

St. Thomas Lutheran Church  
Epiphany C3 January 27, 2019  
“One Wild and Precious Life”  
Marie F. Fleming

Over the weekend I did a count of the Bibles in our home. I found 10, plus a New Testament from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*. One of the Bibles, a gift from decades ago, is still shrink-sealed. I suppose it felt a shame to open one more edition of Holy Scripture with so many sitting idly on the shelves. [Another is a very old, very large altar Bible – German language – from an elderly parishioner long ago. Hashtag *WhenLutheransDownsize*.] And so, many of the Bibles in our house have histories that endear them to us.

To be sure, Lyle and I do use a few Bibles for study and devotions. Different versions are handy for comparisons. My Harper Study Bible is full of insights and information not included in other volumes.

But 10 and a half? I am chagrined – this is an embarrassment of riches.

So, anybody need a Bible? See me after church.

In my childhood home there was one Bible, from which we read every morning. That Bible was always in view, there in the living room. And one rule none of us ever questioned was that nothing should be put on top of it. No other objects, books or papers. Looking back, I see that practice as a liturgical act, embodying respect for the Holy, despite our decidedly non-liturgical tradition.

My first Bible was a pocket-sized new Testament, such as my grandfather and his fellow Gideons showered on country schoolchildren like parade candy.

Over a lifetime, my relationship with Scripture has evolved along with my faith. We have had rocky moments – okay, years. A college Religious Studies course led to a painful break when a professor suggested that a familiar Bible story “might not have happened just that way.” At the time, I thought I had lost the Bible forever. I know now that what I really lost in that moment was an idol – a god that refused to be questioned. It was a terrible and necessary loss. A healthier, more appreciative relationship ensued, with lulls and leaps along the way. It was decades later, with further study, when the joy of scripture fell full-bore upon me and ever since it has been a living, breathing companion on my journey of faith.

It is an ongoing concern for me that Holy Scripture is more often a stumbling block to faith than its source. For this reason, I am grateful that at St. Thomas we take its study seriously. Especially if you have ambivalence about the Bible, what it says and what it means for life today, I commend to you the opportunities on offer through “Living the Questions” and “Book of Faith”. Some of us are on our third round of “Living the Questions” and continue to find something new in every session. Or start a small group where frank conversation and solid scholarship can help clear the fog.

In our Parents Café conversation last week, we talked about the value of a Children’s Bible as one way to teach children to know a loving God. St. Thomas gifts such Bibles to our Godly Play children. Our young people receive Bible upon Confirmation.

In addition to the pew Bibles here in the St. Thomas sanctuary, there is a large supply of Study Bibles in the conference room, where classes use them with regularity.

Of course, every week our worship service features a variety of readings, usually one from Hebrew scripture, a Psalm, an Epistle lesson, and a gospel text.

Yes, unlike in days past, Holy Scripture is endlessly available to us. If you don't believe me, just get the app!

And so we come to today's lessons, two of which present powerful pictures of scripture reading, AND of scripture-hearing. Each at a time when the only way 97% of the people had access to Holy Scripture was when somebody else read it to them.

The Nehemiah text describes a community gathering on the occasion of the restoration of Jerusalem. In a public square, the people call for scripture to be read in an inaugural observance of the city's rebirth. We are told, significantly, that the reading will be for "Men and Women and all who can hear and understand". This must include the children. Such a situation is rare indeed. Seldom do we hear of the inclusion of women in a setting so similar to worship. Nor do we run across references, in such an adult-centered world, to a *child's* capacity to hear and understand. But there it is. "And all the people were attentive to the book of law."

