

Council Plenary #1: 20 minutes, the Rev. Francene Young Reading the Bible Through a Missional Lens

As the title of this plenary suggests, I will focus reading the Bible with a missional lens (missional hermeneutics)

But I want to begin with a story.

Let's go back to Christmas Eve a couple of years ago. At St Luke the Evangelist, where I am Rector, one of the carols we sing on Christmas Eve is "Go Tell on the Mountain." Most of you know it,

"Go tell it on the mountains, over the hills and everywhere. Go Tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born. "

In this great song, we announce across the mountains, hills, country sides and city streets, that Jesus Christ is born.

Like most Episcopal churches, we had a nativity on a table in the Narthex. It was front and center as you entered the church for worship.

On the Sunday after Christmas, a parishioner advised me that baby Jesus has not in the manger. PANIC! Baby Jesus is missing. This set off a search for the missing baby Jesus.

The immediate assumption was that someone had taken baby Jesus from his manger. We looked high and low for the little baby Jesus. Who could have taken baby Jesus from the manger?

In the midst of the search for baby Jesus, a small yellow post it note was placed in the manger that once held baby Jesus and it read "Jesus is out and walking in the hood." **Jesus is out and walking in the Hood.** Jesus has given up the comfort of his straw filled manger. **He is up and walking in the hood. (SLIDE of Empty Manger)**

What a novel concept. Jesus walking in the hood. We tend to look for Jesus in places familiar to us, usually INSIDE THE church, we look for him at Christmas, lying in the manger. But when we revisit scripture, you will note that Jesus was always on the move. He is always on the move, inviting others to join him.

So, my question is this, “If Jesus is already out on the world, then how do we read scripture from this point of view? With this understanding?”

We come to realize that we do not BRING Jesus into the world. We FIND Jesus in the world. We are not sent to SAVE the world, **but to LOOK for those places of creation where God’s work is already being made manifest.**

In order to even think about what that means, we need to go back to basics. We need to go back to the Bible and re-look at what it is GUIDING US TO DO. We need to read scripture with a new lens. This new lens is referred to as “Missional Hermeneutics” OK write these one **down** **MISSIONAL HERMENEUTICS (LENS). (slide)**

What does it mean to read the Bible with a missional lens? Anthony Rajski, editor of the Underground Network offers this view. It means “reading the Bible and understanding it in a new **way that rallies our soul to serve.**” **Anthony Rajski.**

What does hermeneutic mean? Hermeneutic is a fancy word for the lens we use to see something and make meaning from it. A biblical hermeneutic is the lens we bring to the Bible, the perspective we use to make meaning from scripture. And the reason it’s so important to name our lens is because our lens or the way we see the world becomes largely unconscious, and tends to shape what the Bible means for our life.

We have all inherited a biblical lens or way of seeing and reading the Bible that is mostly individualistic and probably moralistic. And so we often read the Bible wondering, “What does this mean **for my** life?” or, “What is the Bible saying about **how I can** be good?”

Reading the Bible with a missional lens, however, does not begin with a question. Instead it starts with a premise: God IS good and God is saving the world. In light of that truth, we can **then** ask: How **are WE (not I!)** called to experience, participate in, and narrate God’s salvation already happening in the world?

To read the Bible with a missional lens tells us that we are being called to step up and step out into the world to advance God’s mission. We read

the Bible with the understanding that we are called by God **into the world** so that we might experience, participate and share in the renewal of all things that God is *already* at work accomplishing.

In his book *Incarnate*, Michael Frost states that **the Bible is God's word to us; our source that equips us to continue the apostolic witness that brought us into being as the church of Jesus.**

According to Malcolm Guite, a missional view finds the core of the Bible and uses that core to interpret everything else. **Fortunately, Jesus tells us the core:**

It is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'^[a] 31 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b] There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12: 30-31). I have heard said for years that *ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS HANG ALL THE LAW AND PROPHETS.*

We can be assured that we are reading the Bible correctly if our reading of Scripture enhances our capacity to love God and love neighbor. Any interpretation that diminishes our capacity to love God/neighbor is a misinterpretation. Therefore, reading the Bible with a missional **lens looks for God's commandment to love God and neighbor.** This requires us to we adopt a broader view of "neighbor" .

Like in the story of the Good Samaritan we heard last night from Bishop Doyle, the stranger is where we find our salvation. We called to reach down in the ditch and help our neighbor. In the book of Hebrews, we read: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." (Heb 13:2).

This verse takes us back to the book of Genesis where both Abraham and Lot welcome strangers and show them hospitality. The joy obtained for providing the hospitality far exceeds the cost or perceived inconvenience. It causes me to ask myself who has God placed in my path and how have I responded. Did I turn away because I did not see God's hand at work or did I respond positively to the call and show some form of Christian love to the stranger?

