

INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Luke 24:13-35

Once upon a time, just a few days after the crucifixion two dejected disciples were slumping home to Emmaus when a stranger joined them. They didn't realize the stranger was Jesus.

Why so sad, the stranger asked. The two dejected travelers told him why. Their Beloved Friend, the best friend ever, had just been crucified.

Then the stranger said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah suffer and then enter into glory?"

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

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The Bible is the written foundation of our Christian tradition. Yet, interpreting Scripture is no easy task.

Of course, not every Christian needs to know the Bible inside and out anymore than every citizen needs to know the constitution inside and out. But it's helpful if some do, such as constitutional law professors, Supreme Court justices, lawmakers and the President.

The same goes for the Scriptures.

Not every Christian needs to know the Bible inside and out. I mean, how much do you really need to know besides *God is love and those who abide in love abide in God*. And do we really need to know this from the book of Genesis: *Esau was a hairy man; Jacob was a smooth man*? Interesting factoid but will it transform your life?

Not every Christian needs to know the Bible inside and out. But it helps if some do so we can trust their interpretations. I hope I've been that for you in my role as your Teaching Elder. Over 42 years I've shared with you all I have been learning, a certain way of interpreting Scripture.

There's a lot of stuff in the book we call the Bible. It looks like one book but it's actually a collection of 60 some different books of many different genres compiled over more than 2000 years in languages and from cultures very strange and distant from us.

Please read as much of Bible as you can. But "Rule One" is: *know what genre you're looking at*. It's like going to the movies. It's important to know that "Beauty and the Beast" and "Schindler's List" are not the same genre of film.

Interpreting Scripture is no easy task. But some parts are easy to understand. *The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. Or, love one another as I have loved you. Or, now abideth faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.* That's easy.

But other scriptures are a bit more challenging. For example, the first chapter of Genesis seems to claim that the natural world was created in seven, 24-hour days. Many take that to be *the only true account* and anyone who disagrees is an infidel. Evolution be damned.

But as it turns out, based on cultural and linguistic studies, Genesis 1 is not a quasi-scientific claim. It's a mythic poem celebrating the inherent goodness of life with a seven-day structure serving as a poetic device.

Behold, it is good.

We hear that pronounced like a litany over each day. In other words, life arises out of an original blessing, from a spirit of love. *I am the breath breathing in you.*

Creation tells what for. Evolution tells how. Creation and evolution are complementary stories.

That's not so hard to see once it's explained. Right?

Other parts of the Bible are down right bizarre—like the last book in the Bible, “The Revelation to John.” Many Christians see that book as predicting the future and so they sleuth out its many alleged codes. Thus the spooky number “666”—for the Anti-Christ—has been applied to popes, to Hitler, and even to President Ronald Reagan. No joke.

In the 1980s, I along with many other clergy received a mailing depicting the President's full name—RONALD WILSON REAGAN—over the number 666. Why? Because there are six letters in each of his three names. Therefore, obviously, he is the Anti-Christ. I thought Reagan was many things but Anti-Christ was not one.

“Revelation” is not a Ouija board. It's a graphic, cartoon novel of sorts full of beastly and bizarre images common to that type of literary genre popular at that time. Beneath its carnival of images is a passionate plea to remain faithful in that time and place (and by extension in ALL times and places) to the way of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

It's message is simple: no matter how violent the evil, beastly Roman Empire (or any other empire) may be, no matter what comes down, stay true to the way of love and non-violence. Give your allegiance to “The Lamb.” Love is stronger than hate. Do not give your heart to that which is unworthy of your heart.

And that brings us to another problematic part of the Bible, John 14:6. *Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life.* That seems simple enough until it's twisted to mean that Jesus is the only way to get into heaven which it doesn't say but which many think it does because Jesus goes on to say *no one comes to the Father but by me*, which again seems like heaven in some other realm.

But there's another way of interpreting this. In the Gospel of John, “Jesus of Nazareth” is a literary device personifying the power (Logos, Word or Tao) within reality. *I am the light of the world*, says the voice of Jesus. *I am the bread of*

life. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the door. I am water. I am the way. Jesus is presented as a personification of the creative, compassionate force within the whole world of things and creatures.

When asked in the first chapter of John, *where do you abide*, Jesus says, *come and see*. And when they follow they see love in action—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, and forgiving sin.

Where do you abide? *That's where I abide. Those who abide in love abide in God.* And that's heaven here and now!

To “come to the Father,” then, is a symbol of homecoming, where we all are meant to abide, namely in love. *I am the way*. True! There's no other way to that experience of abiding with God but by love. Which is to say, neither Jesus nor Christianity is the way, the truth and the life, but rather love—as embodied and practiced by Jesus—is the way—the only way to truly live.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today.

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

I'm sorry I missed that Bible lesson!

I'm pretty sure Jesus skipped over the stories of so-called “holy wars” found in Joshua and skipped over other parts of the scriptures that prescribe bloody sacrifices to appease an angry God. I'm pretty sure Jesus drew on the prophet Micah. *What does the Lord require? Answer: Not bloody sacrifices but rather this: Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God, who is kind and merciful.*

Whatever Jesus showed them in their scriptures it burned, as the gospel puts it—*it burned in their hearts*. And then when the stranger joined them after sundown in their house, he took bread, blessed and broke it. And suddenly they saw it was Jesus—the living and loving one.

The way to interpret the Scriptures is to find Jesus therein, or as I would say, to find love therein. Otherwise, you're not seeing it rightly.

And that brings us to a paragraph from “The Charter of Compassion” which our Session endorsed in 2012.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion, to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate. Period.

The way to interpret Scriptures is to find love therein. Otherwise, we're not seeing it rightly. And that's why we pray and sing: *Spirit, open my heart.*

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Hymn 692
“Spirit, Open My Heart”