

“God’s Holy, Confusing, Flexible, Frightening Word”

Rev. Tom Warren

September 22, 2013

I want to start out today by talking about a man whose name is Walter Slonopas, and Walter Slonopas was a maintenance worker at the Contech Casting Company in Clarksville, Tennessee. Contech Casting Company is a metal manufacturing firm which has been quite pleased with Walter’s work ethic. He’s always on time. He works hard, and he hardly ever complains.

In early February of this year, Walter Slonopas quit his job at Contech. He quit, not because he was dissatisfied with his work, not because he wasn’t getting paid enough, not because he had a disagreement with his boss, but Walter Slonopas quit his job at Contech Casting Company because, when he received his W-2 Tax Form this year, the identification code on his form ended with the numbers “666”. Calling it a satanic omen, Slonopas quit his job saying “I cannot accept this number. If you accept that number, you sell your soul to the devil.”.

Now, in the third chapter of “The Heart of Christianity” book, which many of us are reading, Marcus Borg makes the case that the Bible is the “heart of the Christian tradition”. He makes the case that, to be Christian is to have our lives centered in the God of the Bible, and he says that the Bible is our foundational document. It is the document which gives us our identity, and it is the document through which we gain wisdom in regards to the 2 most central questions about life. Those questions are, according to Borg: (1) What is real?, and (2) How shall we live? How we interpret the Bible has tremendous consequences for how we answer these questions, for what we think is real and how we think we should live are heavily dependent on our understanding and interpretation of the Bible.

Marcus Borg, who has spent much of his life trying to help others understand the Bible, gives for us, in Chapter 3 of his book, five summary points for understanding the Bible as a historical product. Here are those points, and see what you think about these. He says:

First, the Bible is the product of 2 historical communities, Ancient Israel for the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and the early Christian movement for the New Testament. The Bible, he says, is a human product which is the response to God of these two ancient communities. The Bible is how those communities responded to their experience of God in their lives, so we have the Old and the New Testaments as responses to God, and he says, as a response to God, the Bible tells us how these communities saw things, how they understood their lives with God, so the Bible, according to Borg and scholars of his ilk, is not God’s witness to God but it is these early faith communities’ witness to God as a response to God, so as a human product, what Borg argues is that the Bible is not some absolute true handbook, but it is directly related to the time and place and era in which these early Israelites and early Christians were struggling with their understandings of God, and I always have this vision in my mind of those early disciples gathered around Jesus as having an intense sort of back and forth about what was Jesus talking about when he was talking about the kingdom of God, what do you think he meant, and so those early Christian communities went back over time and wrote down the story of Jesus and what they thought he meant, and then Borg says this: He says the laws of the Bible (613 laws in the Old Testament alone) need not be understood as God’s laws for all time but the laws and ethical teachings of these communities from which we extrapolate meaning for our lives in this day, so if the Bible is a human product created by two related, yet different, ancient communities revealing their struggles to understand God with God’s will for their time and place from which we draw our ethics, our values and wisdom for living in the 21st century, then how we interpret Scripture is critically important to everything else we do as a faith community, so how we interpret our Holy Books is critical for how we will live and do our ministry as a congregation.

What I want to do today is spend just a little bit of time interpreting these 3 Scripture readings that we had this morning. Somewhat familiar, certainly, the creation story is familiar, and the Isaiah text is probably a little new for us and that text from our Revelation, people sort of know because it is out there in our culture, but we don’t really know what to do with that kind of imagery, so I want to go into these because how we interpret these has a lot to say about how we live and how we minister in the world.

To begin, of course, is to begin at the beginning. The first Book of the Bible and the story of creation comes, of course, from Genesis, and biblical literalists, of course, read the creation story from Genesis and say that this is about how exactly the earth was created, that it was created in 7 days and it's a done deal, but Borg wants us to think again, and I'm going to get to some important pieces of this. He says "No matter how you read that creation story, the meaning of that creation story is, in many ways, the same, whether you read it as sort of a literal account or if you read it metaphorically" as Borg encourages us to do. These creation stories say this: First he says God is the Creator of all that is, that the creation and all that is in it is good, indeed, very good, and that we humans are created in the image of God. We are, perhaps, a little wacky but we are still good according to this story of creation, and if we are to read on, of course, about Adam and Eve, what we know is that we live our lives east of Eden; that is, we have been sort of thrown out of the Garden and we know something is amiss in our human condition, so part of that story is to sort of bring up the point that we are all yearning to get back to that Garden of Eden. We are yearning to get back to Shalom and peace and well being in our individual lives. Now, metaphorically, this is what the creation story tells us without having to believe its literal interpretation, but why not believe this story literally.