"...Note that the leadership decision is not to JUST TALK about Torah, but to empower the rest of the people by reading directly from the written text." [ Working Preacher [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3952](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3952) ]

Of this scene, Pastor Debie Thomas writes, "Something powerful and transformative happens when Ezra opens the book. What happens is not magic. Neither is it manipulation. What happens is that the people consent to listen to God's Word with their whole hearts, to receive what's read in a spirit of openness and vulnerability, and to express their comprehension in acts of celebration and sharing." <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2060-when-he-opened-the-book>

Our second scripture-reading scene comes from the Gospel of Luke with Jesus' first-ever sermon in his home town. Jesus has been making quite a name for himself. His return to the Nazareth synagogue is likely to have been much anticipated, probably with a bigger crowd than usual, to hear from a local-boy-made-good.

There is a discernible good-news, bad-news, good-news aspect to Jesus' declaration. What is good news to the captive might not, after all, sound so good to the captor. Knowing that forgiveness abounds is a blessing to those who know their need, but rather off-putting to someone who doesn't. Good news for the poor may mean bad news for the non-poor. Indeed, the jubilee year of the Lord's favor sounds great if you need the redistribution of now alienated ancestral lands, but if you have amassed someone else's land --not so much.

So here's the trick: As with the crowd's hearing in Nehemiah's story, one has to be open enough to hear this news from Jesus' lips to your ears. You hear the Good News, recognize that maybe it isn't so good, for you, but stick with it until it is good again – because justice is more to be desired than self-interest.

With the death of the poet, Mary Oliver, in recent days, a resurgence of commentary, certainly lament, and quotes from her work is making its way through the contemporary grapevine. It has been a pleasure to review her legacy, along with her poetry, especially in view of the power of words that Holy Scripture represents.

Of her own word-smith'ing, Oliver said, "I did not think of language as the means to self-description. I thought of it as the door – a thousand opening doors – past myself. I thought of it as the means to notice, to contemplate, to praise, and thus, to come into power."

Not a bad description of scripture at its most compelling.

May we speak a moment about identity and vocation - For the scenes we have contemplated touch on both? And our reading from First Corinthians illuminates. And Mary Oliver eloquently explores.

Clearly, the community gathered before Ezra, gob-stoppered by the hearing of scripture, find their deepest belonging and purpose in that unifying experience of Torah. That the story made its way into the biblical witness confirms its power to weave its way into communal memory, and affirms that, in the best and worst of times, "The Joy of the Lord is our strength!"

Jesus' self-understanding as a beloved child of God is cemented at his baptism. Now, at the ripe age of 30 years, our Lord is ready to declare his life's vocation, and he uses words familiar to his hearers, from the prophet Isaiah, to do it. Notice that he doesn't make something up. Rather, by using the prophet's words he claims his place in that revered lineage, in the presence of friends and family, of his old Sunday School teachers, former coaches, 4-H leaders, [buddies from the Nazareth High School Vocational Center – "Stick with carpentry, Son. You're just not college material." Turns out his thing was Fishing, but that's a different sermon.]

Disturbingly, unambiguously, audaciously he proclaims: All that this prophet imagined, is here, now, in me.

Mary Oliver said a lot about naming and claiming one's purpose of life.

First and foremost, she cautions, "You must not, ever, give anyone else the responsibility for your life." She, like Jesus, invites us to vibrantly eternal lives that begin NOW.

"Always remember that you are absolutely unique," advises Margaret Mead, "Just like everybody else."

In that spirit, Oliver wrote,

"I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, AND as sing-u-lar.

And each name a comfortable music in the mouth, tending, as all music does, toward silence.  
and each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say, "All my life I was a bride married to amazement."

"I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms."

"I don't want to end up simply having VISITED this world."

And so, we attend to scripture, we try to wrap our lives around the Gospel truth that each of us is a beloved child of God, each uniquely belonging to the body of Christ, just like everybody else.

And, whether we are quite young, or just starting out, or wondering what's next in the third or fourth stage of life, let us take up the challenge and opportunity that God places before us, and for which God promises wisdom, power, and a loving community to hold us up.

In the midst of it all, may we hear Jesus' loving voice and see his twinkling eye in Mary Oliver's signature question,

"WHAT IS it YOU plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"