

This morning I'd like to have an interactive conversation rather than me do all the talking. Now I know sometimes people prefer to sit in quietly listening to me go on, but for this morning I'd like to shift our pattern. I think there are things that you have to say about the bible, I mean after all, it's a resource for everyone in the church, not just the preacher. That's why I'm calling this conversation the people's library. The bible (a word which means holy books) is a collection, a virtual library of the depth and breadth of human emotional experience. It belongs to us. Not some academic elite we charge with the responsibility of interpreting it.

So let's have a conversation. When I simply use the word Bible...or Holy Bible...what instantly comes into your mind? What images do you see? What experiences come to mind? I have an idea...just to get this going...why don't you simply turn to your neighbor and offer them your response.

Anyone want to offer up their thought, their idea, their image? When I use the word Bible...what happens to you?

We just sang the song I love to tell the story...an old old gospel tune about Jesus and his love. If you could tell but one story from the bible..a story that speaks to you about your own life's experience or resonates with what you understand to be true about God...what story would that be. Again...just turn to your neighbor and name the story. If it's a new story to either of you...take a minute to tell the story but more importantly, talk about why that story has meaning for you. Take a few minutes.

Anyone want to venture into the question about who wrote the bible. Now those who have been taking Bible 101, this might your chance to remember what we've talked about over the past four sessions...But really...anyone want to guess who wrote the bible...okay...once more...take a minute to have a conversation with your neighbor. Talk about what you know about who wrote this library. The people's library.

I want to speak briefly about the old testament.

- Solomon....orderly conduct, social constructs, some literacy, some gathering of information and story

- Ezra and Nehemiah began to record a people's journal of what they remembered. Remember...no was literate. No one could read or write...really. There were scribes, commissioned by their respective faith communities charged with the responsibility of recording the stories...BUT only the stories that had

meaning. Ezra and Nehemiah were only interested in the first five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. These guys wanted to begin to record something of a record of that which brought meaning and inspiration....and it happened after the return from exile somewhere in the 4th century BCE. They collected stories from an oral tradition, fragments of papyrus or broken pottery on which stories were recorded...anything that could be found.

In the third century, prophets of Isaiah and Jeremiah began to be recorded. Did you know that Isaiah was not one guy. Isaiah was a manner of prophesy, a way of seeing and speaking. Isaiah was observing before, during and after the babylonian exile, but the information was only recorded in 100 years after the events. How much can change in 100 years??

In the second century, scribes were interested in gathering the information contained in the writings and the history – Esther, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, the psalms.

Any thoughts about who wrote the bible?

The Old Testament Bible was recorded from many different source materials, in a language, when written, didn't use vowels. It could have been anyone's guess what was intended in any given passage. Do you know that the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament wasn't really finalized as a set of books until the second half of the first century BCE. And that was just the Jewish Hebrew Bible. The Christian Hebrew Bible didn't come until much later, about the middle of the second century.

How about the new testament? Any thoughts about how the Christian scriptures were recorded.

- talk about the glow of resurrection...

- Paul's writings were first, closest to the events...but...his own conversion experience

- there was no one person called Matthew, Mark and Luke...the gospel of Luke and the book of the Acts of the Apostles was written by the same writer. Mark was first, Matthew and Luke had material that squared up...leaving scholars to believe in a common source Q...quelle...german for source. But they had different material.

- scribes in local communities commissioned to gather the stories that had meaning for the people in those communities. Those stories became sacred scripture to that community.

- there was no authority around one common source, one common book, one common expression of the faith...only individual communities finding meaning and purpose from the stories that mattered to them.

Any thoughts about who wrote the bible? What are your impressions of what happened as the book we call holy came into being? Go ahead...say something to your neighbor about what's going on for you right now.

The best resource I've seen about what we do when we read the bible is Peter Gomes' book "The good Book; reading the bible with heart and mind." A gay, black southern baptist who served the chapel at Harvard Theological School for nearly three decades, Peter Gomes points out that there are three worst things we can do with the bible.

1. That we worship it. The bible is a resource, a holy resource that tells the story of people's search for God as much as God's search for people. It is not the fourth person of the trinity to be revered, held in awe, inviolate and perfect. The bible is not God's unmistakable word for all time. It is a source of inspiration and wisdom for God's people.
2. That we take it literally. The bible is a record of people's memories. Written like memoirs, the bible was etched, scraped together, eeked out of the fragments of story people remembered. It is not history, it is not journalism, it is not science. It was never intended to be.
3. That we contextualize it. Friends take a position on any subject – war and violence, sexuality, parenting, the role of woman. Take your position, make your claim. (ask them) Then scour the bible to support your position. The reason slavery took so long to be abolished was because both sides of the argument used the bible as their source of authority, each believing God ordained his position. It was after all, in the bible.

So...now how is everyone doing?

One last questions for this morning. With all that's been said so far, why do we read the Bible. What meaning and purpose does it have for us today.

- shapes our faith, inspires our living

- the ongoing, permanent record of all human emotional experience.

- you'll find your story embedded in this story...we'll find our story embedded in this story....as a result the bible is meant to be read and understood as a community endeavour. No one has a claim on a particular perspective.

- finally it binds us to the faith community of all time and place We are part of a continuing conversation about what it means to be the children of God.

You want to know why I had you do the talking. It's because you know as much about what the bible and its stories mean to you as I do. And as people of faith, we are all called into a life of active study that we might discern for ourselves our sense of God's call in this time and place. My hope is that we'll listen well. Amen