



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 23 – Proper 28 Year C

Engaging with Scripture

[RCL]: Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

It seems almost self-evident that children’s literature contains some of the most unvarnished truths among any genre. Certainly, we all have our favorites, but two, in particular, have something to do with our life in the church hinted at in our collect and the readings assigned for today.

The first children’s book is *The Monster at the End of This Book*. From the 1970s, it features none other than Grover of Sesame Street fame. The book is essentially about Grover, who reads the title of the book and tries to convince the reader to stop reading. Grover does not want us to get to the end of the book. The book is very “meta” in its own way because Grover interacts and responds to the actions of the reader. From the very beginning, Grover “breaks the fourth wall” – a concept in film, comics, and even novels, which occurs when a character directly addresses the audience. This is usually used to great comedic effect whereby the character in question looks to us for help – or at least commiseration.

The comedy of *The Monster at the End of This Book*, of course, is that a.) the book will not go on without the reader reading, which sets Grover off into escalating measures to stop us; and b.) Grover, it turns out, is the monster.

Another wonderful children’s book is much more recent, called, *We Are in a Book!*. It is written and illustrated by the great Mo Willems. In *We Are in a Book!*, Elephant and Piggie discover that, yes indeed, they are in a book, and they can control the reader and they are in turn controlled by the reader. These are deeply sophisticated books! It’s a real mind-bender and likely has led many a child to the threshold of their first philosophical ideas. “Am *I* in a book?” “What *is* life?”

By now you are probably wondering – what’s this got to do with the readings? Everything.

Our collect for today says, “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

© 2019 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

This is the only collect that explicitly refers to the Scriptures themselves. It claims that God is the one who is the source and cause of the writing of Scripture. It does not get into inspiration or what exactly that means; it simply says that God is the cause of Scripture.

We are encouraged in this collect to engage in Scripture in a series of ways:

Hear: we are invited to simply hear the Scriptures. Hearing is a funny thing because we can't hear more with effort, it is just something we have to allow. We also cannot *unbear* things, can we? The Biblical scholar Rebecca Wright teaches her students to simply "read the words on the page." This is good advice for engaging Scripture because, for many of us, the stories are so familiar that we do not really hear them anymore. If we can hear with new ears, then we will be awakened to the strangeness of what God is doing with us.

Read: We are encouraged to read the Scriptures. How often do you read Scripture? Sunday mornings we get a great deal of Scripture, but how about Monday through Saturday? The Church has long given testimony to the transformative power of daily Bible reading.

Mark: We are encouraged to mark the Scriptures. This does not mean that we mark up our Bibles literally, though it might mean that. There is not a prohibition on underlining or making notes in your Bible. Marking also means stopping and recognizing the gravity of a particular passage. Mark its power; mark how it makes you wonder.

Learn: We are encouraged to learn the Scriptures. For too long, Episcopalians have ceded knowledge of the Bible to other groups. We should not be ashamed of what the Scriptures say and instead should know them well enough to live by them. This leads us to the last way of engagement described in the collect.

Inwardly Digest: We are encouraged to inwardly digest the Scriptures. This may sound strange, but is it? There is a rabbinic tradition that a small dab of honey is placed on a scroll of the Torah for children to lick to understand the sweetness of the word of God. St. Benedict urged his monks to ruminate upon Scripture throughout the day. Do you know what a ruminant animal is? It's an animal that digests food in stages. We need to come back to Scripture time and time again in order to digest it properly. Very often, we simply accept what a particular passage says without critical engagement. This is like stopping one's ears to the words of Scripture. Instead, allow a passage to settle into your very being. Let it reside there. And while it's there, allow it to inform your experience. Go ahead and turn it over in your mind. See what happens. This kind of reading and rumination will keep the Scripture with you like a pebble in your pocket.

All of these methods of engagement with Scripture are transformative. The Church has found that the words of Scripture are not bound by the simple meaning of the words themselves but are the launchpad for our relationship with God. If this were not the case, then the Bible would simply be an idol.

What this collect invites us to know is that – are you ready for this – we are in a book! We are part of a community, the Church, that wrote this book. It is fairly mind-bending to consider that the New Testament was written by people who were gathering just as we do every Sunday. We are in a book!

May each of us take up all these ways of engaging with Scripture to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the text so that we might be transformed by it and live it. In this, we might become Holy Scripture for a world so desperate for hope and love. Amen.

Josh Bowron is the rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Charlotte, N.C. where he lives with his wife, four chickens, three children, two cats, and one amazing dog.