

March 9 / Reading the Bible historically

Assignments: review the Boff section on historical reading
read the handout on "Questions gone wrong" in designing Bible study
read the article on adult learning from the *Lifelong Learning* journal (pp. 89-102, Vol 1.3, Fall/Winter 2007)
search for resources that engage the Luke 24:13-35 text from an historical/critical angle and come to class prepared to share whatever insights into the text you've gained from that process (make sure you've searched at least three appropriate resources, and bring along citations to document your insights)

(Devotional:

What struck me was three things: (confess to doing this ahead of time) I am also always doing things in threes.

1. In vv17-18. Jesus asks them what they are discussing. One answers, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

What strikes me is the tone of this response; the underlying "tude" is just a wee bit superior. Think about their situation: They have just been through the very first Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. They are on their way home, and they run into this stranger. And he asks "What have you been talking about?" And they say, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" I kind of identify with these guys. And I am always amazed at how superior we can be when we are really confused and dejected! The text has just lawed me. When I am confused, I respond by being rude. And then, I couldn't help noticing, Jesus, the stranger, asks the disciples/us, "What things?" Like he doesn't know, and needs us to tell him! He was, after all, there, and he knows the story very personally.

So the second thing that strikes me is maybe Jesus does need them, need us to tell him what happened -- not in order to get the facts but rather to hear from them, from us precisely how we put it all together. Jesus needs to hear how it is we tell the story to a stranger. This is like the incarnate Word needing the proclaimed word to be complete. And how do they/we do?

Well, we blurt out this succession of facts, these things about Jesus: he was a prophet, mighty in words and deeds. We had hoped he was more than that. But he was killed; he was crucified. And a few of the women say he was alive, but none of us can substantiate that. So that's it. The facts, sir, nothing but the facts.

So Jesus listens to us tell the story. And **he seems to hear** that we have the facts and that we depend upon our reason, upon our own vision of what the future should hold, and upon what we ourselves are able to substantiate. **He hears** that we are sad and confused and disappointed. **He hears** as well that our ways of knowing are so limited. **He hears** that our story and our lives need transformation. So transform us he does, through Word and through presence.

******Back to our text. Let's look at the text with a different set of eye glasses and a different set of questions.

******Let's read it thinking about historical settings. This method begins with the understanding that our Bible is, among many other things, an ancient text, written in a different time and place by and for folks with sensibilities and experiences quite different from our own.

How folks often hear history questions? You tell me.

- Often questions like "What really happened on that day?"
Where was the burning Bush or Noah's ark? What did Jesus really say?
Programs on Bible on the history channel often have such questions at the forefront.
Can't answer questions like that. No eye witness, news reporter questions.

Rather, basic question is this:

******What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand the plain meaning of this passage more accurately?

What stands behind the text?

What do we know of Ancient Corinth or about working class houses in various eras of Jerusalem's history?

There are many ways history can be helpful. But it doesn't always solve stuff. Sometimes it gives you really good options, both possible. If this is a Jewish audience, they might hear it this way. If a Gentile audience, this way. Both are possible. What do you think?

To give passage meaning, work by analogy.

Historical questions do need an expert. Sometimes the expert in the room. Me. Your pastor. Your Bishop. Scholar at your table. Sometimes you learn good places to go to look stuff up: church library, study Bible, good materials (AF), **good websites (workingpreacher.org; enterthebible.org). Textweek.com. Ning site. Take folks to enterthebible.org

So, some good historical questions:

**Do we know anything about the author,

about who wrote the passage -- when and where?

**Are there implied political and social realities that could shed light on this passage?

**Do we know where this text was written or takes place and anything about that ancient part of the world?

Answer these questions from what you have read.

Well, the best scholarly speculation says Luke was written sometime after the destruction of the 2nd temple in Jerusalem, after 70ce (around 85-95 ce). Had before him, Mark, a collection of sayings of Jesus called Q, and added his own unique stuff, of which the passage before us is one. Author of Luke also wrote Acts. They are a matched set.

