

## The word becomes flesh

### A sermon on Nehemiah 8:1-12 and Psalm 119:10-16

Ruth Preston Schilk

**T**he story goes that the great Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad attended a small church in his native Germany—a church with a young pastor who was not noted for his skill in preaching. When asked why he kept returning to the church, von Rad responded that the pastor, despite his inadequacies, had one great strength. When he read the Bible on Sunday, he always approached scripture “as if he were opening a package that contained a ticking bomb.”<sup>1</sup>

But why? Why would that young German pastor approach scripture the way he did? What have we to be cautious about as we read the Bible?

*The voice of the LORD is powerful;  
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.  
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;  
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. . . .  
The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,  
and strips the forest bare;  
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”  
. . . May the LORD bless his people with peace!  
(Ps. 29:4-5, 9, 11)*

When Ezra read from the book, from the law of God, the people wept (Neh. 8:9). They wept for joy at having finally rediscovered words of God’s desire to bless the world and to bless the people of Israel in particular. They wept for sadness at how far they had strayed from being the holy people who loved not only their creator but also their neighbour.

Then Ezra told them not to weep, because he proclaimed a holiday, a holy day. He told the people that they were to celebrate, for “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). But because of who they were and whose they were, Ezra told the

people not to forget the poor but to include them in the celebration, sending portions of the festive food and drink to those who had none (8:10).

Why read scripture with caution? Because it has the power to evoke a response from its readers. It reminds us of who God is, and in light of that knowledge, who we are. By the power of the Holy Spirit, it convicts us of how separate from God or how close to God we are.

In hearing the word of the Lord, the Israelites were not merely being informed; they were being transformed. Their inner space, where God's holiness dwells, was being cleaned and restored, to enable them not only to delight in the law, as we hear from the writer of Psalm 119, but wholeheartedly to seek God the teacher. Their response was an inner one, an emotional one, of weeping.

On reading or hearing scripture, at times a response is called forth from inside us. One year I was asked to read one of the scriptures at the Maundy Thursday service, the night before Good Friday. It was an intimate service of scripture reading and prayer. I

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knew the text, because I had read it over before I left home. But in the context of the gathered congregation, I wept as the scripture pointed ominously to what lay ahead for Jesus. I could not continue reading. Someone came to my side and finished reading the passage. This reader meant well, but I did not want to be rescued. Jesus was not rescued. And while scripture may stop us in our tracks and hold us captive, we are rescued not *from* scripture's hold on us but *by* scripture's hold on us. As a result of the confrontation and

struggle, we may leave with a limp but also with a blessing. And with such a blessing, we are being transformed and recreated to be more like our saviour, Jesus Christ.

Scripture also evokes an outer response. After Ezra read the law of Moses, the Israelites moved beyond their tears to minister to the poor in their midst. The empowering presence and activity of the Holy Spirit speaks through the words of scripture and calls for an outward response. Sometimes hearing the word evokes repentance, a commitment to follow Jesus, a desire to be baptised,

a willingness to forgive or be forgiven. William Willimon warns us that “to read Scripture is to risk transformation, conversion, an exchange of masters. You might think of [it] as a struggle over the question, ‘Who tells the story of what is going on in the world?’ Scripture reading can be uncomfortable, as we are made by the Bible to see things we would have just as soon ignored, as we hear a word we have been trying to avoid.”<sup>2</sup>

Liberation theology, the view that God cares for and desires to liberate those who are poor and oppressed, came about because oppressed ones dared to read the Bible in a risky way. Having done so, they believed that the revolutionary themes of release for the powerless were also for them. They applied to their own lives the stories of the exodus from slavery in Egypt and of Jesus being anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.

“Anabaptist emphasis on a church of believers meant that all members were urged to become biblically literate. Even though the majority of Anabaptists could neither read nor write, they knew large portions of Scripture by memory. Time and again, Anabaptists in prison astounded their captors by reciting from memory the biblical foundations of their beliefs. Members were expected to explain and defend their own faith biblically.”<sup>3</sup> They knew that the Lord Jesus was their master, and they would not exchange him for any other, even under threat of prison, torture, and death.

