



## *“The Good Book”*

Psalm 19:7-17; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

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Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

It was a surprise best seller. Neither the author nor the publisher expected it. That was a decade ago and, surprisingly, the book is still in print and still selling.

The book was a surprise, in part, because it is a serious book by a university professor. It isn't in any way a self-help book nor a breathless straight-from-the-headlines book dashed off in a hurry.

The book's success was a surprise because it's a book about the bible and that's a tough sell these days. After all, the bible is an ancient book, written in ancient languages to ancient cultures. Popular culture wonders if any ancient book, especially a religious text, has any relevance in our secular world.

The author of the book was a surprise too. At the time he wrote the book, he was little known outside the university in which he teaches. He was a celebrated preacher, one of the best of our time, they say — but then, preaching and great preachers are little valued these days.

The title of the book is simple: *The Good Book*. Its author, Peter Gomes, is Minister of Memorial Church at Harvard University. Gomes is also, by virtue of his post at the church, the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals. Who would have guessed that a thoughtful, serious book about the bible written by a professor would spend weeks on the New York Times best-seller list? The book was so popular, reviews appeared in major magazines and Gomes was interviewed multiple times on national television programs. Fame, more books, and a much larger speaker's fee flowed from *The Good Book*.

Gomes aimed his book at people like his students: cultured, well-educated, and skeptical. He wants them – and us – to take the bible seriously. He wants to save the bible from some of its champions who tend to take the bible too literally and often become rigid and imperial, and judge everyone else. They turn the bible into an idol to be worshipped. Professor Gomes wants to introduce the bible to people on the secular left who trivialize the bible, thinking it has nothing to say and, therefore, isn't worth reading or understanding.

And yet, Gomes says that his pastoral and teaching experience suggests that most people want to be good and do good. They want a spiritual life. And most people instinctively think the bible can help them do good and be good. People believe the bible is a basic tool for spiritual growth. In other words, that instinct about the bible affirms what the church has always believed: the bible is a central means toward spiritual formation.

**Plymouth Church**  
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The problem is, most people, both Christians and seekers, don't know where to start or how to read the bible. After all, it's an ancient book filled with strange stories, quaint language, even weird symbols. Many, maybe most laypeople don't know what to do with the bible.

I know what it's like to sit where you sit. When I was sixteen years old I decided to read the bible from start to finish. I got off to a great start. Genesis and the early part of Exodus are a rip-roaring great narrative. What a cast of characters and what daring plot! Then things slow down quickly. I ran into page after page of mind-numbing legal regulations for the ancient people of Israel – material fascinating to a rabbi still but not a teenage Christian boy. Then came the prophets and I recall trying to concentrate and falling asleep. I finished at long last, but it was not a stimulating or very fruitful journey.

All reading is interpretation, and the bible more than most books, requires interpretation. It's not a book most people can just pick up, read and enjoy. Understanding the bible takes time, effort and, it seems, a bit of training. I spent years learning the craft of biblical interpretation, and I'm still working on it.

When I was a student at Hebrew Union College, the rabbi who was our teacher became upset when I told him we were reading and studying the rabbinic material at my seminary. He said we did not have the right or the skills necessary. The rabbinic material is the child of a particular religious community, and it has a long history of interpretation by that community. You cannot understand it standing outside that community or without the proper historical, linguistic, sociological tools. It is the product of a people, and understanding takes a certain sympathy with that community.

He had a point. Interpretation of religious literature requires particular tools and considerable training. The Christian bible is the product of a particular time and people. That tradition has a long, rich history of interpretation. Linguistic, historical and theological tools are necessary; indeed, some experience in the tradition itself is required for interpretation.

Another true story from the same time of my life: One of my professors at the seminary was a multi-gifted man. He was a formidable scholar, an excellent teacher and a very good preacher. And he knew it. Several of us overheard him telling a colleague, "Only a few people can make the bible live, and I'm one of them." Aside from the arrogance, he was right. How many teachers and preachers can make the bible live? Interpreting the bible is not easy.

So how can this ancient book speak to us today? Well, Professor Gomes's book and dozens of other books address that issue helpfully. Modern translations of the bible put it in contemporary language. The bible continues to sell quite well, but also tends to sit unread on bookshelves. It's an intimidating book and, besides, who has the time to master the intricacies of interpreting it?

Moreover, the past century-plus has seen an explosion of biblical research devoted to putting the bible into its original context to help understand it. In some ways the bible is more accessible than ever in history. The bad news is that it takes years to master that biblical scholarship. And even then, not everyone develops the fine art of interpretation and makes the bible live. I've been working at it all my adult life, and I'm still learning the craft.

Most laypeople are willing to leave the bible in the hands of the clergy – and the theologians. And most of us are more than willing to accept that role. It's a form of job security for pastors, I suppose.

As they say, we have a problem!

Fortunately, the bible is making a comeback – at least in mainline churches. The use of the Lectionary in worship – readings from the Psalms, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament – exposes a growing number of churches and Christians to the Bible. Christian preaching is returning to its ancient practice of making the ancient word from Scripture live in and speak to the modern world.