All this is pretty well accepted by modern scholars, though, another minor but plausible theory, says Matthew had Mark in front of him and he adds his own stuff. Then Luke has both Mark and Matthew, and takes some from both, leaves some out, and adds his own stuff. So pretty settled, but still historical speculation. Don't know much about the author. Could be that he was once a traveling companion of Paul, though many scholars would question this. No indication of where he wrote, though ancient church tradition puts him in Antioch, which is where most folks think Matthew was written, so not likely. May well have been a gentile who was attracted to Judaism, a "god-fearer," found scattered throughout Acts. Knows the Greek version of the OT, the Septuagint, quite well. Knows Greek rhetoric as well. His audience appears to be Greek, acquainted with the Jewish Scriptures, now Christian. Cares about a church that has in it both Jews and Gentiles and cares about social issues. Luke writes, as he says at the beginning of his Gospel "so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

So did any of this help?? Pretty off putting! As I said, answering historical questions is not something a person can do without some expertise. This often

leads folks to think they cannot really engage in good Bible study because they don't know enough. So, one idea is to begin not with the answers, but with the questions so that everyone is engaged with the Bible in its historical setting.

******To help us do this, I am borrowing an exercise I got from my Luther Seminary colleague Rolf Jacobson who got it from Hans Wiersma at Augsburg College. Exercise is this. Look at our passage. Pretend you have to put in the notes for a Study Bible.

If you were writing the notes for a Study Bible for this passage, at which points would you put a note?

Example:

****** Acts 16:14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira* and a dealer in purple cloth.**

******* Thyratira – inland trade city, 50 kilometers east
of the Aegean

******* Purple cloth -- a very valuable material in the
ancient, international trade route.

Try this. Alone or in groups of 2 or 3.

Was it hard?

Tweet me some questions.

So here are mine:

****** Two Moderately Interesting Historical Questions

****** Where is Emmaus? Don't really know. In Hebrew, name means "warm wells." Not much significance (though sometimes names do, so worth a check). ******Text says 7 miles from Jerusalem. Within a day's walk for sure. One source says a pre-automotive Bedouin could walk forty miles a day. Clearly ate their Wheaties. Could be any direction.

****** Who are the "two of them" anyway? Text just says "two of them" like completely out of nowhere. Presumably them=disciples. One is later named -- Cleopas. We haven't a clue who he is. We never hear of him elsewhere. Isn't history helpful?! So why give us a name? Good writing. Authentic memory. Could just put in your own name. Cleopas was a man? Maybe husband and wife?

****Three More Significant Historical Questions**

These two disciples say that Jesus was “a prophet mighty in deed and word.”

****What would the disciples have expected from a prophet?**

****When you hear the word “prophet,” what do you think?**

****What do members of your congregation hear?**

How do you answer this historically or help others to do the so?

We get a clue from looking at other passages in Luke/Acts --

In Luke 7:16 When Jesus raises widow’s son, the crowd is seized with fear, glorifies God, and says “A great prophet has risen among us!” ... **so they expect a prophet like Elijah who brings the dead to life.**

Then, later in the same chapter the Pharisees sitting at table with Jesus say of him, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him-- that she is a sinner." ... so they expect a prophet to see and know things with extra sight like many of the classical prophets.

Then Peter in his sermon in Acts 2 says prophets **like David** knows the future God has promised. And in Acts 3 he says that the prophet to come will be like Moses. So prophets 1) see the future, 2) teach and 3) preach repentance and judgment and hope to the faithful chosen and 4) talks to God and delivers messages of God’s purpose

So for these disciples the identification of Jesus as a prophet was a given, but ultimately a disappointment. When they say in v.21 “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” By which they meant, “we had hoped he was the expected Messiah.” Which brings me to my next question:

****What would the disciples have expected from a Messiah? Means literally “Anointed One”, king, son of David. All the expectations of David’s heirs.**

A lot of books have been written about this, so allow me to be outrageously simplistic. The disciples thought the Messiah was going to take on the enemies of Israel by storm, wipe away oppressive forces, and liberate faithful Israel from the mighty forces of Rome and from all corrupt leaders.

