



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Bible's Big Picture

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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One of the most famous paintings at the Chicago Art Institute is by French painter Georges Seurat. It is called *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. And, yes, that was image that I put in the *Trinity in Touch* on Friday! What makes the painting notable is the technique Seurat used. He was experimenting with color theory and the eye's ability to blend tiny dots of contrasting colors into one unified hue. He was hoping to achieve a more intense color palette than the one produced by brush strokes. His style of painting became known as pointillism. When you stand too close to *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the La Grande Jatte* all you see is little blobs—or points—of paint. Only when you back away from the canvass do you begin to see the image that is revealed by the myriad of dots. Each figure, tree, the grass and the water are color stories unto themselves, all made up of small bits and all part of a larger image that only makes sense when you can see the whole canvass, from a short distance.

This is a helpful way to think of the Bible. If you focus on individual words or verses, all you read is little bits of story, history, revelation, culture, world-view, myth, hope, fear, relationship, sin, and love. At that level, you cannot see how those bits of information relate to each other or form a broader message. But when you step back and understand the history, context and circumstance, a whole picture emerges.

Take the book of Jonah. It's a story we all know well because of its rather fantastic elements. Jonah swallowed by a big fish and surviving three days in its belly, only to be thrown up onto the beach near the place that he was trying to avoid. Those plot points are some wonderful blobs of colored paint but they aren't what the book is about. The Book of Jonah is really a book about God and what God wants. Jonah is the best supporting actor, with the fish as the special effects. It starts with the people of Nineveh being unjust, something that displeases God. As we all know, God, having no hands and feet, needs human agents to carry important messages. Enter Jonah as the hapless one chosen by God to carry a good scolding to the naughty Ninevites.

The drama begins when Jonah doesn't want to go and hops a ship to get away from God. The story then shows the persistence of God, using winds and waves, sailors, and finally a big fish to get Jonah where God wants him. Those are great details but they are not the important part of the story.

So here is major point number one in reading the Bible. The Bible will reveal its secrets to us if we ask about what we learn in a story—not whether the story is true or what kind of a fish it was or whether the events in it could really have happened, but what the story reveals to us. What is the picture we see when we step back and get a little perspective? When faced with a story like Jonah's, the best question to ask is what is God doing here.

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Here is point number two. The Bible is filled with many kinds of literature and is written in different voices. There are the great stories – creation, exodus, and the flood. There are historical narratives and biographies. There is poetry for worship and contemplation and aphorisms for daily living. Because it was written over centuries, the Bible reflects on the different circumstances of the Jewish people and the early church. There were times of peace and prosperity. There were times of unity and strength, division and weakness. There were times of great distress, oppression and trial.

In each of these circumstances, different voices arose to comment on the times. In good times the Wisdom voice was prominent, claiming that we could know all that we need to know by observing nature and what goes on around us. This is homey, Ben Franklin type wisdom – “plant good seeds and you get good crops” kind of stuff. It provides counsel and calls for awareness.

On the other hand, when things were good for some people and not for others, the steady, grating drumbeat of the prophet’s voice emerges to chastise the wealthy and those in power, coming to the defense of the poor and oppressed. This voice always brings a warning from God to those in control – continue in your injustice and things will not go well for you. Jonah was the only prophet who succeeded in getting a wayward people to listen to God’s warning. In our reading today, he said “God said stop it!” and they said, “OK!” The voice of the prophet is harsh, and very often that voice is silenced, but there is always another who steps forward to speak for those who have no voice.

In the Bible, when things get really bad, there is particular voice that arises to give hope and comfort to a people in distress. It is called the apocalyptic voice; it acknowledges the dire straits and promises that some day soon, the “great and terrible day of the Lord” will come and the oppressors will be overthrown. At various times throughout Israel’s history, this voice has sounded as a form of pastoral care, and people embraced it, because they couldn’t see any other way out of their predicament. They lived in expectation of a great reversal of fortunes orchestrated by God, who would no longer leave them in misery.

Look at today’s lesson and Paul’s counsel to the church in Corinth that “Time is short”... At first blush, it may sound odd, but Paul really thought that there was no point in making any changes in one’s circumstance, and his apocalyptic voice speaks more to the anticipated return of Jesus than to the dynamics of marriage. In this sense, what he says about marriage seems to be just like the bits of color in a pointillist painting—pieces of information that taken together form a bigger picture. Paul was used to responding to appeals for him to settle quarrels among the Corinthians, and often he needed to speak in a way that lifted them out of those petty issues and focused them on a more hopeful and positive image. In this context, it is hard to imagine that Paul would have thought his words would one day be considered “scripture” and taken for their literal meanings.

To step back and see the big picture of Paul, and the voice he uses, is to see the vision of a redeemed world, one that follows Christ rather than a worldly power, a world in which differences and distinctions are obliterated by the new status of being “in Christ.” To look at only a selection of sentences, like so many blobs of paint, and not broaden your view is miss the world that Paul was expecting. To read Paul with such context requires study and some commitment to learning, and to fully understand Paul’s voice, we must ask the right questions. We must ask about not only context but the reason Paul was writing and to whom. We must ask how what he is saying leads to the world that he envisions – the new age of life in Christ.

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The third point to remember in reading the Bible is found in today's Gospel story of Jesus calling how Andrew and Simon Peter, and how James and John are called away from their father and their livelihood. If we read this as a story about a handful of guys in Galilee, we miss the point, but if we understand it as our own story, we grasp its real message—Jesus calls you, an ordinary person, to step out of your boat and join in the dawning of the Kingdom of love and peace. Step back from the small blobs of paint and see the whole picture, ask the right questions, understand the context and read the Bible's story as though it were yours.

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