

Welcome

I'd like to run an experiment with you this morning: I want to show you some passages and I want you to tell me what kind of work they're from. You can work with the person next to you if you want!

Here's the first one:

"You know what they were calling the terraforming initiative, when we left Earth orbit? The Forever Project. Because this is it. This is when the human race becomes immortal, you get me? We're off Earth. We're *making* new homes amongst the stars, whether the stars want us or not."

[Science Fiction]

Here's the next:

"I am a successful business professional with a proven track record of business growth and restructurings of multinational corporations. I would bring my tenacity and penchat for success to your organization in the capacity of the senior executive. As such, here are the skills I will bring to your company..."

[Cover letter]

And another:

Temperatures were expected to hit 101 degrees in Dallas on Monday and were forecast to climb even higher on Tuesday afternoon before cooling off. The combination of heat and humidity will make temperatures feel closer to 107 in Dallas and even hotter in Houston. The National Weather Service has issued a heat advisory until 8 p.m. Tuesday.

[news]

One some of you may know:

A Dog, to whom the butcher had thrown a bone, was hurrying home with his prize as fast as he could go. As he crossed a narrow footbridge, he happened to look down and saw himself reflected in the quiet water as if in a mirror. But the greedy Dog thought he saw a real Dog carrying a bone much bigger than his own.

[Fable]

Here's a fun one:

Heat oil in a medium pot over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until onions are starting to brown, about 8 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add oregano and cumin and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

[Recipe]

And another:

The child who would become Black Elk was born on a riverbank in the Powder River Country, a fertile rectangle loosely defined as the Powder River Basin of southeastern Montana and northeastern Wyoming.

[Biography]

And another:

No Senator or Representative shall, during the Time for which he was elected, be appointed to any civil Office under the Authority of the United States, which shall have been created, or the Emoluments whereof shall have been increased during such time; and no Person holding any Office under the United States, shall be a Member of either House during his Continuance in Office.

[Constitution]

Last one:

K lol. C u 2nite.

[Text message]

Think about what you just did: you read a sentence or two of a text and, without much trouble at all, and with basically no context, identified its genre. You knew intuitively that these were all different forms of writing, that they followed different rules, used different terminology and key words. If we went back through them, you could point out the specific clues that led you to the choices you did, but for the most part, your decisions weren't that conscious. If you know how to read English, then a lot of these decisions feel natural, instinctual to you.

They're not, of course. They're learned. But we take them for granted.

Until we come to something like the Bible. The Bible is a collection of books from several cultures, several languages, from thousands of years ago. The cultural assumptions that underlie the genres of the Bible can be very different from ours, which can make it hard to read the Bible. Moreover, we're mostly not *taught* to read the Bible with an eye to genre - it's not just that we treat the ancient histories in the Bible like modern history (even though they're pretty different). We read poetry like history like parables like letters like legal code.

Imagine if we did that today - treated a sci-fi novel like a history book like a legal document like a text message. That's a quick route to confusion. Some things we want to take very literally - like a legal document. Others we might read literally but feel free to improvise on, like a recipe. Still others we know not to take literally - like novels, fables and poetry.

The Bible is the same - it's a huge collection of literature, and believe it or not, we're not meant to take it all literally. We're going to explore today why we need to learn to read not literally, but literarily - and don't worry: it's something we can do without a seminary degree.

Scripture is a pathway we have to knowing God better, and by learning to hear Scripture as it was meant to be heard helps us encounter God more fully!

Message

[Series Master Slide] During the Summer, we're asking one basic question: How do we know God? We began last week with the conviction that, if God is our creator, then God is knowable. God is knowable because God *wants* to be known and, by becoming human in the person of Jesus, made himself knowable.

We have four major sources of knowing God: Scripture, the record of God's interactions with us throughout history; Reason, our ability to think and learn and discover; Tradition, how others on the journey of faith have known God; and Experience, what we learn about God from our own lives.

