

Welcome

A lot of you know I'm a big movie buff, but one of my least favorite genres is biopic (or bio-pic, which I don't think sounds nearly as slick). Part of it is that they're often about people I'm not *that* interested in. I never saw *Walk the Line* because, while I enjoy Johnny Cash's music, my grandpa was the one who was obsessed with him. Me, not so much.

But the other part of it is that they all follow the same basic story arc - you get some childhood stuff where they were a genius but not accepted by their parents or something. Then some trouble finding their place as a teen, then fame, which leads to failed relationships and substance abuse before finally conquering it all, finding true love and having it all.

Maybe my favorite thing about biopics is the "What was really true?" articles that always come out afterwards. Because as much as I find biopics overplayed and generic, I really love learning about the real people I admire. I really *do* love the true stories about people who didn't fit in finally finding their place and their people. I feel more connected to the musicians, artists and activists when I learn they're like me. Or maybe, that I can be more like them.

I mention biopics this morning because they ask the question, "What makes a life valuable?" Today, we're going to explore the Gospels - the four stories of Jesus' life we have in our Bible. We're going to ask how we read these stories such that we meet the one who inspired them. Because the Gospels are about much more than Jesus' death. They're about his life, a life that stood with the vulnerable and outcast, that challenged the powers that be, and that ultimately offered himself to

Message

This Summer, we're doing a series called *How the Bible Works*. Last week, we began by exploring what the Bible is - a library of books written over more than a thousand years, by more than a dozen authors in three languages. The Bible is inspired - a book that is both fully a product of human authors and full of God's spiritual authority. Because the Bible is a divine library, we can trust Scripture fully to lead us into a relationship with Jesus.

But how does the Bible work, exactly? Well, because the Bible is also a human document, the kinds of books in the Bible matter. Much like wandering the shelves in a library, we need to pay attention to genre. The Bible has all kinds of literature in it - legal code, prophecy, wisdom literature, poetry, history, mythology, letters and more. We all make interpretive choices when we read - you don't treat a recipe the same way you treat a bill or a novel or a news article. We make these choices intuitively because for the most part, we know what we're reading before we put our eyes on it. We don't do that with the Bible - maybe because it all looks like one book, or we've never been told to think in terms of genre or because ancient genres aren't exactly the same as modern American genres.

So during this series, we're going to work through the various genres in the Bible. We're going to explore how they work, and learn some tips for reading them. Our goal is twofold: first, we want to do the best job we can of learning what the Scriptures meant to the original readers. We want to know what the

Spirit was saying *then*, through those ancient authors. All that so that, second, we can better listen for what the Spirit is saying to us today.

The goal of reading Scripture isn't to become experts on ancient literature. It's to know God. We read not to become informed, but to be transformed.

So today, we're going to start with one of the easier genres: the Gospel. When we talk about the Gospels, we mean Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - the four stories at the beginning of the New Testament of the life of Jesus. Despite the fact that the Gospels all have names attached to them, we don't know who wrote them. The names were added over 200 years *after* they were originally written; the books were circulated anonymously before that. The four Gospels were all written sometime between about 60 and 100 CE, or in the second generation after Jesus was raised from the dead.

The stories and teachings contained in the Gospels were preserved by the early church orally before that - passed down from the apostles who knew Jesus in the flesh to their congregations. It wasn't until that first generation started dying off that congregations decided they needed to preserve Jesus' teachings.

But there's a decision to be made in the move from "we need to preserve this collection of teachings and stories" to "let's write a Gospel". After all, they already had Paul's letters (Paul had been writing letters for at least a decade by the time Mark was written). And they had what we call the Old Testament - poetry, history, law and more. In other words, the churches had to decide *how* they wanted to preserve and present Jesus' words. What genre would they choose?

Obviously, they chose Gospel, but what *is* that? Well, we get the word from the books themselves - specifically from Mark (which most scholars think is the first one written). Mark opens his book about Jesus like this:

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. -- Mark 1:1

That phrase "Good News" is a Greek word, *euangelion*. In Old English, *euangelion* was translated as "Gud Spel" - good spiel. Good story. Gospel. A Gospel is "Good News". But not just generic good news - those early Christians used it because it's a word the Roman Caesars used anytime something happened that reinforced Roman rule. So when they won a major battle against enemies, or when one of the Caesars had a son, they sent out *evangelists*, "good newsmen" who would announce this all over the Empire. They were basically saying, "Good news! Because of X new thing, Rome's rule is secure and will continue forever!"

So when the first Christians started telling the story of Jesus, they had to decide what to call it: a story? A biography? A report? And they chose the word "euangelion". Mark begins his Gospel with "This is the euangelion of Jesus Christ, the son of God."

Mark said, all this stuff I'm going to tell you about Jesus is good news! But not, of course Rome's good news. A different kind of good news. A good news that says the whole world belongs to God, not Caesar.

In other words, the point of the Gospels is to celebrate Jesus as king.

