

# LENTEN SERMON SERIES : THE BIG QUESTIONS

LENT 1 Believing in Bible stories today?

## 1. Childhood

When I was very young, we occasionally visited my grandparents. And as they did not have a guest room in their apartment, my sister and I would spend the night tucked in between Grandma and Grandpa in the dark, wooden queen size bed. I have a clear memory that just before dozing off I would look at the print that was on the wall; an evening scene of Jesus the good shepherd, bringing the flock from the mountains back to the fold. And, in His arms, a lamb. I felt so safe and cozy. I remembering wondering about Jesus, and just who He was. I knew He was important to Grandma and Grandpa. I knew He had to do something with God who was looking after us and who wanted us to listen to Him. This may very well have been the earliest religious experience I remember.

*“I am having a hard time believing in the Bible stories that I learned as a child. I seem to be doubting everything. Am I a non believer?”*

This question was one that came in on the little blue paper slips last week, and I want to begin our Lenten series on the BIG Questions with it.

Perhaps the person who wrote that he or she has a hard time believing in the Bible stories they learned as a child, has similar comfy memories to look back on. I came across this old children's Bible with an inscription from 1916 this past week: “For Gladys, for regular attendance”, it reads. A beautifully made children's Bible with sensitive illustrations in the style of the early 20th century.

Little Gladys, who so regularly attended, soaked up these stories and believed in them the way any child does. And, because her Sunday school teachers choose the stories carefully, she only hears the Bible stories which are uplifting and interesting. Noah in the ark with all the animals, and then the beautiful rainbow when they are saved and can start again. Moses in the bulrushes as a baby. God speaking to Moses out of a cloud on the mountain. Jonah swallowed by the whale. Jesus baptized in the river Jordan. Jesus healing the blind and curing the lepers. Jesus throwing the money changers

out of the temple and setting the doves free from their cages. Jesus telling beautiful stories and performing miracles.

She hears the stories. She is enchanted, perhaps sometimes a bit bored by the lengthy ones. But she never questions whether it really happened like that. She hears the Bible stories with the same magic; as when she hears Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs told, or as she listens to Mother Goose nursery rhymes. A world of stories. Never once the question arises whether a story happened like this. She knows the stories are true.

This magical time of childhood, I trust, is what the author of our question and many refer to when we say *“I’m having a hard time believing in the bible stories I hear as a child. I seem to be doubting everything.”* So many questions arise as we become teens, adults, mature adults. We encounter a modern world where facts count. And where the definition of truth is “what can be proven as fact”. In school, we have a chance to address some of our questions about life. Answers are given in relation to physics and biology, society, and history. Much is brought into the classroom. But usually, the Bible stories get left behind, in the box with the fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Schools and colleges generally do not teach a more mature approach to Bible stories and leave that in the hands of the churches. And in the churches most young people stop attending any sort of Bible study after confirmation; age 14. So we grow up and we think that we should still “believe in the stories” just like when we were children, yet we live in a rational age.

If we don't seek guidance, we are stuck, we will feel guilty about our doubts. It is extremely important for Christian adults to continue in Bible study and discussion of some sort, so your faith can evolve and stay connected with the stories that are so important to us.

## 2. Historical/Critical Study

If we do seek guidance and dive into Bible commentaries and attend adult Bible classes, we soon discover what has been taught at every major seminary for at least 100 if not 200 years: that Moses did not write the first five books, that Jonah was never really swallowed by a whale, that not every word printed in red was really spoken by Jesus, that many of the miracles reported in the Bible probably never happened that way — and that that’s its not even the point, whether they happened like that or not. As the reaction to popular christian scholars and authors like Bishop Spong or Marcus Borg shows, churchgoers are fascinated, but often complain: “Nobody has ever

told us this before” .

Well I can tell you, there is nothing new to this. Unless you go to a fundamentalist church -of which we have several here in the Valley - you will have heard decades of sermons based on this kind of insight. You will not have heard a whole lot of scholarship mentioned in the sermon, but you can bet that your preacher has prepared the sermon taking into account these insights of current biblical scholarship. Why she does usually not dwell on this in the sermon I will explain a little later. In any bible study or discussion in United, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, United Baptist or Catholic circles you would learn something like what follows:

First of all, the Bible was written by human beings, using their intellect, their imagination, their understanding. It was not dictated directly from God, as is claimed for the Koran or the Book of Mormon. Every word is a human word, reflecting the human mind with its hopes and fears, and also with its cultural prejudices and limitations – and we have to read with an awareness of these limitations. I have added to the bulletin quotes from our United Church Faith statement that repeat this also. (See also the quote from UCC “Song of Faith”.)

So was the Bible not inspired by God? Yes, I believe it was. But not equally in all its parts. (Again, see “Song of Faith”) And not in some kind of direct supernatural dictation. When the prophets denounce injustice, that passion is from God; when the psalmist praises God’s faithfulness and mercy, that piety is from God; when the laws outline a just and humane society, that vision is from God. And when the evangelists and apostle Paul are so touched by what they encountered in Jesus, and in the stories told about Jesus, that they proclaim him as a unique revelation of God’s love – that’s another kind of divine inspiration.

But when Joshua commands that the Canaanites be slaughtered, man, woman, and child, when Ezra demands that the men dismiss their foreign wives, when the apostle tells women to be silent in church – these passages, and many others like them, are inspired from another, more human source, from ignorance and prejudice and hatred and cultural blindness. So it is very important that we never assume any single Bible verse is God’s word, but rather that we discern the spirit that inspired it. I trust you are all still with me.