Throughout the summer, we're going to dive into each of those four sources of knowing God, and ask how we can know God better. We began with Experience, exploring how we can know God better through what happens in our lives - our private practices and acts of service both in relation to others. Next, we explored Tradition. From our local Catalyst experience to the global church, we saw how sharing in the faith experiences of others helps us know God better. We just finished exploring how Reason invites us to know God, from faith and science to learning to think like Jesus to the place that reason meets mystery called faith.

We're in our final source of knowing God: Scripture. We saw that the Bible is a collection of books inspired by God, which means both that it's fully a product of human authors and fully the books God wants us to have to shape our faith and ultimately invite us into a deeper relationship with the author of Scripture. Last week we saw what it looks like to read the Bible not for information, but to be transformed, using a practice called Sacred Reading that helps us meditate on Scripture.

Today, I want to press on the reality that, even when we meditate, when we read for transformation, the Bible can still be hard to understand. And it doesn't help that most of us have been told we're supposed to take the whole thing literally. A lot of that comes from how we use the Bible, or how we've seen the Bible used in our churches. First, we treat the Bible like a single book - not surprising since that's how we are used to seeing it. But the Bible isn't a single book. It's actually 66 different books - more like a bookcase or a library than a single book (in fact, our word 'Bible' comes from the Greek word for library).

Books have different genres, and that matters. Take the exercise we did at the beginning: most of those excerpts were shorter than scripture we use in our sermons. They were all different genres. And you

knew almost intuitively how to read them. You didn't treat the sci-fi the same way you did the recipe or the constitution. Why would you? That would be silly.

And yet we don't do that when we read the Bible. We treat it all like a text book or an instruction manual. We have it in our heads that we have to read it all literally (which to be clear is how you read an instruction manual. If I'm trying to fix my garbage disposal, I shouldn't be meditating on the deeper metaphors the author of the manual was trying to communicate). But full meaning comes when we read not literally, but literarily. We have to work to ask, "What genre is this, and how does that inform the meaning?"

If we don't, we can end up missing how God is meeting us within the text. So let's look at the book of Jonah.

[Scripture Slide 1] In today's world, Jonah is both one of the most important and most misunderstood books in the whole bible, and it's basically all because of a fish.

If you know anything about the book of Jonah, you know it's the story of a guy who was swallowed by a fish and lived to tell about it (like a hipster Pinocchio - doing it way before it was cool). And... that's all a lot of people know about it. The book of Jonah has become a battleground for Christians and atheists. A number of prominent atheists point to the impossibility of a person surviving inside a fish for 3 days as evidence the Bible is untrustworthy. Christians respond by turning the fish into a make-or-break issue. You either believe the book of Jonah is literal history, or you're a godless apostate. I know Christians who've gotten fired from their jobs because they don't think Jonah is literal.

But we don't stop to ask the question: what genre is the book of Jonah? Is it *meant* to be taken literally? Is believing a real guy got swallowed by a real whale the point of the book? Is it essential to what God wants to do in me and in us through the book?

In the case of Jonah, there are some really good indicators both inside and outside the book that it's not a history book. It's more like a short story or novella.

First is the book itself: it reads like a novel. Our English translations obscure some of the really fun wordplay in the original Hebrew. I'm going to pull from a translation by Matt Mikalatos. Matt's goal with his translation was to capture the wordplay we find in the Hebrew.

What you need to know about the book: Jonah is a prophet of Israel, and God tells him to travel to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, to announce God's judgment against them.

In Jonah's day, Assyria was the biggest, baddest empire in the world, and one that would eventually destroy Israel. Imagine how Americans feel when we think of Russia today, or maybe Al Queda. That's how Israel felt about Assyria.

Rather than follow God's instructions, Jonah gets on a boat that's going in the opposite direction - he wants to get as far from Nineveh as possible. While he's on the ship, this happens:

"Yahweh hurled a great wind across the sea. Such a monstrous storm arose as a result that the cargo ship seriously considered breaking to pieces..."

The sailors freak out, figure out it's Jonah's fault, and throw him overboard. Then, "the sea immediately calmed down, relaxed, counted to ten and wasn't furious anymore. It stopped walking around and just stood there, calm as could be." -- Jonah 1:4, 15

And then Jonah gets swallowed by the fish.

