

Making the music of scripture

Mary E. Klassen

Studying scripture in silence is like studying Bach's music without the sounds.

That insight, from Tom Boomershine, co-founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers and professor of Christianity and communication at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio, pinpoints one important aspect of how we can and should experience scripture.¹ To fully know the power of the Bible, we cannot study it only in silence. We must also experience it aloud—with our voices and with our ears.

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communicated orally as God's people gathered for worship. The stories of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, the teachings of Jesus, the songs of David, and the letters of Paul guided people in their lives because they heard the words recited or read aloud in the liturgy of their worship.

Reading the Bible in silent meditation is important in forming our spirits, and careful study of the Bible is essential for understanding what it teaches us about God. However, we must experience it not only as words on the page worthy of meditation and scholarly study. It is God's revelation to us, and when we experience it with our voices and ears, we can become more fully involved in it. We bring all of who we are to the scripture, and it gives us a depth of experience in return.

Does this description fit what is happening in our congregations when scripture is read aloud? How often in our worship is scrip-

ture viewed as not much more than a routine, obligatory segment of the service? Is it only a prelude to the sermon?

How often is scripture read without expression and seemingly without preparation? Because almost everyone can read, do we view the oral reading of scripture as something almost everyone can do? Because we want to include children and adults with varying skills and backgrounds in our worship services, do we view scripture reading as an opportunity to be inclusive at the expense of being effective?

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Scripture is the foundation of our worship services. The hymns we sing, the sermons we hear, and the prayers we speak are based on the Bible. When we acknowledge this central place of scripture in our worship, we will recognize how important it is that our oral interpretation be done with care and skill.

Preparation begins with seeing the scripture reader as one who speaks God's word to the people. When you step into that role, there are several steps you can take to prepare yourself.²

Ask what kind of text it is. Is the text to be read poetry, law, story, wisdom? How does the passage contribute to the whole of God's message to us? In what ways can this text make a connection between the story of God long ago and us now?

Consider the contexts of the reading. Within the text itself, what comes immediately before and after the passage? Within the worship service, is it a call to worship, is it for meditation and prayer, does it lay the foundation for the sermon?

In this early stage, commentaries and a pronunciation guide are helpful.³ When you know the historical context of the passage, you can avoid presenting it in a way that is not congruent with the biblical story.

In *A Word That Will Rouse Them: Reflections on the Ministry of the Reader*, Aelred Rosser writes, "We need to rely on more than the words themselves. Those who devote their lives to the study of the Bible are our greatest helps. They have mastered the original languages and have studied the culture in which the

scriptures were born. Their scholarship enables us to read the Bible in all its richness and complexity.”⁴

Discover what the passage says. What is the core idea? Where is the high point or the climax to which the text is leading?

It may help to imagine the setting: picture the people, their surroundings, and where they are placed in the scene. Listen for the mood. If the text is a story, can you imagine yourself in it? If it is not a story, can you imagine being the writer and thus let the words become your words?

Through this process you begin to internalize the passage. As a child you may have learned Bible verses “by heart” when you memorized them. While there is significant value in memorizing scripture, the focus here is not on knowing the words one after

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another by memory but on knowing them well enough that the passage as a whole is familiar. You want to be so comfortable with the text that you are giving it life, not just reading it.

Transform the words into sounds, making the music that so far you have studied in silence. Practicing aloud and even warming up (just as a singer warms up) is essential before you enter the pulpit to read to the congregation.

Find ways to embody what you have internalized in your study. Experiment with your voice—pitch, diction, speed and pacing, rhythm, contrast, volume and intensity—to make these tools work for the passage. Just as music is interesting to listen to because it has varied tones, volumes, and speeds, your reading also needs this variety.

Work with the sounds of the words. Pay attention to consonants, especially those known as fricatives (f, s, v, ch, sh, and th) and plosives (b, d, g, k, p, and t). One of the most profound experiences I have had in listening to scripture was hearing Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor, writer, and speaker, read from Isaiah 6. I heard the sizzle of the hot coal as he said “lipss,”—a small detail that surprised me and pulled me into the story.

Prepare yourself to communicate the mood. In your daily conversations you know how to make your voice sound angry,

comforting, warm, and sad. You can bring these moods into the tones you use to read the scripture text.