The Messiah was their long awaited king, their anointed one who was going to usher in a righteous kingdom. He was the redeemer of Israel. And they certainly had plenty of Scriptures to back up their expectations!

And what does Jesus say to this great expectation? Look at v25:

"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" (Interesting that he doesn't say "how slow of heart to believe all that I told you while I was alive!".. Richard Hayes)

Ah, excuse me! I thought we were believing all the prophets had declared. So much for historical expectations.

What Jesus says next is this: 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

Which brings me to my final historical question:

******What passages would Jesus be pointing to about himself that the disciples somehow missed, that would make it clear that the messiah was to suffer and die and then enter into his glory?

How do we know from Scripture that this is necessary?

Perhaps as well the disciples think Jesus is in the tradition of rejected prophets..rejected and killed by the people. And that is the end.

Well, one way is to look for clues in Luke/Acts itself, and we find them particularly in the sermons of Peter and others in Acts.

Acts quotes a lot from the Psalms:

For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. (Ps. 16:8-11, esp. v10 -- Acts 2)

The LORD says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." (Psalm 110:1-- Acts 2)

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. (Ps. 118:22 - Acts 4)

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, (Psalm 2:1-2)

And then of course from the suffering servant songs in Isaiah -- Isaiah 53:7-8 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.... 8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away. ... he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. (Acts 8 Phillip expounds on Is. 53)

Does this all seem clear now?

Well not exactly. One of the astonishing and wonderful realities of this text before us is that we are not, in fact, told what passages Jesus points to. In fact, we are told

in v27 that “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in **all the scriptures.**”

It is not so much that a particular passage points to the necessity that Jesus suffer and die and then be raised again. It is that once the disciples, once we take this reality, this experience seriously, then suddenly all of Scripture is different. What Jesus does on the road to Emmaus is reorient our version of the story with the larger story God gives us in Scripture. It is never enough just to have the facts and logic. One needs more: one needs the pattern, the clue, the experience that makes the facts come together and tell the truth.

So Jesus says to the disciples, to us -- “Look, he says, at the Scripture you have before you, by which he means something like, open the Old Testament. But, he says, read it now with new eye glasses. Read it with the eyeglasses of all that has happened in these last days. And to myself I imagine Jesus reading with us from the book of Exodus, and reminding us how God heard the cries of the Israelites as they suffered under slavery. And I imagine Jesus talking to us of Naomi and Ruth and their journey from death to life. And I imagine Jesus reading with us about the skepticism of Ecclesiastes and the suffering of Job, and exploring with us the suffering servant passages of Isaiah, and the story of Gomer and Hosea, as well as all those remarkable psalms of David.

Which are now not only the words of faithful Israel and the prophecies of David but are as well the very words of Jesus.

And are not our hearts burning within us as we become re-immersed in these texts, now with the experience of Jesus fully present, Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. Something new happens. God is there now in the text-- in and with the suffering and the doubting, in weakness and in service, with those who do not know, with the imperfect and the unclean, even with our enemies. A new center has emerged that reshapes our way of telling the story forever.

The Messiah we had hoped for was going to rush in on a white charger, and vanquish our foes and made all of us rich and famous, or at least happy and superior! But the Messiah we now find in Scripture arrives on a donkey, wearing a crown of thorns. So when we were asking our Lutheran questions, when we ask, “How does this passage show forth Christ?” Never, never without cross and resurrection. And we learn as well that telling the story any old way is not enough. How we tell the story matters. Opening the Scriptures with the experience of Jesus in, with, and under all is the beginning of our own transformation.

And perhaps most interesting of all in our passage is that we cannot really understand what it is we have learned until we have a further experience of Jesus sitting at table with us and breaking the bread.

