

## WHY I LOVE THE BIBLE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

October 21, 2007

Scripture: Psalm 119:97-104; II Timothy 3:14-4:5

Krister Stendahl, the Swedish theologian and New Testament scholar now 86 years old served as Dean of the Harvard Divinity School and as Lutheran bishop of Stockholm. He remains the Mellin Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard.

With credentials like that, you would not be surprised that in this year's winter volume of the Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Stendahl wrote an article entitled, "Why I Love the Bible." If you are a New Testament scholar, you are bound to love the Bible. It is your livelihood, your passionate intellectual focus, your scholarly Rosetta Stone.

And yet, Stendahl's article is surprisingly personal. It is not scholarly at all. As its title suggests, it is a personal reflection about his love affair with the Bible, a disarming revelation of personal meaning and worth that I found worthwhile.

After I read it, I decided that I wanted to share with you why I love this book, too, and what my relationship with it is. Not because I enjoy speaking about myself, I don't. But I have been living with the Bible and studying it from Sunday School onward. By now, I should be able to give some account of what it means to me. And perhaps the only way to do so is to speak personally, out of my experience, and let that experience be what it is. I would hope that it might get you thinking about your relationship with the Bible as well.

So often ministers teach and use the Bible in their work in such a way that it becomes a bit like a computer or a palm pilot or a cell phone, a tool that we take for granted in accomplishing our work, a means to an end rather than an end in itself. We preachers are always good at admonishing folks to read their Bible more often, make a daily regimen out of it, pray and meditate on the Bible. But I find that when I advocate in that way I see people's eyes go glassy. There is something about the Bible that resists being read. It is tough sledding to begin in Genesis 1 and plow your way through all the begats and unpronounceable names all the way to Revelation 22. If the summer's hottest sell, the last episode in the J.K. Rowling series, **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows** contained 759 pages read by young enthusiasts breathless to get to the last page, can we really expect only moderately inspired adult readers to work their way through 1280 pages of small print on onion skin paper with only occasional mention of sex, and that not in an approving way?

For people who don't like to read, the Bible is now available in podcast to make it more accessible. Now there's a concept. People in the subway fiddling with their mp3's, devouring Habakkuk and Haggai and II Timothy. Maybe there's a future for the Bible in pod form if not the written page.

For me the Bible was not always the most consistent of my reads. I started out with the Bible, like many of you, in Sunday School where year after year we seemed to keep learning the same stuff, the exodus, Moses, the parting of the Red Sea, the ten commandments, the healing miracles of Jesus, the birth at Christmas time, the empty tomb at Easter, and all of it a bit disjointed and run together.

I never really knew until junior high school that Jesus and Moses were not contemporaries in time, and that everyone in the Bible, for that matter, didn't live in an obscure continuum of long ago and far away.

The artwork in our Sunday School books suggested that every male in the Bible had a beard, and wore a long robe and carried a staff and looked like an Ohio Presbyterian. Women wore pastel robes, pale blue mostly, and they spent the day sewing and playing small harps, and carrying jugs of water on their head. Nothing about these people's lives seemed to be like mine. So nothing about the Bible seemed very relevant.

But like Paul praising Timothy's mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice, and their role in teaching the faith to Timothy, I found that the Bible came alive in the earnestness and interest of the teachers in the Sunday School I attended and in my mother's own interest in imparting what she knew of the Bible to us, which wasn't much, but which was sincerely offered, nonetheless, along with all of herself expressed in a trusting faith.

I hated Sunday School. I didn't like the other kids, too goody-goody for me. I didn't like dressing up or wearing a tie or shining my shoes or any of the other preparations required to read the Bible. But in time the Bible itself came to be a source of inspiration to me. Not because I read it every day, I didn't. But because I searched it and sought from it the help and strength I needed in difficult times.

Certain passages came to be my friends. My father had died when I was very young, five years of age, and I began an early quest to understand why. Why would God be so mean? What kind of God would do such a thing as to take my dad in his early forties, when we four kids were so young? It seemed cruel, and I had a beef with God that had to get settled one way or another. So I dived into his book, hoping at times to pick a fight, and at other times to sit in God's lap and have him tell me stories.

Sometimes I used the Bible to voice my complaints. I found in the Psalms just the words to express my discouragement, as in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm. "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" There in the Bible's hymnbook were the impassioned curses and retributions that seem so necessary when you are a teenager, like the 137th Psalm, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" Not a pretty thought, but it's real and it expressed the highly charged anger that a teenager sometimes feels in a world that seems neither fair nor kind.

When I came across passages like Romans 8, where Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose," I felt reassured that while my life seemed chaotic, there was some larger purpose working itself out and that in time it would make sense. That particular passage became my own.

When I felt unsure how to pray, the Bible reassured me that no one knows how to pray that well, "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness," Paul wrote, "for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." In other words, God knows even better than we what it is that we want to express and hears it compassionately in its most heartfelt expression.

Throughout high school and college the Bible was a kind of spiritual resource book for me, my confidant and counselor.

It was really in college that the sweep and the breadth of the Bible really struck me for the first time. I took a course on the New Testament and through the wisdom and skill of my professors learned that one can actually be a scholar of the Bible, two words that in my experience had never been in the same sentence before. I found I could treat the Bible as a book to be studied, dissected, examined and when subjected to all that, found that it still did not fall apart.