A missional reading of the Bible understands that God's Spirit is present in every aspect of creation **long before we get there**. As it says in Psalm 139: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens, you're there; if I make my bed in the depths, you're there." Where can I go to escape from the Holy Spirit? And of course the answer is, *nowhere*. Because: before you get there, the Spirit has already beaten you there. We just need to show up.

The missional point is that there is no place, no person, no city, no situation, no neighborhood, etc. where God is not already present doing what God does and that's "make all things new." Our job is to get curious and to look for it.

God is asking us to open our eyes and to see differently. In Psalm 119, we read:

*Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.
Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from your law.*

To "look differently" AND therefore "see differently", we need to travel lighter in the world and bring "nothing" with us except for curiosity and expectation that we will find God.

"He told them: "Take nothing for the journey--no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt." (Luke 9:3)

Without realizing it, we carry a lot of baggage from our experiences in life. Baggage from old hurt feelings, baggage from historical prejudices, **baggage from long term (traditional) practices**, baggage of fear. The amount and weight of the baggage we carry impact us physically and spiritually and they are costly! For example, in the third quarter of 2016 (*this is before holiday season travel*) it is reported that the airlines collected \$1.1 BILLION dollars in baggage fees. Carrying a lot of baggage is costly.

Bags that weigh us down and keep us from fully living into God's mission for us and for his world. To step out into God's world, we need to travel lightly and begin to see God at work through a different lens.

As we ponder God's work in the world and our role in God's mission in the world, we Repent (turn around) reconnect with our creator through his

word and look for ways to let go of some of the traditionalism in order to honor **our living tradition, Jesus Christ.**

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, **it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.**” (Jasoslav Pelikan)

This quote from Jasoslav Pelikan is so appropriate because it sheds light on so much of Jesus’ ministry. Just about everything Jesus did – touch the unclean, heal on the Sabbath, downplay the importance of the temple, share a meal with sinners – was an affront not to Rome, but to the political and religious establishment of 2nd Temple Judaism.

Sometimes, the things we hold dear become obstacles. Think of how radical it was, how scandalous, for the church to decide that circumcision wasn’t a requirement for Gentile converts. Think about that! The very sign of God’s **covenant with Abraham was put aside simply because the Holy Spirit was doing something new – traditionalism gave way to a deeper tradition.**

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes this: “We have **this treasure** in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7). Reading this with a missional lens asks us to get really clear **that the treasure is Jesus Christ and that no vessel** – no building, no liturgy, no particular way of doings – that no vessel can contain Jesus for very long **simply because the God Jesus reveals, the Living Word, is always moving in the creation, and speaking a new creation into being.** But more than that, a missional reading of the Bible does not ask us to **bring the treasure into the world, but to FIND the treasure in the world: in the stranger, the outcast, the person with different views, people who know God and those who do not, yet, know God.**

Our story begins with Abram and Sarai really comfortable and settled in the land of Haran only to have their lives disturbed by the voice of God who says, “Go from your country and kindred and what’s familiar and let’s go on a journey to this new land that I’ll show you.” Deep down we know that God speaks that same word to us. God invites, not any one individual but the Church, to gather as the Body outside the walls we’re used to, to take a few more risks, to form new partnerships, to widen our circle of relationships, to call neighbor those we previously called strangers, and to say yes to the

adventure of finding Jesus in the world. (Slide: Abram and Sarah). God tells us to “GO.”

Early in my life, I struggled with how I fit in the Episcopal Church as an African American woman. A friend, told me to read the book of Ruth and reconsider my struggle to remain in this tradition. Reading with a missional lens revealed not what I would change but, like Ruth, what God was doing and inviting me to be a part of a larger adventure. (Slide: Naomi and Ruth). Ruth telling Naomi that “Your people will be my people” took on new meaning for me.

Seeing mission as an adventure means we don't have to get it right and sometimes we do not wish to go. In fact, only as we get it wrong and learn and grow and change and cry and pray together in the midst of that experience of getting it wrong, only by doing that do we become the right sort of people. Ultimately, mission yields JOY. “I came that they might live,” Jesus said, “and have it more abundantly.” The world will tell us that abundant life is about what we possess and achieve and consume, about what we've accomplished and how we've succeeded.

But thank God we have this nagging Lord who insists that abundant life is something we experience only as we live missionally in a world that God is already saving.

The Bible is the word of the Lord, the book of instruction filled with examples of God inviting us into God's mission. Your diocesan team has developed a Bible Study that help you discover where God is inviting you to join the mission. We will hear more about that later in the program.

Just remember, Jesus is walking in the hood; yours and mine and we are invited to go find him at work.
Amen.

With humble thanks to the Rev. John Newton, who provided the initial text.