The Bible is a huge collection of all kinds of different texts: prayers and praise and lament and myths and legends and parables; love poems and riddles and laws and wisdom; theological arguments and moral exhortation

and so on and so on, dozens upon dozens of different kinds of writing, as different as a grocery list is from a job application. In most cases, it was never intended to be understood as history, as an account of things that happened just so. Of course Jonah wasn't swallowed by a whale – because when you read the book of Jonah as a whole, you realize that it is a satire, written to make fun of a certain kind of prophet. Of course the world wasn't really created in six days: the first chapter of Genesis was written by the exiles in Babylon, where they encountered the most sophisticated science of the day. They were writing a creation account in terms of that new science, showing that God was in charge; just as today we might write one telling how God called forth the Big Bang, forged atoms in the heart of stars, and developed different forms of life through evolution.

### 3. Meaning of the stories – not factual

Some parts of the Bible may well describe exact history, like the extensive lists of family names in the book of Chronicles. But those chapters, even though they refer to something that really happened, are not at all relevant to us!

But compare that to the story of Noah's family and the animals in the ark, that story clearly is not historical, but it is a deeply meaningful story : God recognizes human's permanent inclination towards evil, God's desire to save a broken but beautiful earth. For me, it is a true story.

And this brings us to the key: as Christians we do not read the Bible as history or facts, at least in the modern sense: we read it as story. The difference being how it conveys truth. Facts and History are true when they describe the way things happened, what a reporter would have seen had a reporter been there. A story is true when it gives us insight into the way humans are, the way life is, the way God is.

When we read a good novel, we don't ask if it really happened: that's the wrong question. We enter into it with our imagination, we live in it, we see whether it rings true to our experience, and at the same time we let it expand our experience and understanding, we learn to see the world through another's eyes. And that is basically the way we read the Bible.

This is not, by the way, a modern theory. It is the way the church has always read the Bible.

What is modern is the question: “Did this really happen?” It springs from a modern mindset, we pride ourselves in thinking that truth is the same as facts: to find out the truth, we just need to discover the facts.

Fundamentalist Literalism is also modern. (phenomenon of last 100 years) It is also concerned with proving the Bible is factual.

BUT :Indigenous and premodern people, when they wanted to express the truths that really matter, told stories: myths, legends, folk tales, parables. That is how people of Biblical times expressed themselves, and that is what the church has implicitly understood throughout the ages. Nowadays that understanding of truth still exists, this is why we love novels and movies and other literature; but it stands off a bit to one side, as science and its literal, materialistic understanding of truth has taken centre stage.

And we are a bit caught in the middle, caught between the different understandings of truth in our modern world and in the past, and so it's no wonder we get a bit confused by it sometimes. No wonder we get caught into having a hard time to "believe" the bible stories we learnt as children.

To summarize: Yes. Anyone will have a hard time if "believing" is understood as "you must not doubt that it happened that way". I hope I have shown that for all the relevant parts in the Bible The question "Must I believe this happened?" is the wrong approach to the stories.

Excursion: Why bible is somewhat different from fiction

We read the Bible as story – and so it may be that a good novel is the closest thing to the way we read the Bible. But there is one difference: the Bible does have a kind of historical claim. Its story does not unfold once upon a time, or in some parallel imaginary universe. It is set in a real time and place in our world: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee". The truths the Bible claims to tell us are truths about this world, our reality, our own lives: it makes the claim that God has truly entered into human history to change and save us.

It does matter that Jesus really lived, that he is not just a character in a novel; that he taught and healed and reached out to the poor and marginalized, that he really was crucified, and that his disciples experienced him as risen from the dead, whatever that may mean.

But as for the details: whether you believe that he really walked on water or turned water to wine, or whether you think those are legends that arose to express who he was, that doesn't really matter. What does matter is that we are willing to enter into the story, **to look for the truth it has to tell us, whether it happened or not.**

And that is what a good adult bible study does, and that is where a good

preacher will lead the sermon, and that is why you wont hear in most sermons a lot about the latest scholarship aspect of the story.

#### 4. What is “believing”?

So, “Can I doubt that this stuff really happened and still be a believer?” Oh, yes. God does not demand of us to sacrifice our critical minds, they are a gift. But if doubt is ok then what does it mean then to be a believer? Faith or belief is about a relationship of love and trust with God. And we find that relationship when we enter into the story, when we let it dwell in our imagination and find echoes with our life; when we stop asking “did this really happen?” and start asking “is this true?” Whether you simply and implicitly accept all the miracles of the Bible, or whether you doubt everything with a critical mind, doesn’t really matter that much. What does matter is whether you can enter into the story, and allow yourself to fall in love with the God you meet there, and with God’s image in Jesus. In that imaginative venture, in that falling in love, this story becomes true, becomes real, as it begins to shape our lives and our hopes.

Back to the bedroom: 50 years later that print of Jesus with the sheep in Grandma and Grandpa’s bedroom is a distant memory. I do not need to believe that all that I have read of Jesus in the Bible happened exactly the way it is told there. But an image of God that shines through in the stories that are told of Jesus - that image of the caring and challenging God - I love that. And that is why I can say “I believe in you, God, I trust, or at least I really want to.” I can say that now, in an informed, adult way, with the wisdom of a child.

- Feb. 18, 2018 by Revs. Elisabeth Bachem-Jennings and Paul Jennings