Well, along with the arguments of science and all that sort of razzmatazz about evolution, we do know a few things about this creation story. The first is this: There is no doubt that the creation stories in Genesis (and there are two, but I'm only reading from one today) utilizes older materials. What that means is, the Genesis story of creation echoes, if you will, and uses earlier creation stories that have been discovered in Egypt and Mesopotamia, archeologists, anthropologists and all those sort of "professionals of science" have discovered that there are creation stories for the biblical account of creation, so our creation story that we have in Genesis is at least, in part, attributed to creation stories that were before the Bible's creation. What that points out to me is that we are all (regardless of our era, regardless of our tradition of faith) struggling with the question "How did we get here?". This is the question of humanity and religions come up with answers for that, so the creation story is our way of answering that question.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, scholars have determined that the biblical creation story is dated to the sixth century B.C. This is the time when Israel was in exile in Babylon. Now, why is that important? The point of this exilic text, as they say, (It is a text written from exile.) is not to make arguments about creation or science or evolution, or any of that stuff that we deal with today. The Bible was not interested in those issues. Imagine yourself living in Babylon—this foreign land with foreign gods, feeling like the God of Israel, Yahweh had abandoned you, hope is gone, despair is reigning. How do we find affirmation of our faith when we live in a foreign land? So, the creation story, written out of this context of loss for Israel, is a push back against Babylonian gods and Babylonian claims. It is a text of hope. From Babylon read this recreation story and know that God is still with you. Know that God is the Lord of all life, and read that Christian Jewish creation story in the context of your life today and know that God is in control. It is a radical story of hope. It is not interested in science. It is interested in affirming to the Israelites and affirming to us that God is still with us even when we live in a foreign land, so it is a transformative story about affirming that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is still in their midst, and that is the power of this narrative, so the Old Testament, the first Book of our Bible starts with hope, starts with newness in the midst of despair, starts with a story that is about God. Our God is with us.

So, we move from the first Book all the way up to the last Book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, and the Book of Revelation is difficult, and it is a highly contested Book in the Christian tradition. Many people do not like this Book, many more don't understand it, and some people throughout Christian history have wanted to remove this Book from the New Testament, take this far out, strange, odd Book out of here because it freaks us out.

Studying Revelation is a big, and I would argue, a very important endeavor within our tradition, but today I just want to look at a few of the verses in Revelation 13 and to show how dangerous a literal interpretation of Scripture can be. Revelation 13:11-18, the one that I read, is a fantastic piece of Scripture about the Beast that comes out of the earth. It is part of what is called an apocalyptic genre of writing. This was an ancient style of writing found in Revelation and in the Book of Daniel and in other little bits and pieces of the Bible, but it is a tradition of writing. It is far out, but it communicates a certain message. Now, this Beast in the text of signs and wonders throws fire around. He has a mark which he says is the mark of a man (The mark is "666") and people, of course, have been arguing and writing about the mark of the Beast forever and ever.

Some of you will remember that, in the late 1970s, a man by the name of Hal Lindsay wrote a book by the name of "The Late Great Planet Earth". It was a book about the impending doom of the earth based mostly on the Book of Revelation, and Hal Lindsay has made quite a comfortable living sort of rewriting this book every 5-10 years according to the political winds, but here's the deal why these books need not be written. What scholars know, what historical critical scholars have known for a very long time, is that "666" is a historical reference to the emperor Nero of the Roman empire and it is generated by a practice called Gematria where Greek words are transliterated into Hebrew letters, and all of these Hebrew letters have numerical values attributed to them, so the value of the Hebrew letters which spells out Caesar Nero, or Emperor Nero of the Roman empire, when you add up the Hebrew values, you get the number "666". Now, why did they do that? Well, you remember perhaps, that the Book of Revelation is written by John of Patmos. He is a prisoner on the Island of Patmos, who was writing for early Christians who were feeling under pressure and oppressed and attacked by the Roman Empire, and Nero was the first emperor who went after those early Christians. He was, perhaps, not the worst emperor, but in the mindset and the imaginations of those Christians, it was Nero who started the oppression and the attacks. So, to write Nero as "666" and to claim him as "The Beast" is the way those early Christians identified the emperor and the Roman Empire and, more importantly, how they were experiencing that Roman empire in the first century.

