

Not Very Sheep-Like
Lake Street Church of Evanston
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So, I have this very difficult problem, when I'm reading theology – I read what I want the author to be saying, as opposed to what they really are saying. In my head, I am often already trying to see the radical edge of some profoundly non-radical theology. I'm seeing what I want to see, or my desire to see something redeemable, good, and usable, outweighs my ability to see what's really there. Some of you may have this problem in other disciplines, or some of you may read your spouse's text messages and interpret them in just the right way to be what you wanted to do, and not what is actually said. Such is life. We all do it. My favorite example of this was a recent study in which they gave x-rays to technicians who were trained to spot diseases in the lung, but they put a picture of a gorilla in the x-ray. Just sitting there, a gorilla, pretty big one too. 83% of them missed it because they weren't looking for gorillas – they were looking for diseased lungs, which is fine, because how many times is a gorilla going to be in your lungs when you think about it.

So, we oftentimes have this problem in scripture where we want to make it a little better than it really is. And I do this all the time, in fact, in some ways, it's my job to do it. I could sit here on mother's day and pick out the handful of times that God is called by a feminine pronoun – don't get me wrong, that deserves to be celebrated – but the reality is scripture is far more comfortable with masculine pronouns for God, and that should make us a little uncomfortable. So, what do we do with our discomfort? What do we do when our experiences don't match onto our ancient supposed-wisdom? How do we remain faithful but not lose our respect for our intellects and our hearts?

I'll give you two things that really hammered this home for me over the past month or so. My first Sunday here I used a text from the Gospel of John that has a line in it, an ominous line that would shed much light on the anti-Jewish and later anti-semitic direction Christianity would go: the disciples were locked in their room "for fear of the Jews." Part of me wanted to edit it and make it "for fear of the crowds" or "for fear of the Judeans," part of me wanted to leave it and preach my entire first sermon about it, but in the end I figured that there would be plenty of time to hash this out, and one's first sermon is not always the best place to do everything, but I also decided something. I don't have to correct scripture's mistakes. Scripture should speak for itself, with all its myriad flaws, outrages, and difficulties, and my job is to help us make sense of the after,

because we live our faith lives, like it or not in the pause after the breathless statements of millennia ago.

And the other is that the lectionary reading in here uses the sheep and shepherd metaphor, and folks it just does not work for me, and I know that's probably a flaw with me, but man out of all the metaphors. That believers ought to be like sheep, following a shepherd. Now, sheep are not known for their intelligence, their vigor, the forthrightness of their convictions or for having such complex and nuanced lives that let the holy stream in. They are known for grazing, for following, for being white and fluffy. Which is great, but the Bible's focus on sheep has influenced a lot of positive emotions that we have about them. Have you ever thought about whether our world would be very different if tortoises were the metaphor used? Think about it – slow, steady, mysterious, long-lived. There's an animal I could be, I think. I feel a bit like John Shelby Spong, which I know our Large Christian group has been reading, when he says that a lot of damage has been caused by the use of "you must become like little children" line in scripture, saying that it just doesn't work for thinking about a rational, intelligent creative believer who is wrestling with scripture and modernity.

And so what do we do with these ancient texts that sometimes seem so sage and wise and sometimes seem like relics of the past that are best left to our ancestors? That is the question isn't it folks.

Our first task should be to ask whether this matches up with our experience of the world or the divine. A great example here is this passage of Talmud. We got any doctors in the house? Cool – well the Talmud says that you can just skip go and head straight on to hell if you like. Obviously something was going on with ancient Jewish views about professions that I haven't figured out, but it certainly doesn't match up with our experience. And so when we read about a cruel God or a God that is more about punishment than mercy, that would personally make me think really hard about what I'm reading. In a similar way any ancient text that has a view of the human being as not deeply flawed and wonderfully holy at the same time would arouse my suspicion.

Second we should know that rejecting something in scripture that doesn't resonate does not mean that you have to reject the whole thing, and it is one of the most faithful acts that we can do, because it represents a faithful wrestling with what works and doesn't work for us. To me this sort of laying down and picking up again of parts of scripture represents some of the most profound work that a person of faith can engage in. It would be easy to completely walk away from scripture, but we'd also be missing out on some important wisdom, guidance, comfort, and nuanced thought. In that same vein, you do not have to make scripture cohere or obtain. Some of it makes sense, some of it doesn't, and you don't have to play the role of editor to make it work.

Finally, it could be helpful to shift your frame to thinking about metaphorical readings of scripture, which does not mean that you're watering down scripture. Metaphorical readings are MORE than literal, not less than literal. So, when we read about a miracle that we may doubt, we can also see what the author may be trying to tell us. So, when we see Jesus change water to wine for instance, that is not just a retelling of a story, it's intended to communicate that life with Jesus is like being at a wedding where the wine never runs out.

In the end, whatever you want to see in scripture is what you will find. And that's part of the frustrating magic of church – ancient texts put into conversation with 21st century lives. The books we look to are not perfect, and they are not a book of answers, rather they are a book of questions, forming us as people of faith to ask the right sorts of moral, ethical, spiritual questions. And that doesn't sound very sheep-like to me! Like I said, there's got to be a better metaphor here.

And so on this mother's day, if you're looking for examples of a feminine, mothering God, they will be there, and they should be celebrated. Pick those up, use them, and you get to decide what to do with the rest.

Thanks be to the Divine for that and Blessed Be.