



From the 2017 ESM Retreat

Serving IS LIVING

REV. IN KEE KIM

LECTURE
TWO



Welcome!

Welcome to the ESM Retreat.

This is the second lecture within the 2017 retreat series

This year's theme is SERVING
IS LIVING.





Power of the Scripture

The core of my ministry has been in teaching the Bible. I have witnessed how powerful the Word of God is but, at the same time, I've realized how little people know the Bible and how foreign they are to the Scripture. Thomas Merton said in his book, Opening the Bible, "The reader who opens the Bible must be prepared for disorientation, confusion, incomprehension, perhaps outrage." Thomas recognized that the Bible is not a comfortable book to simply enjoy. It is not a book that you can casually read and be entertained by. It is hard to accept it without some critical thinking and the asking of serious questions. On the other hand, Merton also said "The Word of God is then able to prove itself by its transforming power which brings love, unity, peace, understanding and freedom where before there were prejudice, conflict, hatred, division and greed." Merton really recognized both aspects of the Bible: that it is both a difficult book to understand and accept, while also being a powerful book that brings true transformation. This is something that I want to discuss: how the Bible brings true transformation. Because, if the Bible can bring true transformation, it is what we need for our spiritual journey. Movement from disorientation, confusion, incomprehension and outrage to transformation itself is a kind of spiritual journey. But, it doesn't happen once in a life time; it is a continuous cycle. So, what I am interested in is biblical spirituality





Biblical Spirituality

When I think about biblical spirituality, I think of two things. First, the spirituality that produced the Bible. This is the spirituality of the authors and the community that produced the Bible and how they put their experiences into writing. Second, the spirituality that the text produces in its readers, in the present. The text that was produced by the spirituality of ancient authors and communities also has the power to produce the spirituality of the people who read them now. The text, once it is written, has a life of its own. It is not necessarily bound to its authors. Sometimes, the text goes beyond the author's world and goes deeper than the author's intention. It can touch people's lives in ways the author could never imagine. But, it is the same Spirit who works both in the original authors and the reader. Jesus said, *"But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."* (John 14:26) It is the Spirit that takes the text and goes beyond the author's limited world and teaches the new generation with greater insights. Using the text the Spirit takes us into a deeper spiritual journey.

Now, I want to talk about how the work of the Spirit produces spirituality from the text. Hebrew 4:12 says, *"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* When I read this passage I wonder in what way the word of God is living and active?



Living & Active Word

The Bible is not like a manual where everybody sees the same thing. With a manual you don't need to interact with the text, you just take the information and use it - but the Bible is not like that. You cannot just read the Bible, take the information and apply to your lives. You may be able to do that with an IKEA furniture manual but you cannot do that with life. Often, I cannot even do that with IKEA furniture. After I assemble everything, I often have a piece left over and I have to do it all over again from the beginning. No matter how good the messages in the Bible may be, we cannot just understand them with our brain and apply them in our lives.



See, Jesus said, "let those who have ears to hear, let them hear." What does that mean? I think what Jesus meant was that not everyone hears the same thing. You hear the same sound but you hear different messages. Something has to happen to us so that we may have ears to hear. Jesus didn't say that the truth shall set you free. No, he said, "you shall know the truth and the truth that you know shall set you free." The truth out there cannot set us free. The truth that comes to us, comes within us and is known to us shall set us free. I believe that knowing this truth is not just knowing with your brain, it is deeper than that, more intimate than that. It involves awakening, understanding, deep realization and the opening of our eyes.

Did you know that In Hebrew, the Word "Know" means Intimate Relationship? The real meaning of the truth is hidden until the reader truly encounters the living Word of God and fosters an intimate relationship with it. Then the Word will free us. Through the Bible, through the human text, we encounter the true Word of God, who is Jesus.

The Word of God is an expression of God. That's what the word does: Expresses. The Incarnate Jesus is the true expression of God, he showed us who God is very accurately. That is why Jesus said, "If you know me, you will know my Father also ... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14, 7, 9) We cannot see God on our own but through the revelation of Jesus Christ, we see God. Revelation is God's self-expression. God revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ and through the Scripture. That revelation is God's love.