What does that mean, exactly? Scholars have identified the Gospels as ancient biographies. That might sound strange to us if we're familiar with the Gospels in their entirety because, as biographies go, they're not very good. Two of the Gospels - Mark and John - don't include anything about Jesus' birth or early years. Both open on Jesus' baptism, which is the beginning of his public ministry.

And even though Matthew and Luke have birth stories, they're sparse. We don't get to know his parents very well. His father, Joseph, vanishes from both Gospels by chapter 2 with no explanation. We have no idea what sort of education Jesus had - was he literate? We don't know. How many siblings did he have? How did his formative years, you know... *form* him?

The Gospels focus almost exclusively on his public ministry, with a special focus on the final week of his life - what we now call the Passion week.

This doesn't fit into our modern ideas about what biographies should be. We want to see childhood. We want to know what forces and influences made people the way we are.

But ancient readers didn't have those same questions and concerns. They didn't have theories of personality or child development. So ancient biographies were focused on the big events - public work, wars, great contributions and heroic deaths. In other words, pretty much exactly what we see in the Gospels.

Ancient biographers were not interested in a full picture of their subjects. The goal of ancient biographers was to present their subjects as persons worthy of being imitated. Biographers wanted to highlight the morally praiseworthy features of their subjects' lives - and deaths - as a way of illustrating for their readers the kinds of lives *they ought to live as well*.

Not so hard to see why those early Christians chose ancient biography to tell the stories of Jesus, is it? In a world that celebrated the virtues of Rome - kill or be killed, leaders who would do anything to be king of the day, the Christians celebrated the good news of another kind of king. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than laying down his life for his friends." Jesus challenged those in power rather than making deals with them. He spent his time with the outcast and vulnerable.

In short, he flipped the story of Rome and her Caesars upside down. He gave his life to prove his way is truth. And - like we saw a couple of weeks ago at Pentecost - God raised him from the dead to prove he is the one, true king.

And those first Christian communities wanted everyone to know this good news. So they wrote stories about it - stories that took the form of ancient biographies, stories that would've been a signal to every person who read them not to be put off by this strange story about a king who has no throne, a leader who serves, a God who is crucified. It's an ancient biography, which means this man is a man worth following, worth imitating. This is a man who can save you.

This is the moment where some of us still want to push back - am I saying the Gospel writers had an agenda? That they weren't presenting pure history?

Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. Well, *I'm* not saying it. The Gospel writers themselves did. Take Luke, for example, who presents his Gospel as a report to a person named Theophilus (which means "God-lover"):

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. -- Luke 1:1-4

Luke says, "There're quite a few accounts floating around, and now I'm giving it my best shot." Why? Because Luke is bored? As an assignment for school? No... *so you can be certain of the truth.*

Luke wants Theophilus - and all us other God-lovers who read his book - to be certain of the truth of Jesus' life!

John is even more blunt:

The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name. -- John 20:20-21

John says, "Look, Jesus did *tons* of stuff I left out. The things I included here, I included *so you may continue to believe Jesus is the Messiah.*"

The Gospel writers absolutely had an agenda. They were not neutral observers striving for some sort of journalistic objectivity. They were people who were transformed by Jesus' good news and wanted their readers to experience that same transformation.

That makes us uncomfortable because we associate agendas with duplicity. But that's *our* problem, not that of the Gospel writers. What they have given us is not a sterile, drab history report, but four vibrant paintings of Jesus. Each Gospel writer has his own 'take' on Jesus - who he is, what his life and death meant for us and what it means for us to follow and imitate him.

Let's review: the Gospels are ancient biographies. Their goal is to present a picture of Jesus-as-king, and for that picture to invite belief in Jesus - belief that translates into life change.

So how do we read the Gospels?

First, we remember they are *stories*. They're narratives. They have a plot, a beginning, middle and end. It matters who the characters are. Jesus is obviously the main character, but which disciples are featured? Do they change as the story progresses? Why or why not? Who does Jesus interact with?

As you read the Gospel stories, one important way to read them well is to put yourself in the story. Would you be one of the disciples? What about one of the religious leaders who oppose him so often? Or the vulnerable and marginalized with whom he spent so much of his time? What happens if you *sit* in the story and be with Jesus, take in his words again and again? How does putting yourself into the story help you know Jesus better?

This is why it can also be really helpful to read through a whole Gospel story rather than jumping around or going bit by bit. Mark's Jesus is different from Matthew's and Luke's and John's, and taking each picture of Jesus on their own terms helps us get to know the one behind all the pictures.

Those first Christians left us a beautiful gift: rather than a single, static and sterile image of Jesus, we get four portraits of the one who changed the world. Four invitations to consider what it means to confess Jesus is our king. The question before us when we read the Gospels is, "How is Jesus good news? How do I follow him?"

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to his table.

1. How has my life looked like Jesus' in the last week?
2. What kept me from imitating Jesus?
3. What might keep me from imitating Jesus in this next week?
4. How can I imitate Jesus in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing

Reading Challenge: a passage from each Gospel this week! (See Reading Guide)