

“Colorful Canons and Making Morality”

Proper 27C (November 10, 2019)

Scriptures: Haggai 1:15b-2:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

In my 2018 annual report I shared an old story about a mystic, a pastor, and a fundamentalist. In that story, the three of them die on the same day and approach the pearly gates.<sup>1</sup> “Upon reaching the gates they are promptly greeted by Peter [it’s always Peter in these jokes], who informs them that before entering heaven they must be interviewed by Jesus concerning the state of their doctrine. The first to be called forward is the mystic, who is quietly ushered into a room. Five hours later the mystic reappears with a smile, saying, ‘I thought I had got it all wrong.’ Then Peter signals to the ... pastor, who stands up and enters the room. After a full day has passed the pastor reappears with a frown and says to himself, ‘How could I have been so foolish!’ Finally Peter asks the fundamentalist to follow him. The fundamentalist picks up his well-worn Bible and [marches] into the room. A few days pass with no sign of the [fundamentalist] preacher, [and] then finally the door swings open and Jesus himself appears, exclaiming, ‘How could I have got it all so wrong!’”

It’s the little detail about the “well-worn Bible” that caught my attention when I reread the story this week. Even Jesus in the joke is no match for a fundamentalist and his Bible. In Christian history the Bible has been called a “canon” - a term that comes from a Greek word, which means rule or measuring rod, the standard against which all beliefs and practices are measured. But, of course, this standard or canon looks different depending on the branch of Christianity: Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox Christians have never completely agreed on which books to include in the Bible - a disagreement that goes all the way back to the second century when the first list of canonical books was produced by Marcion of Sinope, launching centuries of debate over which books to include and exclude. The big branches of Christianity have also disagreed about which language to read the Bible in: for most of Catholic history, the Bible was read in Latin; many of the Orthodox have read it in Greek; and Protestants, beginning with John Wycliffe’s Middle English edition and Martin Luther’s German edition, have insisted on reading the Bible in the vernacular, the language of the people.

But in all three branches, the Bible is called the “canon”: the rule, the measuring rod, the standard. Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel, both of whom are professors of science and technology, wrote an article earlier this year about how we determine our standards.<sup>2</sup> “Our modern existence depends on [standards,]” they write. We take these standards for granted. “Cars run on gas from any gas station, the plugs for electrical devices fit into any socket, and smartphones connect to anything equipped with Bluetooth. All of these conveniences depend on technical standards ... . The objects that surround us were designed to comply with standards,” they continue. “Consider the humble 8-by-16-inch concrete block, the specifications of which are defined in the Masonry Society’s ‘Building Code Requirements and Specification for Masonry Structures.’ This [masonry] book distills centuries of

<sup>1</sup> Peter Rollins, *How (Not) To Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2017 [2006]), 21.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/16/opinion/sunday/standardization.html>

knowledge about the size and thickness of blocks, seismic design requirements, and the use of materials like concrete, glass, and mortar. Professionals worked through committees organized by the American Concrete Institute, American Society of Civil Engineers, and the Masonry Society from 1977 to 1989 to foster consensus around this single national standard. The number of technical standards that go into some products is astonishing,” they write. ... “A 2010 study found that a laptop computer incorporates 251 standards. Companies such as I.B.M. and Microsoft created some of these standards - but only 20 percent of them. The other 80 percent of the laptop’s standards were developed by private or nongovernmental organizations ... [and] technical experts. ... The basic irony of standards,” conclude Russell and Vinsel, “is the simple fact that there is no standard way to create a standard, nor is there even a standard definition of ‘standard.’ Standards,” they say, are created by “‘voluntary consensus’” - a majority of people agreeing that this is the standard.

(It’s worth noting that the fourth century Christian historian Eusebius referred to the books of the Bible as those that are, in his words, “commonly accepted.”<sup>3</sup>)

Today’s scripture readings are all from the lectionary, and in today’s gospel reading, Jesus appeals to ancient scripture as a standard. The gospel story we heard a moment ago depicts an arcane debate between rabbi Jesus and representatives from a different group in first century Judaism: the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a group closely tied to the priests in the Jerusalem temple. And, in the story, Sadducees come to Jesus with a theological question about resurrection. First century Jews, according to scholar C. D. Elledge, held a variety of views about resurrection.<sup>4</sup> Some groups believed in a bodily resurrection; others in a spiritual resurrection; and still others held that life after death was a kind of cosmic existence with the stars and angels. The Sadducees were ancient materialists - no bodily existence after death; one lived on materially through one’s children and grandchildren. I still remember a sermon delivered on this text by my seminary president many years ago. He was fond of seminary, nerd jokes. And he said in that sermon, “the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, which is why they were Sad-you-see.”

The Sadducees in today’s reading ask Jesus about the resurrection, and they try to trap him in an absurdity by creating an absurd scenario based on a tiny point in Jewish law. The law says that a man is to marry his brother’s widow if he dies childless, so that his brother can live on through the children. But, wondered the Sadducees, what happens if brother after brother dies childless? Which one of them will be the husband of the widow in the resurrection? There are so many patriarchal assumptions in this scenario that it’s hard to know where to begin, but Jesus recognizes a trap when he sees one, and appeals to the standard of scripture for guidance. Digging deeply into the story about Moses and the burning bush in Exodus ch. 3, rabbi Jesus notes that God in that story refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the present tense - as still alive, even though they had long since died. So, argues Jesus, the dead are all still alive to God. The dead, he says, don’t marry; they are like the angels - always present before God.

If you go back and read Exodus ch. 3 and the story about the burning bush, you’ll see that the story - on the surface - has nothing to do with life after death. Jesus is reading an

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<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25. Read it here: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/eusebius.html>

<sup>4</sup> See the review of this book:

<https://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2018/11/12/book-note-resurrection-of-the-dead-in-early-judaism>

interpretation about life after death *into* that story. He's taking the canon - the standard, the sacred text of his day - and using it in a creative way to address some issue.