The Book That Reads Me

Hans-Ruedi Weber tells us an interesting story, in his small book, *the Book that reads me*. In that story there is a village woman who would walk around always carrying her Bible. "Why always the Bible?" her neighbours would ask teasingly. "There are so many other books you could read." But the woman knelt down, held the Bible high above her head and said, "Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me."

The Bible that reads me. That is an interesting concept. That was what Thomas Merton discovered in his book, Opening the Bible: "When you begin to question the Bible, you find that the Bible is also questioning you. When you ask: 'What is this book?' you find that you are also implicitly being asked: 'Who is this that reads it?'" You are not the subject that uses the Scripture to exercise your spiritual life but you become the object that is challenged, shaped, molded and formed by the Word of God that you encounter in the Scripture. In that way, the Word of God is living and active. Hans-Ruedi Weber says that this mysterious reversal of roles cannot be triggered by methods, It comes by the power of the Holy Spirit.





A Whole Being Encounter

So, reading the Scripture is not just a rational process or cerebral exercise where we acquire informational knowledge from a book. It is instead an event where the living Word of God and a living human being encounter each other. As this encounter happens, a reaction occurs within us. There is a ripple created within us. It touches some part of our consciousness that is buried deep within. It can be our dark spot, it can be a place we don't have courage to visit, it can be a thing that we have forgotten for a long time. It triggers the faith that we have deep within but forgotten because of too much sorrow, disappointment and disillusionment. It arouses certain emotions: Sometimes Joy, sometimes deep godly sorrow, sometimes confidence and other times newly renewed vision. Luke captures this image very well in his resurrection story of the two disciples who were on the road to Emmaus. These men were totally disillusioned because of Jesus' death and were going home very sad and disappointed. Although Jesus was walking along with them, they could not recognize him because they were too buried within their sorrow. Just like these disciples, when we are in deep sorrow, we don't look around - we become self-absorbed. Throughout their walk Jesus spoke about his interpretation of the things written about himself in all the scriptures. Luke records the disciples' reaction in this way: *"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"* (Luke 24:32) There was a reaction, a ripple was created within their hearts. It is almost a burning sensation, like a dead soul coming alive. That is what the real encounter with the living Word of God is like. It creates an event within us. Then, just like the disciples, our eyes are opened and we are able to see Jesus.



Eyes Opened Through Scripture

As we encounter the living Word of God in the Scripture, it creates something internally within us. It awakens our consciousness that has been numb for a long time. It touches our wounded heart and brings healing. It does something wonderful and beautiful. But, It is not what we do using the Scriptures but what the spirit does using the scripture. We are just silent recipients.


Isaiah describes this beautifully in this way:

"10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Unique Encounter of the Scripture

The scripture is like music. It is like a song that has been written many years ago but still comes alive. It's not in the past anymore, it is in here and now. When the Scripture comes to us as the Word of God, the story is no longer in the past, it is in the here and now. We can feel it now. We can live it now. Sandra Schneiders said in the book, The Bible and Spirituality, "Explanations destroy the magical power of words ... the story is always happening in the present because it never happened in the past." Like Sandra said, for the story to be the real story, it has to happen in the present. Since reading scripture is an event and interaction between the text and the reader, not every reader will get the same reaction. Also, you will not get the same message every time. What you experienced last year will be very different from what you experience today even if you read the same passage.

I do many Bible studies; the core of my ministry is teaching the Bible. I have bible studies on: Tuesday morning and evening, Wednesday morning and evening, Friday morning and periodically Friday evening and also Sunday in between the two worship services. In some of the Bible studies, I overlap the same books of the Bible, but the message in each Bible study is so different. The understanding and the sharing that comes from each Bible study is so different. It's so colorful, so rich and abundant. The text comes alive and our mundane lives are touched with a sense of beauty, hope, strength and joy. If the Bible is a manual, each time it will be the same. But, since it is not, and I thank God that it is not, every time we read it there is a new and different life that is created. It is a magic and It is wonderful.