Reading into a tape recorder can be very helpful. Listen for problems like singsong patterns or muffled diction, make sure the correct words receive emphasis, and pay attention to how sentences end, so the last word is not dropped too quickly in a rush to move on.

Finally, test whether simple gestures may help. Think about posture and stance. Can you make eye contact with listeners at key points in the reading? Keeping a finger at the side of the text as you read (even though your first-grade teacher may have discouraged this practice) gives you some freedom from the page so you can look up for emphasis and speak directly to your listeners. Your preparation should include thought about how you approach and leave the pulpit, because your movement can communicate reverence for scripture and put listeners at ease.

We want to be sure we are using the tools of our voices effectively but not overemphasizing them. If we are overly dramatic, we do a disservice to the text and to our listeners. If we do not project our voices well and communicate clearly, we also do a disservice to the task. Our goal is for the listeners to focus on the scripture, not on us as readers.

This careful preparation is something we owe our fellow worshippers. The people I sit with on Sundays are likely to be in one of two groups. Some may encounter the Bible only in the worship service. If they hear the Bible read in a monotone week after week, they will be convinced that scripture is boring, and that its only relevance is what the pastor explains in the sermon.

But many of the people with whom I worship have heard and read scripture all their lives. If we are part of a congregation that bases its services on the lectionary, we hear the same passages repeated in a three-year cycle. Can we, after so many readings, find something new there? Or have we been so inoculated with lifelong study and lifeless reading that we can no longer experience the impact of the scripture?

The reader's ultimate purpose is to enable the people of God to hear the word of God and keep it, according to Rosser.⁵ We must communicate that the word of God is alive with power and

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deserves our attention. “Readers at the liturgy are not merely teachers; they do not simply convey information. Rather, they enfold the word through human speech. When they proclaim the word at the liturgy, Christ is present in the assembly, speaking the word that is his saving deed.”⁶

For several years I was part of a group of four who presented a twenty-minute message, based entirely on scripture, called “The Bible Speaks.” William Gering compiled the selections to build on the theme of how we respond to God.⁷ When our group presented this message, we relied primarily on our voices to interpret the scripture, although we did incorporate minimal gestures and movement at the front of the worship space. In his introduction to the published version, Gering writes, “The messages of the Bible, if interpreted properly in the oral-aural tradition by heart, as it was hundreds of years ago, catapults its purpose for those times into our present time in a new inspirational way.” We as interpreters experienced this impact over and over as we shared the presentation with congregations.

For me, one benefit of participating was living with those texts so fully that I did know them by heart. One of my assigned passages was the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus just before the crucifixion. I had to experience that scene for myself, and imagine myself there both as Peter and as the maids, before I could speak those verses effectively—with power and emotion but without getting in the way of the message.

Understanding those passages well enough to convey orally their emotional impact and meaning was a challenge. Seeing the impact on the listeners, most of whom had heard those texts many times before, was rewarding. Discovering that scripture can speak for itself, that it does not always need commentary, was a blessing. I wish for all who gather for worship to have these experiences, to hear the Bible as a profound truth from God to us and from one heart to another.

Notes

¹This statement is from an oral presentation. For more on the importance of sound in reading scripture, see Thomas E. Boomershire, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the*

Gospel as Storytelling (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 42–43.

²June Alliman Yoder, professor of preaching and communication at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, led a workshop on oral interpretation of scripture at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, where I am a member. Some of the suggestions outlined here are drawn from her work with our congregation.

³Susan E. Meyers, *Pronunciation Guide for the Sunday Lectionary* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998).

⁴Aelred R. Rosser, *A Word That Will Rouse Them: Reflections on the Ministry of the Reader* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995), 51. Rosser's series of workbooks for lectors and Gospel readers (years A, B, and C) are also helpful resources from Liturgy Training Publications.

⁵*Ibid.*, 84.

⁶*Ibid.*, 10.

⁷William M. Gering, then professor of communication arts at Indiana University South Bend, compiled "The Bible Speaks," which was first printed by Mennonite Biblical Seminary (1975) and later copyrighted by Central District Conference (1986).

About the author

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