

Hearing God out: Worship: Act two

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

When the books of the Bible are read in the context of worship, they become the scripture of the church. Just as the greeting turns an assembly into a church, so the proclamation of Old and New Testament passages turns words into the Word.

Though no single book of the Bible tells the whole story of God, each has been understood as indispensable for a complete rendering of God's character. If any one book were taken away, the ability of the church to meet the true God in the reading of scripture would be weakened. It is the same in a congregation. No single church or denomination can claim to incorporate every aspect of God's purposes. Each has a different blend of faithfulness, discipline, suffering, courage and wisdom. But diversity and disunity are not the same thing. Diversity is a sign of health in the church, so long as it mirrors the diversity of scripture. But when the church believes it can read the Bible without the eyes and ears of some of these diverse elements, its diversity becomes disunity, and its ability to hear God's word is seriously impoverished.

What the practice of reading scripture conveys is that the church needs a myriad diversity of people if it is to be able to read the scripture well. It is not that a diversity of people has a "right" to be there; this conveys nothing substantial about how people should conduct themselves once they are included in worship. It is not that the church has a duty to unjustly oppressed or ignored social groups; this would put the church in an unduly high position of status, ministering to the needy out of its bounty.

What I mean is that a diverse Bible requires—almost creates—a diverse people to be able to read it. If the church is not made up of the full diversity of human existence and experience, it cannot hear all that the scripture has to say—because it does not mirror the extraordinary diversity that is in scripture. One might have thought that from reading scripture the church is moved to minister to the poor and needy. But one might think instead that if the church does not include the poor and needy, it cannot properly hear the scripture.

In one congregation, at a quiet evening celebration of the Eucharist, a lay leader was reading the Gospel when she read the passage that said that when Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant, he resolved to “dismiss her quietly.” The reader dropped the Bible onto her lap, and stared straight ahead. After a few moments, she quietly said, “I was pregnant at 14. I was made to have an abortion. I wonder every day who that person would have been.” The Gospel reading, sermon and creed were abandoned, and the congregation continued the service in intercessory prayer.

In a congregation where leaders and members were mostly men, a woman member rose to read the Old Testament lesson that described how hard it was to find a good wife, and what her attributes were. The woman reading the lesson shook as she read, her voice quivering, a hint of tears in her eyes. Everything in her spoke of the tension of hearing those words in her context. When she sat down, tears flowed. No one in that community ever saw that passage as a quaint pastoral sermon again.

The way the scripture is read is an important factor in shaping how the scripture is heard. In one congregation the Gospel reading was read from a small balcony. The members of the congregation turned around and looked up to hear the Gospel because the balcony was some distance above their heads. Over time they came to perceive that *understanding* the gospel was less a matter of intellectual grasp than of *standing under* its authority.

Another congregation placed the lectern toward the back of the building. Not only did this mean that they had to turn around to hear the scripture readings, but, since the entrance door was mostly made of glass, it meant that they could look outside as they heard the Bible being read. There were often people milling around outside the building. When one or several came in and joined the assembly during the readings, they received an especially warm welcome. The congregation had learned to receive the Gospel as if it were a stranger, one who makes demands, requires hospitality and needs to be understood. At the same time, the congregation learned to receive each stranger who walked in as “a gospel”—even when, as with some of the more mischievous young people, they were “texts of terror.”

The scripture readings form an arrow—the Old and New Testament readings forming the two angles of the arrow and the Gospel reading forming the shaft. The sermon, at the point of the arrow, is also the point where all three readings meet.

The sermon proclaims that the God who acted in the story of Israel, came in Jesus and was alive in the early church is living and active today. The sermon is an event, not a report. It is not an account of the truths that were made known to the preacher some days (or years) earlier when he or she was surrounded by scriptural commentaries and compilations of timely anecdotes. It is not an aggregation of insights on a scriptural passage presented by a diligent researcher to a pencil-sucking congregation.

It is a moment when heaven comes to earth, when the truth of the way God acts in history and God's longing for the restoration of friendship with his people comes face to face with the reality of human intransigence and fragile striving. It is a moment when Christians rediscover who they are by seeing, face to face, who God is. It is a moment when earth comes to heaven, when the truth of what humanity is in sin is redescribed by the glory of what humanity is in Christ. It is an incarnational moment, one in which God's divinity meets our humanity in the spoken word, and the congregation discovers that God became what we are so that we might become what God is. It is a resurrection moment, when the apparent givens of sin, death and evil are stripped away and the possibilities of humanity in the new creation are transformed.

The congregation that begins the service wondering what God is going to do today should discover in the sermon something that honors its expectation. The purpose of the sermon is not to scratch around searching for faint traces of God's ways. It is to recall and portray the overwhelming stream of God's blessing and redeeming purpose, and, lest the congregation drown in the abundance of grace, to focus and funnel that stream onto a specific moment and onto a particular aspect of God's being and action that transforms a dimension of contemporary existence. The "point" of the arrow may scratch, annoy or even hurt, but its purpose is to alert the listener that overwhelming grace is heading this way—searing, sudden and soon.