Probably the real breakthrough came when my professor said that we should all be writing in our Bibles. "Make margin notes," he said, "add comments about your reactions, write down your questions, compare one passage with another, make footnotes." It was a new concept to me. It seemed blasphemous. My Sunday School teachers had told me never to mark up the Bible. And consequently, I had so revered the Bible as a holy book that I had made of it an icon, a totem, with magical power all its own. If I were to write in it, I feared I would make it a common book, something ordinary, robbing it of its awe and holiness. What I didn't realize was that it was exactly this distance that I was putting between myself and the Bible that was keeping me from getting to know it better. It would only be when I was to treat it as a conversation partner, a sparring partner, a teacher willing to engage me that the Bible really started to live and breathe for me. And then the love affair began in earnest.

In seminary you are taught to treat the Bible a bit like a doctor is taught to treat a patient, dispassionately. You outline gospels as if they were essays. You do words studies to see how that word's meaning changes depending on who is using it and in what context. You listen and look for what is not said as much as what is. You analyze the historical context and look for signs of authorship and dating. You categorize the literature as fable, census, poetry, exposition, law, instruction, parable, and prophecy. You come to look at the Bible less as a source of inspiration and more as a source of instruction.

At times you marvel at the genius of a particular psalm, or wonder at the audacity of a notable prophet, or rail at Paul for his apparent stupidity, and wonder at Jesus in his story telling brilliance. But somewhere along the way the Bible becomes the text you use for writing papers, the source on which you base sermons, and in which you immerse yourself for scholarly debate. In that sense, the Bible becomes less a foundation for personal inspiration and strength, the soil in which faith is planted and rooted, and becomes more like a tool of the trade. That happened to me for awhile.

In the early years of my ministry, while my love of the Bible continued, I have to say that my own daily reliance on it diminished, while all the time my need for it grew. In a word I came to take it for granted. It wasn't until I was thirty-two years old and became seriously ill that I rediscovered how much the Bible meant to me as a friend and companion.

I spent a month in the hospital with a heart infection, and a few months later faced open-heart surgery to replace a valve that had been destroyed by the infection. It was then that I sought solace and help in the scriptures once again.

More than any other passage, more than the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, more than the beatitudes, it was the encouragement of St. Paul, writing again to the Romans, that got through to me, “If we live, we live to the Lord,” he said, “and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

The real possibility was that I might die. And if I did, what would be the meaning of my life? That was what I was wondering? What would be the legacy of what I had accomplished at 32 years of age, with what others had suggested was *all my promise* unfulfilled?

I sometimes think about these names that we read each Sunday in the prayers the same way, the names of our fallen service people. What might these young men and women have become, what would they have accomplished if given a full measure of days? That is the tragedy of death at an early age, so much is yet to be revealed, and yet we will never know.

The encouragement I took in the midst of my own life threatening illness was that ultimately my life was God’s, and every day was a gift, and while I had lived up to that time with the illusion that I was in control of my life, I really was not. I came to realize that I lived and I live today by God’s grace. And that would have been true even if I had died on the operating table at thirty-two years of age, whatever of promise I might have left unfulfilled, whatever for good that has occurred by my living since. It still would have been, every bit of it, a gift of grace and kindness.

When my life is ended, it will have all been a gift to me, it will have all been grace. Every day of it, however long I live. And when my life here is ended, then I will still be God’s, so that as Paul put it so eloquently, “whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord’s.”

The Bible gave me that hope and that confidence in living. And it holds out that promise in dying. For that knowledge alone I will always be grateful.

I have never been a person who is able to quote the Bible by chapter and verse, with the exception of John 3:16, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and a few of the most familiar passages. I can tell you where to find the beatitudes, and I am really good on most of the details of the nativity stories. I know how Genesis 1 begins, and I can even recite part of Luke’s second chapter by heart in the King James Version, having learned it for a school play in the seventh grade. In other words, if you ask me where a passage with a certain phrase or idea is located I can sometimes tell you, but as often as not, I will have to refer to a concordance. It’s just the way my mind works.

Maybe if I would do what Ezekiel did, eat the scrolls of the scripture (3:2) they might be more a part of me, but I doubt it. I have come instead to be more of a grazer of scripture, a taster of the Bible’s best and most meaningful passages, the ones that touch my heart and move my spirit.

And I will tell you honestly that the preaching of other preachers has probably done more than I can say to help me appreciate the power and import of the Bible in my life. Many people say that preaching is dead. We are a media age and the power of what is put on a screen has so tainted our ability to appreciate preaching that it has become meaningless. Others say the reason preaching is dead is because there are so few people

who do it well. But for me when a person rises to speak and offers out of a serious study of the scriptures an interpretation of what that scripture means, when mediated through the lens of human experience, nothing can be more powerful.

The Bible is not just any book, but The Book. The Good Book, with which there is no parallel. It is not, as Islam believes about the Quran, dictated by God word for word with a matching Bible in heaven that says the same thing as this book we have on earth. It is, instead an inspired Word, which is a different thing altogether. It is fraught with contradictions, it is pre-scientific, and it shows the smudge marks and fingerprints of the human hands that put have pen to scroll. And yet it is still the faithful witness of those who have shared with us their discernment of what God is doing in human history.

And yes, the Bible has been used to subjugate women, condone slavery, and foster homophobia, but its larger witness when freed of the culture and the time in which it was written is a message of God's overwhelming love for all of us, even when our own prejudices, hatreds, and fears have threatened to thwart God's larger purpose.

Because of that human element, I cannot take the Bible as inerrant literally, but I have to take it utterly seriously, as holy writ unlike any other because its inspirer and interpreter is God.

In the final analysis, I love the Bible because in it, I am lost and found. The Bible is a love story of God's passion for you and for me. A story of our resistance to being loved so much and so well. And God's willingness to do anything to express that love for us nonetheless.

It is the best and most difficult book I have ever owned. And if I could have no other book at all, it would be the one I would choose.

And I am not the only person who thinks that way, which may be the best explanation as to why it is still the best selling book of all time.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2007.