

## **Finding A Word: Listening To The Text**

### **Psalm 19:7-11; Romans 15:4**

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When I was a kid, I was like a lot of kids - I loved rocks! Specifically, I loved to hunt for rocks, collect them, and bring them home with big plans for what I would do with them. Inevitably, they ended up sitting in a bag or bucket somewhere forgotten while new dreams and passions led me elsewhere. Some things never change - I'm embarrassed to tell you how many boxes and bags of rocks I have in my garage right now!

Like any good Michigander, I honed my rock hunting skills in northern Michigan while searching for Petoskey stones. But then, in the summer after fifth grade, a whole new world of rock hunting opened up for me. That summer my family took a road trip across the country to celebrate my grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary with them. Oh, the rocks I discovered! Rocks in Nebraska, rocks in Colorado, rocks in Arizona, rocks, rocks, rocks!

Yet, the high and the low of my rock-collecting adventures came in California. When we arrived at my grandparents' home in Sebastopol, I learned that my grandfather had hundreds of rocks he had collected and polished over the years. Many of them were quite beautiful and a few were rare or even valuable. This added a whole new dimension to my rock fascination. Maybe I could become famous or rich because I'd found an especially special rock!

So, when we headed to Sutter's Mill one day, my head was full of big dreams. Sutter's Mill was where James Marshall found gold in 1848, kicking off the California Gold Rush. Who knew? Maybe I could find gold, too. I was ready - equipped with a bowl I could use to pull rocks and sand from the riverbed. I filled the bowl once but saw nothing that looked even sort of like gold. Then, again...and again...and again. Until finally, as I fingered through another bowlful, there was a glint of something shining in the sun. I pulled it out and cleaned it off in the river. It was beautiful; I could not believe my luck! I ran over to my parents, so proud of my find, and they said...Well, you have probably guessed. "That's not gold...that's fool's gold". Oh, the heartbreak for my little ten-year-old self!

Searching for spiritual truths can be a lot like hunting for gold. What looks brilliant and valuable is not always what it appears. Only, truth can't be objectively verified like gold can. Of course, many Christians claim to have found that the Bible is how we test truth because it is God's literal, inerrant Word. But is the Bible really meant to function this way? Was it designed to be an answer-machine, where we can insert a question and it delivers God's Word in black-and-white? Since we're five weeks into a series on listening to God's voice, it makes sense to pause and ask how God might speak to us through scripture.

Many Christians find it surprising, but there was no such thing as a "New Testament" for a full three centuries after Jesus' death. What we know as the Christian Bible is really the result of a two-century-long response to a crisis that started in the mid-second century. That crisis was provoked by a wealthy ship owner named Marcion, the son of a prominent bishop. Marcion was concerned that there was far too much diversity within Christianity and no basis for deciding between what might figuratively be called "gold" and "fool's gold." He felt the problem was

created, or at least sustained, by the number of contradictory and just plain foolish texts influencing the faithful.

To be sure, Marcion had a point. In the first two hundred years following Jesus' death, Christians produced quite a large body of literature, including collections of sayings and miraculous acts attributed to Jesus as well as accounts of his birth and childhood. There were also stories concerning acts of the apostles, sermons, and speeches of prominent Christian leaders. Some of these stories and teachings were quite bizarre or nonsensical.

For instance, there was the Gospel of Peter, whose author claims to be Peter though scholars generally agree it was written after Peter's death. In this gospel, the Cross of Christ is said to have floated out of his tomb and spoken to people. Another gospel, known as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas depicts Jesus as a precocious child who breathes life into clay birds and whose curses strike bullies dead.

Marcion proposed to create a unified canon which would separate the "real gold" from the "fool's gold." The problem was that Marcion himself had some pretty strange and foolish ideas. For instance, he considered the entire body of what we call the Old Testament to be worthy of the trash bin. He considered the God of the Hebrews primitive and evil, having nothing to do with the God of Jesus. The only writings he listed in his canon were the Gospel of Luke and ten letters attributed to Paul.