Let me get a little more wonky this morning, and delve into the world of anthropology - the study of human beings. My PhD is in the anthropology of religion - the study of people's religious practices and rituals, their meal practices and community behavior. One area of study in this field is the area of canons - standards.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, anthropologists of religion have found canons in many cultures, even in ones without reading or writing. For example, religious leaders among the Ndembu people of Zambia have a canon. It's a basket filled with a fixed number of objects. The objects include a rooster's claw, a piece of a hoof, a bit of grooved wood, a piece of withered fruit. These items are placed in a basket by the religious leader and shaken, so that a few rise to the top of the heap. Those at the top are interpreted by the person shaking the basket. Different configurations of objects yield different interpretations. Like a Bible with a set number of books, the basket with a set number of objects, writes scholar Jonathan Smith, "is held to be complete and capable of illuminating every situation [in life]." Jonathan Smith goes on to say this: "What enables the fixed canon of ... objects in the ... basket to be applied to every possible situation or question is ... that, prior to [shaking the basket], the [leader asks questions of the person seeking his advice] in order to determine the [person's] situation with precision. The [Ndembu religious leader, says Smith] functions ... much as the successful preacher functions with respect to [a] congregation." The basket of objects is like a Bible; and the interpretation of the objects is like a sermon, which is shaped by the situations of, or by the situations that arise among people in the pews.

Isn't this what Jesus teaches us in today's gospel reading? The canon - the standard, the scripture - is supposed to be put to use. It's supposed to be applied in real time to our lives. It's a "place to start," as we say in the UCC - a place to start discussions about ethics and morality and theology and doctrine. We start with scripture, but we don't end there. There's tradition to consider. There's personal experience to consider. There's the well-being of people to consider, as feminist theologians remind us of. Any interpretation that harms fellow human beings and children of God, they say, is a wrong interpretation. The Bible - the canon, the rule, the standard - is more a roadmap than it is a constitution: it's meant to be put to use to guide steps going forward than it is to anchor one to the past. It's living and active, as one New Testament writer puts it. And when we read it, we're mining it for techniques and tactics and strategies for living more compassionately today, even as we always keep in mind that it was written thousands of years ago by writers from a different time in a different place with different cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality and theology and ethics. And so when we look at a text like today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Haggai, we can sift through all the historical details about Persian kings and Judean governors and priests, and isolate the core principle that is a promise - a promise that God is with us, regardless of the downturns in life. God is with us - present in the hands and feet of the people of our church community, who support and pray for us. And, because the canon was written millennia ago - in a different time and place - we are free to update today's New Testament reading from Second Thessalonians - an updated text that is not a template about an apocalyptic future, but is a timeless warning about all the "people of lawlessness" in history - narcissistic leaders who claim to be the sole origins of truth; who claim that they

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<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 36-52.

alone and not the fake news are the ones to be trusted - we can see in this ancient text a roadmap for resisting the bombastic, cult-like leaders of our own time. The writer of Second Thessalonians says that We belong to God and to Christ, not to political leaders who claim to be the sole source of truth.

The Bible - the canon, the standard - is a place to start. And God's spirit moving through us today - inspiring us today - guides us as we shake the basket and interpret the text in order to live more compassionately each day, with the example of Jesus as our guide.

...I began this morning's sermon with a story about three clergy and a well-worn Bible. Let me close with another story about the Bible.<sup>6</sup> "There was once a small town filled with believers who sought to act always in obedience to the voice of God. When faced with difficult situations the leaders of the community would often be found deep in prayer, or searching the Scriptures for guidance and wisdom. Late one evening, in the middle of winter, a young man from the neighboring city arrived at the gates of the town's little church seeking refuge. The caretaker immediately let him in and, seeing that he was hungry and cold, provided a meal and some warm clothes. After he had eaten, the young man explained how he had fled the city because the authorities had labeled him a political dissident. It turned out that the man had been critical of both the government and the church in his work as a journalist. The caretaker brought the young man back to his home and allowed him to stay until a plan had been worked out concerning what to do next. When the priest was informed about what had happened, he called the leaders of the town together in order to work out what ought to be done. After an intense discussion it was agreed that the man should be handed over to the authorities in order to face up to the charges that had been made against him. But the caretaker protested, saying, 'This man has committed no crimes, he has merely criticized what he believes to be the injustices perpetrated by authorities in the name of God.' 'What you say may be true,' replied the priest, 'but his presence puts the whole of this town in danger. What if the authorities find out where he is and learn that we protected him.' But the caretaker refused to hand him over to the priest, saying, 'He is my guest, and while he is under my roof I will ensure that no harm comes to him. If you take him from me by force then I will publicly attest to having helped him and suffer the same injustice as my guest.' The caretaker was well loved by the people, and the priest had no intention of letting something happen to him. So the leaders went away again and this time searched the Scriptures for an answer, for they knew that the caretaker was a man of deep faith. After a whole night of poring over the Scriptures the leaders came back to the caretaker, saying, 'We have read the sacred book all through the night seeking guidance and found that it tells us that we must respect the authorities of this land and witness to the truth of faith through submission to them.' But the caretaker also knew the sacred words of Scripture, and he told them that the Bible also asked that we care for those who suffer and are persecuted. ... The caretaker, a man of deep faith, looked up to heaven and [said, ...] 'You [O, God] have written that I must protect [this man] at all costs. Your words of love have been spelled out by the lines of this man's face, your text is found in the texture of his flesh.' ... With this God smiled ... , confident that the matter had finally been settled." Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2008), 1-3.