Authority of the Scripture

Sandra Schneiders said in the same book: "As we grow and deepen in our spirituality we engage with the text differently and the meaning that emerges further changes and deepens us so that our next encounter will be richer still." So, it is not only what is written that is important but who is reading it that is also important. The authority of the Scripture is not just in the written text. Only when there is a true encounter between the reader and the text does text come alive and have authority. It is not authority that has power over us but authority that has power within us and empowers us. Once we have that event or moment of encounter in the Bible study, there is no more distinction between the teacher and the student. We all become students. We all feel the truth. We all experience the freedom.

I think the statement of The United Church of Canada captured the idea of the authority of the Scripture very well. "Authority is found in the living interaction between the written text of the Bible and the lives of believers, as they are enlightened and empowered by the Spirit." (The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture, A statement of the United Church of Canada) The Bible has many layers. The deeper we desire to know the truth, the deeper into the well of God's truth we can enter. There we encounter God who is hidden, unknown, mysterious, loving and embracing. We don't figure out God. We just simply enjoy his holy presence with awe. It is there where we encounter our inmost truth. There we find the strength and courage to be able to face our own darkness in God's warm and merciful presence. Real spirituality does not cover up our weaknesses and put up a facade to look good on the surface. It instead causes us to encounter our true self in God's loving embrace and have the courage to engage in becoming the person as God intended.



The 3 layers of Reading Scripture

- 1: The Intellectual Layer
 - 2: The Spiritual Layer
 - 3: The Sacramental Layer
- 



The Intellectual Layer

The first layer is the intellectual layer. This layer is fairly simple but takes a long time to go through. In this layer we aim to understand the historical context, geo-political situation, the culture and language of the world where the Bible came from. The Historical-Critical method is a very important area of study and it gives us very important insights. You have to study the structure of the Scripture and study how certain words were used. It takes a long time to do this and you need help from other books and scholars. However, this layer is not the end - It is only the beginning.

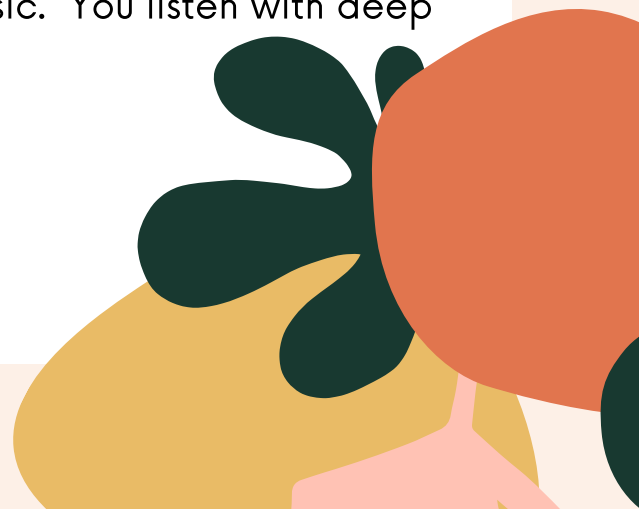
The Spiritual Layer

The next layer is a spiritual layer. In this layer we aim to understand the spiritual meaning and intended message of the authors. We get moral messages and spiritual messages. We understand the theology, spiritual worldview and how God works in our lives.

The Sacramental Layer

But I believe that there is another layer. I want to call it the sacramental layer. This is where the reader and the text truly encounter each other with the help of the Holy Spirit. This layer illumines us, challenges us, transforms us, shapes us and awakens us. Like we saw in the story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus, in this layer the scripture opens our eyes. The text is human language as water, bread and wine are physical objects, but God uses these things to reveal God's divine presence. His presence touches us and we experience God. We are no longer subjects that study the Scripture but we simply listen to what God has to say. Reaching this layer doesn't happen all the time and we cannot even demand it. We cannot control it and plan it. It comes when it comes. We need a humble attitude of waiting. We have to let the Bible speak to us. We have to listen with desire; as the deer pants for the water, we are hungry for the word. Meditation is waiting with desire for God to speak.