But what makes scripture tick? Why does it have the power to make us respond both inwardly and outwardly? The answer is given in the very words of scripture: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”; “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1, 14). God, the living, breathing word, became incarnate; that is, God put on skin for a time, and lived, died, and rose again to life for our salvation. Because Jesus fulfilled the scriptures, the Bible is the primary witness to Jesus Christ, whom we claim as our saviour and lord. No other document tells us so much about him and his way. Jesus continues to be the living word.

However, unless we read or otherwise “consume” the Bible, we miss out on this major gift from God who offers us in scriptures not only wisdom and revelation but the guide for living a Chris-

tian life. We need to develop and maintain the holy habit, the spiritual discipline, of reading scripture. We need to consume large quantities of scripture. As the Lord told Ezekiel in a vision, “Eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it!” (Ezek. 3:1-3).

Studying a few verses of scripture at a time—using a daily devotional book, for example—is helpful. But if this practice is a substitute for reading a large block of scripture at one sitting, it is akin to using vitamins to replace meals. Vitamin-verses are not enough for a growing Christian, and a lack of Bible meals will lead to a lack of spiritual vigour.

As one consumes large amounts of scripture, some of it will go down easily, but other parts will be hard to swallow. We will need help to understand and interpret the scripture. Trustworthy

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Christian resources—such as those offered by Mennonite Publishing Network—offer aids for our study, including commentaries on books of the Bible, Sunday school material, study guides, and other materials.

Personal study of scriptures is important, but so is study with other believers. Such study may mean getting involved in a Bible study group or Sunday school class, or interacting with an author through a book you are reading to help you in your Bible study. Third Way Café, an on-line source of readable

information on Mennonites, offers a helpful summary about the Anabaptist practice of discerning scripture in community.

*The Anabaptists believed that the best interpreters of Scripture were those who had received the Holy Spirit. This meant that an illiterate peasant who has received the gift of the Spirit is a better interpreter of God's word than a learned theologian who lacks the Spirit.*

*Anabaptists taught “Scripture and Spirit together” rather than “Scripture alone” [the slogan of Martin Luther's church reform]. This idea was radical in the extreme, especially because it opened the interpretation of Scripture to all. [Not surprisingly,] the political authorities consid-*

*ered this politically dangerous and theologically irresponsible. . . .*

*[But] Anabaptists soon found it necessary to modify their teaching on “Scripture and Spirit.” Some individuals had begun prophesying and doing questionable things, claiming to be “led by the Spirit.” How were “the spirits” to be tested?*

*One early Anabaptist document recommends that the brothers and sisters read Scripture together, and then “the one to whom God has given understanding shall explain it.” This process of congregational discernment provided one way of placing controls on the interpretation of Scripture and prophecy. . . .*

*A second measure of spiritual claims emerged after so-called prophets had led some Anabaptists to disaster. Menno Simons, especially, emphasized that all claims must be measured by the life and the words of Christ.<sup>4</sup>*

And there we are, back again—after the Holy Spirit lights the fuse on our reading of scripture—to what brings forth the life and power of Jesus Christ, the word who became flesh. May we be willing to put flesh on the words of scripture, as God does an inside job on us, transforming us inwardly, so that we may participate in God’s re-creation around us.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 132.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>3</sup> From “Who Are the Mennonites?” on the Third Way Café web-site (<http://www.thirdway.com/menno/as/as4.asp>). Edited by permission of C. Arnold Snyder from his book, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, ON.: Pandora Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thirdway.com/menno/as/as2.asp>

## **About the author**

Ruth Preston Schilk enjoys being pastor of Lethbridge (AB) Mennonite Church, where she has served for the past seven years. She is grateful for her husband, Harold, and her children, Tannis and Isaac. She preached this sermon in fall 2004 as part of a worship series on spiritual disciplines.