and grandchildren are exposed to the same kind of worldview. I bet that most of them believe that the Bible is history and without question. They would never think to question the gender of God, miracle stories, or be allowed to question the existence of God or heaven and hell.

It reminds me of the story of the Sunday school where they were learning how God created everything, including human beings. Johnny was especially intent when the teacher told him how Eve was created out of one of Adam's ribs.

Later in the week his mother noticed him lying down as though he were ill, and said, "Johnny, what is the matter?"

Johnny responded, "I have pain in my side. I think I'm going to have a wife."³

Because religion plays such a major part in our culture and society, and because of the central place of the Bible in that part, I believe that Biblical literacy is essential to both our identity and purpose. If for no other reason than the spiritual and intellectual integrity of our families and ourselves we are called to Biblical literacy. In other words, when our children come home from school with questions about the world or human relationships, when they have heard from their friends about the answers their churches give them about God and faith, can you sit down with them and make sense of the Bible? As Kansans we should know better than anyone the powerful forces that would replace science with so-called creationism or intelligent design. That proposal was only defeated in 2007. It was a 6-4 vote at the Kansas State Board of Education that deleted language from teaching guides that challenged not only Darwin's theory of evolution but also natural selection. And I know as well as anyone that there are plenty of teachers out there who simply ignore that science by never discussing it. Do we wonder why American students are falling behind other nations in scientific education?

Please do not be offended, but we cannot speak about Biblical literacy if we are not willing to be educated. I know that almost everyone in this room had some form of Christian education that was probably Bible based. Most of us received that in our childhood. I also know that most of us left the Bible in adolescence. That points to two realities. One, many of us continue to live with an adolescent understanding of the Bible. Many have not engaged in serious adult Christian

³ Author unknown. <http://www.swapmeetdave.com/Humor/Religious.htm>.
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education or Bible study since we left junior or senior high school. Two, recent scholarship in the past thirty years has radically changed what we know about the Bible. If we have not kept up with the scholarship we cannot claim to be Biblically literate.

Now this is very important. To what end would you seriously engage in Biblical studies? Just as the many books and chapters of the Bible were written in different times and places by human beings within communities of faith, so our reading of the Bible reflects the needs of the human faith community in the 21st century. Borrowing from the Center for Progressive Christianity, I believe that we read and interpret the Bible to “promote an understanding of Christian practice and teaching that leads to a greater concern for the way people treat each other than for the way people express their beliefs”. This means an acceptance of all people and a respect for other religious traditions. We can only read the Bible with an affirmation “of the variety and depth of human experience and the richness of each persons’ search for meaning, and we encourage the use of sound scholarship, critical inquiry, and all intellectual powers to understand the presence of God in human life.” That also means that “We are opposed to any exclusive dogma that limits the search for truth and free inquiry, and we encourage work that eases the pain, suffering and degradation inherent in many of the structures of society.” Central to the Christian life is the work that safeguards the “fair, open, peaceful, and loving treatment of all human beings.”⁴

⁴ “Spiritual Networking and Resources for an Evolving Faith,” The Center for Progressive Christianity, found at <http://www.tcpc.org/template/index.cfm.html>. Downloaded on 1/21/11.

In my opinion, that is a Bible study worth having throughout the Christian Education program of University Congregational Church. That is a Bible Study that Kansas needs to engage in. I think I would call it “The Most Dangerous Bible Study in Wichita.” After all, shouldn’t we invite them into the light? Shouldn’t our light shine on those who have walked in the darkness of Biblical fundamentalism, with all of its fears, superstitions, and anger? Let the people walk in the light!

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