Happily, the Christian community was generally horrified by Marcion's proposal. But his idea for a canon did get them thinking. Shouldn't there be *something* people could turn to, to explore and develop their faith? Shouldn't there be *some* basis for defining Christianity?

Over the next two hundred years, many writings were suggested and debated until a biblical canon was agreed upon in the 500's BCE. How were these books selected? The great church historian, Eusebius, tells us how he came up with his list in 325 C.E.—and his criteria stand for the approach of many others. Eusebius asked three questions of many texts under consideration. To paraphrase, he asked:

(1) Has the writing been recognized as helpful by earlier generations of Church leaders? (2) Was the book written early in the Christian era, either by someone who knew Jesus or who would have known someone who did? And (3) Is the content consistent with what is generally established to be Christian theology and doctrine?

This list is surprising, not for what it mentions but for what it does not. Nowhere does Eusebius mention divine *inspiration* as a factor. Nowhere does he ask, "Does this writing function as the literal Word of God?" In the eyes of the ancient Christians, divine inspiration was not so much about God speaking directly to and through the authors of scripture. Rather, it was what happens when the Spirit moves as we read scripture and we encounter God in the word. Books of scripture are like ore-bearing rocks but they are not the pure ore itself. If you want to extract the gold, you have to apply heat to the rock. The early Christians would have said that prayer and meditation are that heat. God's word comes to us not when we pull it out of scripture, but when we allow scripture to set us in relationship with God.

But, how can we engage with scripture so it reveals a truth about God or how we live our lives? I'd like to teach you about a little exercise called *Lectio Divina*, or "divine reading." *Lectio Divina* is the oldest form of scripture interpretation that has been continuously practiced in Christian history with its origins in the second and third century. *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply, to hear "with the ear of our hearts" as St. Benedict wrote.

As with any spiritual practice, before you begin, it's helpful to take some deep breaths and ask yourself if you are truly open to hearing from God. Don't be expecting that God will speak to you on your schedule, though. If you truly desire to experience the benefit people have experienced for centuries, it needs to be practiced over and over until it becomes natural. Insights may or may not occur during your formal time of meditation. This form of meditation opens you to hearing God's "voice" over the course of the whole day, not simply during time spent in meditation.

*Lectio divina* has four steps. The first is called *lectio* which means reading the scripture passage - usually two times. As you read, you pay attention to what word or phrase sticks in your mind. You may want to write down these words.

The second step is *meditatio* or meditation. *Meditatio* involves ruminating on the passage or one of its words/phrases. The image of the ruminant animal quietly chewing her cud was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God. Roll the passage, word, or phrase round in your mind. Free associate with it—let images, feelings, memories, and other words arise. Don't worry if your thoughts or feelings seem "irreverent." The key is to engage authentically, trusting that being authentic is more important than being pious.

Step three is called *oratio*. *Oratio* is understood as dialogue with God. This is a time for prayer focused both on the passage and on your personal life. Many people take the word or phrase upon which they have been ruminating and hold it next to a life experience or question they are exploring or struggling with, allowing that word or phrase to have a conversation with that question. Some will also recite the word or phrase as they contemplate or pray and then close with praying about anything that's on their mind, whether it connects with the passage or not.

Finally, the last step is *contemplatio* or contemplation. This is a time for simply enjoying God's presence without particular words or thoughts, strategies or questions. It is also time for making decisions about what to do with any insights received in the previous stages. What next steps are indicated, if any? Offer thanks and gratitude to God.

In my own prayer life, I have been amazed at how much more I get from scripture by approaching it in this way. Lessons for my life seem to rise out of the words like gold lifted from rock. Suddenly, I see some truth I hadn't seen before. In a world where so many things distract or confuse us, where uncertainty and temptation are ever present, *lectio divina* provides a way for us to find wisdom and assurance for our lives through engaging with scripture.

May it be so. Amen.