So, Revelation is not about the end of the world, or monsters from the sea, or zombies attacking the earth, but it is really a Book about Christian hope. How do we live in the context of a culture that is against what we believe or is oppressing us or not letting us worship as we see fit? Early Christians had much of that struggle going on in their faith.

So, the next time you hear someone talk about the Beast or "666", you can say "Oh, yeah. Emperor Nero. I don't need to worry about him", because the Book of Revelation is actually one of the most hopeful books of the New Testament because, if you remember, Revelation 21 is about God's kingdom coming to earth and the streets are gold, and there are no more tears, there is only joy, there is only peace, there is only well being, so Revelation is really a tremendous Book of hope, but understanding it in its context and interpreting it is very important.

Last, but not least, I want to touch on Isaiah 56:3-8, and I go to a rating of "PG" at this point. Mary read this text, and if you did not pick up on it, it was about a couple of things, but one of the things it was about was Eunuchs. It was about Eunuchs being welcomed into the worshipping community. It is the text where they are formally welcomed into the Jewish faith. It is important to understand that this text was written during the time when the Jews of Israel are re-gathering after the exile. They are starting their community, in a sense, new. It is a new day for them, and what is incredible about the piece that Mary read from Isaiah is that it directly contradicts what is said in God's law, in Deuteronomy 23, so if you were to go back to Deuteronomy 23--and it's one verse (and for those of you who do not know what a Eunuch is, you will get a very clear message right now), Deuteronomy 23:1 is all the laws of who is in and who is out in Israel, and this one verse says that "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord." My response to that text is "Ow!" God's law says no Eunuchs in the faithful community. We don't know exactly why they weren't welcome, but you could let your imagination run, and it could go in many directions, but there is a new day in Isaiah. In the third part of that Book of Isaiah, there is a new day and all of a sudden Eunuchs are going to be welcomed into the community. New times, new situations demand new ways of living, even in the faith community. Thus, the Bible as a human document, which Borg says and argues, requires in this instance a new thinking and a new response to God, and what we learn is God's word is flexible. Because it is the word of the community, it is responsive to the needs of the community at that time and that day and that situation. Can you imagine, if you're a Eunuch, the good news that you are hearing? You have been cut out forever and ever and all of a sudden the door is open and you are welcomed into this community? Our Bible is an amazing document. It is the document that we base our faith on. It is the document that we gain our identity from. It is the document that challenges us and moves us out into the world and it is a document that is living. It is alive with newness for our day today, and we read it (as Borg wrote in his book) as a Sacrament. That is, we read the Bible with the expectation that, through this ancient book, God speaks to us and comes into our lives reading this book.

I remember going to my first church in St. Louis when I was a seminary student, and I walked in on that Sunday morning, and Reverend Mike Vossler, who was sort of my mentor to that church, looked at me and said "Where is your Bible? We don't do anything without our Bible.". I never quite understood that, but I came to understand that that is, indeed, why the biblical narrative is so important and why it is so powerful, because it is not written in stone, never to

be changed and just sort of a dusty sort of Book. It is a Book that sort of requires us to engage with it and study it and struggle with it and write in the margins. It is through the Bible that we come to understand God. It is through the Bible that we come to understand God's will for our lives and how we should live our lives, and it is through the Bible that we organize our communities of faith.

So, as part of our ministry today, I believe very firmly that our ministry needs to be about Christian education in the public realm--that is, being out there in the public domain and engaging in the conversation about what this Scripture means, what this biblical narrative means for our world because, when I read about people who read the Bible and quit their jobs, I know that they have not gotten a proper understanding because that is not what God wishes for us. God does not wish for us to be people of superstition. God wishes for us to be people of faith, and so, God's holy word gives us life, hope, gives us guidance and wisdom, and today we thank God for that Word, even as we struggle with it, because as we struggle with it, we experience and learn more about the God that has given us the creation and who gives us life and hope forevermore. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Tom Warren, Pastor

TW/slk