Do you know what meditation is in Hebrew word? The Hebrew word for meditate is Hagah. Hagah means Growl. It is like a wild lion having a prey in front of her and growling. It is not just listening as you listen to nice elevator music. You listen with deep hunger.

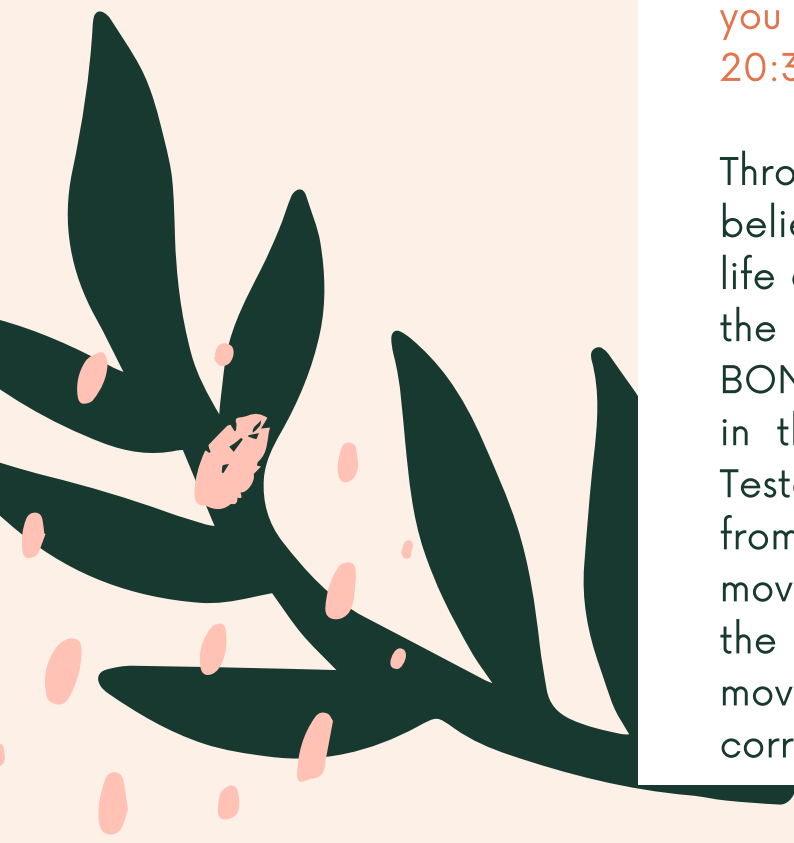




Movement From Bondage

Through the scripture we experience true FREEDOM. John said, "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31)

Through the written text we come to believe, and through belief we have a life of freedom. The movement I see in the Scripture, is the movement from BONDAGE to FREEDOM. Many stories in the Old Testament and the New Testament use the theme of moving from bondage to freedom. Not only moving from the political bondage of the system and its power, but the movement from bondage of sin and corruption.





The Desert

But in between bondage and freedom, we see DESERT. Before Israelites moved from the bondage of Egypt to Freedom, they had to go through the desert. Before Jesus began his ministry of freedom, he had to be tempted in the desert.

The Desert can also be a figurative thing. Before Job experienced true freedom, he had to go through the desert. That desert was his personal suffering. Job was in bondage to his small world of fear. He shows this when he says *"Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me."* (Job 3:25) But in the end, God spoke out of a whirlwind and said: *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"* He then really showed Job how majestic the world is and how majestic life is. The Desert is a place of trial and temptation where all our weaknesses and darkness become real. It is where our inner demons are exposed. But, it is not just a place of darkness, it is also a place of meeting God.

Connection

Along with the movement of “from bondage to freedom”, there is another strong theme of movement present in the scripture. That is the movement from alienation to connection. This includes alienation from God, from the society and from the self. The stories of the Bible are stories of people who are alienated from God, from other people, from society and from oneself. They are stories of how they become connected, accepted and embraced through the ministry of Jesus Christ.