Did you catch how both the boat and the sea were personified? The boat "considered breaking to pieces" and the storm "relaxed" and "stopped walking around". This is a great reflection of what the Hebrew is doing there, and it's a literary feature we know in English as well - giving inanimate objects personhood.

Personification is a clear sign we're not meant to take something literally. We know the author is doing something else (think about Toy Story - there's a reason it wasn't nominated for any documentary awards).

Everything in the book of Jonah is exaggerated - when Jonah flees, he picks the furthest possible point on the map. The storm is exaggerated. The boat's behavior, the sailors' reactions, the fish. When Jonah gets to Nineveh he preaches a four word sermon - literally the shortest possible sermon. And then the whole city repents and responds instantly - the king and everyone repent. Jonah is a story where every single thing is turned up to eleven.

And that's the point - because Nineveh was the great enemy of God's people. And in the final chapter of Jonah, we learn that the whole reason Jonah didn't want to go is because he knew if he warned them about God's judgment, there was a 1% chance Nineveh would repent:

"I knew this would happen. I knew it. You're so gracious and compassionate! It's hard to make you angry. You're great in mercy and you're quick to forgive people who disobey you and you don't destroy them if they turn away from their evil." -- Jonah 4:2

Jonah is a story about a prophet of God who is the one person in a whole book of people turned up to 11 who *won't* obey God. The sailors obey God. The ship and ocean obey God. Nineveh obeys God, from the cattle to the king. Even the fish obeys God! The only person who *doesn't* is the one person who's supposed to know God the best.

Jonah is a story that warns us that just calling ourselves God's people isn't enough. If we're not imitating God in mercy and hospitality, if we don't want God to be for everyone, then we're not really God's people.

Now. Take a breath: does any of that have anything to do with whether the fish is historical or not?

And let's be clear: as Christians, we believe God raised Jesus from the dead after three days. Paul is very clear in 1 Corinthians that the resurrection is a historical fact for us. So if that's the case, then keeping a guy alive for three days in a fish shouldn't be a big deal.

The question about Jonah isn't "do we believe in miracles or not?" or at least, that's not the *right* question.

The question is, "What kind of book *is* this?" And it's pretty clear that Jonah isn't a history. It's a story, a parable that forces us to ask tough questions about ourselves and our attitudes toward the people we consider our enemies.

But ironically, people who insist Jonah is literal history miss that. Sometimes they get ugly and cruel toward people who don't read Jonah their way. They end up looking an awful lot like Jonah at the end of the book - which is the exact opposite of the point of the book of Jonah! In their rush to defend the Bible, the forget to let the Bible form them into the image of God!

So how do we read literarily rather than just literally?

First, it's okay to trust yourself. Remember that genre exercise we started with: you know how to do genre better than you think. And with quite a few parts of the Bible, it's pretty obvious. The letters in the New Testament are marked as letters. Most of the poetry in modern Bibles is arranged in verse.

If you have a study bible, they'll also often have some great resources in the study notes or book introductions. And our good friend Wikipedia is a legitimately great resource for a lot of that introductory material.

Here's the most important bit: we have to read humbly. The Bible is a big, complex library of literature that's thousands of years old. It's okay not to know everything and have questions. If you're not sure, ask questions.

And we're going to talk more about this next week, but that's why we read Scripture together, too.

Above all, what's most important in all this is that big question: is how I'm reading Scripture transforming me? Am I looking more like Jesus? If the way I'm reading the Bible is making me defensive or unkind, it's a good sign I'm putting emphasis on the wrong things.

Friends, I know reading the Bible can be tricky. But I want to return to that first thing we talked about: the Bible is tricky because it's where God and humanity meet. The ultimate purpose of the Bible isn't to make us right about a whole bunch of stuff. We read Scripture to know God and to be transformed.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Sign of Jonah!

1. When in the last week
2. Asdf
3. Adsf
4. Asdf

Assignment + Blessing

Sacred Reading of Jonah!