While true, that still leaves the ordinary church member with the same old problem. How can I read and understand the ancient word? Can the bible speak to me in my world and, if so, how? Or, how can the bible move out of sermons and Adult Education into the lives of ordinary folks? Can you be trusted with this book that is so easily misunderstood – even abused? And do you have the time? Can the bible break through the mists of time and be a tool for spiritual formation in your life?

I answer with a hopeful “Yes.” Yet my optimism is not the consequence of our tradition which places the bible central in the church and life. And I affirm that tradition. My last congregation reinstated an old New England Congregational tradition that symbolized the centrality of Scripture in life and faith. The service began with a processional led by a layperson carrying the big pulpit bible. Followed by the ministers, that layperson took the bible up to the pulpit and opened it. It was a forceful reminder of the character of Christian preaching and worship. At the end of the service the layperson led the clergy out of the sanctuary and placed the bible on a stand in the narthex. It was reminder that the people take the word they’ve heard out into the world. As the preacher most Sundays, I found that symbol empowering – and a bit intimidating.

My hope grows out of my conviction that the bible possesses a powerful pastoral function. The bible bears a unique capacity to speak beyond itself. Scripture is never the point – it points to something larger. And behind the text, any text, is the Spirit of God that animates, gives life, to that text. The bible can live again and in us. Each of us possesses that same spirit to help us understand and apply it to our lives.

Part of our Reformation heritage is what the reformers called the “perspicuity of Scripture.” That is, everything necessary for faith is in Scripture and can be understood by ordinary people. Much of Scripture may remain mysterious, even unknowable. But everything necessary for salvation and a life of faith is accessible to anyone.

John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed Tradition, centered his entire theological project on what he called “the inner witness of the Spirit.” In order to hear the biblical word, we must open our lives to that word and to the Spirit of God who lives in that word and in us.

We know that whether we know it or not. Few things in this world are more powerful than words well spoken. When Alexander Solzhenitsyn accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature, he dedicated it to the writers and artists of the world. Solzhenitsyn spent years in the Soviet prison system called the Gulag Archipelago. What sustained him during those years of suffering was the conviction that the truth was more powerful than all the powers of an empire built on lies. In prison he began the writing project that won him the Nobel. The three-volume work, *The Gulag Archipelago*, was sneaked out of Russia and published in the west. It was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union.

Words matter. The word of truth matters. Solzhenitsyn concluded his Nobel speech with an old Russian proverb: “One word of truth outweighs the world.” Then he said,

On such a seemingly fantastic violation of the law of the conservation of mass and energy are based both my own activities and my appeal to the writers of the whole world.

When written, those words seemed like a dream. What were words, banned words at that, in the face of imperial power. Now, a generation later, we realize the unique power of those words. Words matter. Words work.

In our own time and nation, who can forget the oratorical power of Martin Luther King during the difficult days of the struggle against segregation? King's words were filled with biblical quotes and analogies. His language soared and a nation changed. Again and again, King quoted the ancient word of the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream."

A nation watched as the word of truth overcame burning crosses, bombed churches, fire hoses, and bullets. The ancient word, Scripture mind you, came alive, and nothing will ever be the same. My dad and I watched the live broadcast of Dr. King's famous speech on the steps of the Alabama statehouse. It was breathtaking. The oratory was brilliant and the theme was simple: "How long? Not long!" And the world changed. More importantly, I changed. The word works.

The bible's simple claim is that it is a word of truth. The bible tells the truth about the human condition – we are in sorry shape. And it tells the truth about God – God is faithful to us no matter how sorry we are or how big a mess we make of things.

These ancient texts, when heard and obeyed, form souls and transform lives. When we allow the bible to address us, even interpret us, it does its work. We are changed. When we enter the biblical narrative or better yet, let the narrative inhabit us, things happen. We are formed by that word of truth.

Some of us have sat with Mary on Easter morning in that lonely garden. We've heard the Risen One address her, "Mary." In that address, we heard our name. And Easter happened. Maybe you have sat on that hillside in Galilee and heard the master's voice, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. Love your enemies. Come follow me."

The bible works.

It begins with the decision to read it and allow it to form us. When we enter what theologian Karl Barth calls the "Strange New World of the Bible" the good book begins its work in us. And it is a strange new world. As Barth discovered, the good book is God's world not ours. No wonder it's strange. In that strange new world, it's not our thoughts about God that matter but God's thoughts about us. The bible is not the story of us seeking God. The biblical narrative describes an amazing God who is seeking us.

It seems odd at first. After all, it's ancient and describes an ancient culture. In it we enter a new land. But if we stay there long enough, the bible becomes an acquired taste. As Professor Gomes puts it, in that land we learn to trust the text, trust ourselves, and trust the Spirit. And the rest, as they say, is transforming.

It's big book, best taken in small bits. Years ago, I decided to divide the bible into little pieces. I need to average 4 pages a day from the Old Testament and two and half pages a day from the New Testament to make it through the bible in a year. I don't think about all I've learned about the bible and its interpretation, I don't try to remember anything, I just ask the text to address me.

I'm on my 40th trip through and I still see things I've never seen before. In fact, I think I'm making progress. I invite you to join me.

Amen

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