

The Errant Word

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

3rd Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

By the Rev. Mat Taylor

If I was forced to create a top ten list of great novels, I'd have to include Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The story behind the novel is just as amazing as the book itself. Marquez barricaded himself in his room for 18 months while writing the novel. He and his wife sold the family car to pay for living expenses while he focused on nothing but writing. Nevertheless, the couple still ran out of money. His wife had to purchase food on credit from the butcher and the baker and nine months of rent on credit from their landlord. Everything was riding on the success of this book.

When it was published finally in 1967, it was a great commercial success. In 1982, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, in no small part to this great novel.

Now, I'll warn you before you just run out and buy a copy of it: I know a lot of people who don't like the book. It's a bit of a difficult read; it's a strange, wandering, quixotic tale.

In the book, Marquez chronicles the founding and history of a small town in South American, the village of Macondo. The village is surrounded by swamp and is thus largely cut off from the rest of the world, hence its solitude.

One day a young girl wanders into town. She was fleeing from her village, where there had been a strange outbreak of insomnia. People simply couldn't sleep. The young girl was taken by a family in Macondo. However, this strange plague must have followed the girl, because after a short while the parents noticed that their daughters were having trouble sleeping. Before long, the whole village was affected. No one in the town of Macondo could sleep.

At first, the people assumed that this plague might not be too bad. Without sleep, a great deal of work could be accomplished. But, without sleep, the people began to forget. They soon began to forget about everything. They could not even remember the names of the things they used everyday. So, they made signs to remind them what things were: Cow, shed, milk, spoon, table, door, pig, and etcetera.

But after a while, people even forgot what things were used for. So they had to make more elaborate signs: The sign they hung around the neck of a cow read, "This is a cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk."

To ensure that they never forgot where they were, the people erected a sign where the road emerged from the swamp. The sign read, "This is the village of Macondo." And on the main street, where everyone would see it, they erected a larger sign that read, "God exists."

Thus they went on living, Marquez writes, in a reality they captured momentarily in words that described what was most necessary for life. But that reality would be lost forever when the people forgot the meaning of the letters.¹

In our text this morning, the Jewish people are faced with a similar and equally dismal situation. They have returned from exile only to find that Jerusalem is in ruins. The walls have collapsed, the temple is but a mound of rubble, and the countryside is little more than a wasteland.

Ezra and Nehemiah emerge as leaders. Ezra is a scribe and Nehemiah a tough administrator of sorts, and together they rebuild the city, repairing the walls and rebuilding the temple.

When the work is finally completed, the people still face a terrible reality. They still do not know who they are. They have forgotten. Decades of exile have erased their memory. They no longer remember the gifts that God had given them in the past, gifts of land, prosperity, security. Walter Brueggemann has said that the memory of those gifts and that relationship was the glue that bound the Israelites together.²

Virtually the only thing that's left of the past are the Books of Moses, but none of the people can read or even understand them, since the people no longer speak Hebrew, but Aramaic, the tongue of the Persian Empire. Without the collective memory of the people of God, the Jewish faith is in great danger of being forgotten and abandoned. However, there are but a few left who do remember the old language.

All the people, now gathered in the square, listened as Ezra unrolls the scroll and tells the story the Israelites to ears that had never heard such stories, stories of creation, Noah and the flood, Moses and the Exodus, the Red Sea and the Song of Miriam, the Ten Commandments, the Covenant and the Law. Ezra must translate these stories for the people to understand them, and a team of 13 priests circulated through the crowds, answering questions and explaining the meaning of the stories.

¹ Much of this section was inspired (and largely plagiarized) from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. David Jones entitled "Everything Depends on Remembering." Check it out at: www.day1.org/1710-everything_depends_on_remembering

² *ibid*

At first, the people are filled with great remorse. They realized that they had sinned and broken away from God's covenant and promises. Put the reading of the Scriptures also transforms and renews them. They learn again that they are the people of God. And they celebrate.

As Ezra ends the reading, he declares: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

In this is revealed the authority and function of Scripture: It is designed to help us, the people of God, remember. It is written to tell us who we are and who our God is. It gives us our identity. As much as it convicts of our sin, it also renews and transforms us, and gives us cause for much joy and celebration.

I fear, however, that few of us approach Scripture in this way. In mainline churches like ours, the Bible tends to be ignored. We really don't know what to do with it, how to read it, how to interpret it. Its stories challenge us, disturb us, and even at times horrify us. It's such a strange book and we've forgotten so much in our exile of prosperity, entertainment, and busyness. Our Bibles collect dust.

But in conservative churches, the situation is not much better. The true integrity and holiness of the Bible has been destroyed by those who've made an idol out of it. It may be well-read, dog-eared, and tattered, but it's also largely torn apart, misinterpreted, and used as fodder in ideological and political wars.

Conservatives often declare the Bible to be "inerrant." If you've ever spent any time in an evangelical congregation, you've probably heard about the "inerrancy" of Scripture. Most people, when they declare that the bible is inerrant, they mean to say that the Bible is free from errors. In my mind, the word "infallible" would be a much better choice, but the Bible never uses either term to describe itself. Speaking of the Old Testament scriptures, Paul writes: **All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,**

The word "inerrant" first came into use in the 17th Century. It was used as a kind of scientific term to describe the path of the stars in the night sky, as opposed to those pesky planets, which take strange, wandering paths, wobbling in retrograde as they do.

Armed with the new physics of Sir Isaac Newton, people came to understand the whole universe as a kind of machine. Things moved with clocklike precision. The whole cosmos was predictable, mechanical, orderly, and rational. And so it was that certain theologians and scholars began to approach the Bible with much the same idea.

The Bible, too, could be dissected with scientific precision; it could be atomized into discreet parts, examined under a microscope, studied objectively and rationally, and thus

it would yield its great mysteries up to us much like Mother Nature yields up her secrets under the scrutiny of science.

But, the Bible is not a machine. It cannot be dismantled and rearranged. It doesn't follow a predictable, path. It likes to wander, doesn't it? It likes to wander into the messiness of human life. It wobbles like an errant planet.

Who would have guessed, for example, that a bunch of murderers like Moses, King David, and even the Apostle Paul would end up the great prophets and teachers of our faith? Who would have guessed that God's Messiah would be born among the poor and would be unrecognized by the religious elite? Who could have foretold that his inner circle would include fisherman and tax collectors and women of somewhat ill repute?

The Bible is perfectly, beautifully, truthfully infallible, and *errant*! Not in the sense of being full of errors, mind you, but in the sense of wandering in unpredictable and wonderfully incarnate ways. It doesn't follow a mechanical, predictable path. Instead, it wanders right down to us, right here into the messiness of our lives.

And when we read it, truthfully and honestly, when we recognize it as the Word of God not just written to us, or even for us, but with us, we enter into its story. We learn that we, too, are the children of God and that its story is our story. In the pages of the Bible, we remember who we are and who God is.

We remember. And by that memory we are challenged, transformed, and renewed.
Amen.