



First United Church of Oak Park

All Scripture?

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

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I had an assignment for my worship class in seminary to visit worship services in at least three different places and write up an analysis. Since I worked in churches all through seminary, I had to get creative and find churches that met on Saturdays. One Saturday morning, I dragged myself out of bed and headed to a church. When I got there, I found that instead of a sermon, they had a woman who was traveling around singing in churches. The format was that she would talk a little bit and offer some usually bad theology, then cue the sound guy and she would sing to an overproduced background track. It was... fine. It was ok... until, before one song, she started telling the story of Hagar. Some of you may remember her story. She was a servant to Sarah. Sarah and Abraham were unable to have a child, and so Abraham had a child by one of their slaves whose name was Hagar. Sarah gets jealous of Hagar and becomes abusive. Hagar runs away but an angel appears and says, go back to Sarah and submit. This singer said God wants us to be so obedient that we would go back even if it means going back to abuse.

Well by this time, there was steam coming out of my ears and my face was beet red. I knew I couldn't let this go. When the service was over, I summoned all my courage and went to find the singer in the narthex where she was shaking hands. I said, "Thank you for your singing. I have to tell you that by interpreting the story of Hagar the way you did and saying that God tells people to go back into abuse, you may have just convinced an abused woman to go back into a dangerous situation. There were definitely victims of abuse in this room, because 1 in 4 women experience abuse. You very well may have cost a woman her life today."

And here I stand reading that "all scripture is inspired by God." Inspired... God-breathed. All scripture? Really? What about Hagar's abuse, and the sacrifice of Isaac? What about God destroying the earth with a flood? What about God telling Israel that they get to take over a land by killing everyone there? What about that part where we shouldn't eat shellfish or wear polyester or be gay? Or the part about how women should be silent in church? Is that God-breathed?

There's a difference between being God-breathed and being a bullet point list of facts and moral absolutes. There is a difference between a story having a truth to teach and all aspects of a story being right, good, and true.

There are people in the world who do not want to take the Bible seriously. They want to pull out one verse, one story, one moment, and they want to say, "See, this is the truth, it's in the Bible!" But the truth does not lie in one verse, one story, one moment, or one idea. The truth of the Bible hovers over the narrative, like an arrow pointing away from the book itself, away from the verse, the story, the moment... toward something bigger that God is doing... something truer than what the hearers of the story understood before... something truer than what they can grasp in that moment. Something truer than what can be held within lists of do's and don'ts for ancient cultures. The truth hovers over the Bible. If you want to take the Bible seriously, you have to fly higher.

So, what about the story of Hagar? Yes, it's terrible that Hagar is abused and told to go back, but this is a story that's trying to teach an ancient culture something it didn't yet understand. In the ancient world, people had an understanding of how Gods worked. Gods were vengeful, awful beings, who needed to be appeased. Appease the Gods and you may be allowed to live. Fail to appease them and you may find yourself in a famine, in ruin, in the midst of a tragedy.

Hagar was in the midst of a tragedy. It would seem that her God didn't care much for her at all. She was an abused slave. Hearers of this story would write off her character immediately: 1) Slave. 2) Woman. Double non-personhood. Oh, a slave ran away, find another one. Who cares. But it is to this nobody that God appears... and by the way, she is the only woman to whom God appears in the Hebrew scripture! And when God appears, God is not vengeful or out to get her. God is caring. God promises good things for Hagar! God says to a lowly slave woman, ""Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, which means God hears, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction."

Wait - a God who hears and gives heed to a slave woman's affliction? This is a truly different kind of God! This is a baby step toward the full truth of who God is... a truth that includes God hating abuse and never wanting anyone to be left in harm's way... but for now, a God who actually hears the cries of the oppressed and cares! That is the part of the story that would have shocked an ancient listener; even though there are plenty of other parts that shock modern readers, that's not what the story is about.

You have to take the Bible seriously to figure that out. You have to get some elevation above it to see the fuller story and where we're headed in this crazy book. You can't just read that one story and think you've got the whole thing. Your attempts to teach and use this book the way we are called to use it will be ineffective at best and will cost someone her life, at worst.

But when you do take this book seriously, and you do study it... it can change your life.

We have book groups reading *What Is the Bible: How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel About Everything* by Rob Bell. In this book, Bell offers this amazing concept. It's called *Anakephalaïossathai*. Now let's all repeat that... just kidding.

It's a Greek word from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It says "God made known to us the mystery of God's will according to God's good pleasure, which God purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. Translators saw the word *Anakephalaïossathai* and wrote down.... Um... unity. That works, but that's just one facet of the word. The word was like... bring things under one head... or recapitulate, retell. So God is going to retell the story of the universe and pull it all back together.

When I first sat in that pew at that church on a Saturday with my face turning red hot and my ears steaming... it was the worst! It felt terrible. It was not a great moment. It was not a good story. But today, when I told it to you, it had new meaning, and you knew it was going to lead to some kind of important moment or learning or that at least I wouldn't be telling you the story if it wasn't going to be useful for your growth.

That's what God does. God takes all of the story, not just the easily digestible parts. Not just bullet points on how to live. Not just the happy parts. God takes all of the story: Hagar's moment of deep pain, the sacrifice of Isaac, the part about the flood, the violent parts, the stuff about shellfish and polyester, and lying with another man, the nonsense about women not speaking in church... and God take our story together... the parts where we really messed up as a culture and caused oppression and hurt... and God takes your story

too... the part where your ancestors struggled, the part where you suffered from addiction, the part where your family didn't accept you, the part where you dealt with infertility, the part where your marriage fell apart... God takes all those parts, and God *Anakephalaiossathai*.

God retells it as one great story... with the truth hovering over the top... like an arrow pointing to something more true than you can ever fully understand. The whole thing becomes a story about love and grace and redemption. God brings it all together. All of it.

All scripture? Yes, all scripture.