

*Lydia Neufeld Harder, 27 October, 2013*

**“Why I Still read the Bible: The Embarrassing Foot-note”**

Texts: II Kings 6: 8-23; a series of texts about the Bible (see other page)

Introduction:

This is a 4<sup>th</sup> sermon in the series: Why I am still. . . It is a personal testimony as much as a sermon—a testimony about the power of the Bible in my life. But I hope it will resonate with many of you as you reflect with me about the role of the Bible in the church and in your own personal life.

The Bible is a vulnerable book; that is, it is vulnerable to criticism and risks being irrelevant; it is open to attack and often cannot defend itself! It is vulnerable because it was written over the course of thousands of years in various cultural settings; It is vulnerable because it became the scripture of the church through a political process by the church and the state, a process that was not always healthy. It is vulnerable because it does not always stand up well to present day scholarship. Besides it is just plain difficult to understand. But probably most crucially for our day, it is vulnerable because it has been used as a weapon against many people, seeking to dominate them by using God’s name.

Yet, I have an ongoing love affair with the Bible—Today I want to explain to you why I continue to read and study the Bible and why I delight in its ability to challenge me while giving me hope and courage to live life to its fullest.

I have entitled this message: “the embarrassing footnote”, a title taken from an article by one of my favourite biblical scholars, Walter Brueggeman.

Before I became a scholar, I did not pay attention to footnotes. Even in my early college years, I had no use for those smaller printed bibliographical notes at the bottom of the page. But as I got more deeply involved in scholarly work, I realized that the footnotes are often the most important part of a book. Footnotes are that part of a book that acknowledges the source and inspiration of what is being said in the book. They point me in the direction of further research, of more in depth knowledge than was able to be put into the book proper. I now read footnotes very

diligently, knowing I can get closer to the source and depth of what an author is saying by paying attention to the footnotes.

In looking for the “footnote” in the Bible I often need to look at those small breaks within a story that point to a different memory than the status quo, that create dissonance in the text, that allow me to see the unpredictable way that God enters into our history.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that in today’s world where knowledge is thought to give certainty and religious absolutes are sought because they help us feel secure and safe, the footnote points us into a different direction, a direction in which ultimate mystery is still present, in which control and domination based on certainty are questioned and where moments of pain and amazement still have room.<sup>i</sup>

Today I want to do two things.

First of all I want to read an Old Testament story with you, interpreting as I go along, so that I can illustrate what I mean by “an embarrassing footnote.” Then I want to take you through the stages of my own relationship with the Bible in order to show you why I continue to look for the footnote that brings me up short and points me in the direction of the God who uses Scripture in a powerful way.

## I. The story

I and II Kings are not my favourite books of the Bible. The assassinations and massacres, the plots and counterplots are not my cup of tea! They are based on the historical records of the kings of Israel, written very much from the point of view of the kings from Solomon to the fall and captivity of Judah and Israel. They include much data, names of kings and generals, description of events and treaties that were continually broken, something that historical researchers might enjoy, but not something that seems edifying to us.

The particular story that we want to read begins like many other stories in the book of kings—in a kind of realistic way depicting a war between two ancient kings.

(Read vs. 8-15.)

The story begins with a crisis. The Syrian king of Aram has drawn up battle plans against Israel; but each time Israel somehow is made aware of the plans and avoids the danger. Somewhere there must be a traitor who has warned the Israelite king.

We are told that it is a man of God who somehow knows the danger and warns the king. But we are not told how he found out about the secret plans; not even how he managed to get into the story between the two kings. But there he is disclosing the closed world of military control, confusing the organized and logical plans of the king of Aram.

Note the king does what kings generally do. “Stop the leak! Get control! Secure the borders! Seize the culprit! The best way to tackle such a problem is with a great show of power.

So far the story does not stray away for a realistic portrayal of power politics—much of the Bible describes a world with which we can identify—we know the world of politics, the world of violence, the world of threats and counter -threats.

But in the next scene we notice some drastic changes: (read verses 15-19.)

- This scene is set in the home of the prophet, not the palace of the king
- Attention is put on the prophet and his servant, the real actors in the story.
- The servant is afraid; this is an unequal match, the prophet and his servant against the whole army of the king. (The prophet’s words about not being afraid seem almost irrational—“do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them”.

And then the prophet prays—not for help from another army, for some action by the king of Israel to step in—but rather for sight for his servant. The prophet focusses on the one thing that was most needful at this time; for the servant to see an alternative power, an alternative resource in the face of the danger. To realize that the power of the king was false power, that it is not the final power, that there is a power that the king has no knowledge of. The prophet can be calm because there is another world, unknown by the kings, but known to those who have eyes to see.

The second prayer is just as strange—asking that the Arameans be made blind, that they be made powerless in this situation.

Prayer here effects a great inversion: the blind see, the ones who see are made blind; The powerful become powerless, the powerless become powerful. The weak turn out to be strong, the strong weak.”

A rather unrealistic story, isn't it? These things don't happen in real life, do they? Whole armies do not become blind. And the stories of Elisha are an embarrassment to the serious scholars of biblical history. Such miracles are the stuff of legends and fairy tales. They do not fit into the royal histories. And yet here they are, right in the middle of official data.

The last scene continues and expands on the reversal of power. (20-23)

Through Elisha's prayers the Israelite king has received new power and he wants to exploit it. He wants permission to kill the Aramean army. Here again the realism creeps back into the story. In a reversal of power the powerless gain power. And then the temptation is to oppress the ones who have lost power; they begin to seek revenge. That is the way it usually works in power politics. There may be a reversal of power, but what this reversal does is create new victims. No real change has come about.

However, in this story, Elisha will not let this happen. Instead he authorizes a feast. The Arameans go home defeated but fed. And the story ends with: And the Arameans no longer came raiding in the land of Israel.”

Power is used but it is used to create friends, to overcome barriers separating people. Power is used as it should be—to bring about peaceful relationships.

The story is an unlikely one! It is preposterous in our day to think that a prophet with his prayers can change both the threat of the powerful king of Aram and the retaliation of the king of Israel.

Yet this story was told and retold in Israel. It was passed on through many generations, became part of sacred literature and helped define who God's people are. The Elisha stories, with their strange miracles, found their way into the royal histories and undermined the certainties and absolutes contained in them.

For scholars who are looking for facts that are objectively true, these stories are an embarrassment. The miracles they recount just do not happen in life as we know it. Yet, this story is a powerful story. It challenges the ways of kings and armies and stands with the so called powerless. It proposes an alternative way of viewing reality, where prayer changes things, where armies are powerless and the weak see the power of God and are no longer afraid. It even challenges the usual process of revenge by offering an alternative action.

In this story all status quo notions are nullified by a vision of a greater power, a power that heals rather than destroys. This story challenges our view of reality, presenting an alternative that can only be true if God is really God, active in the world creating new relationships of respect and peace. It asks us to decide how we will use this story as we encounter power that seems invincible!

This subversive story, filled as it is with miracle, has become an important one for me. The embarrassing footnote inserted into a realistic story has given me the eyes to see God at work in my world, to be unafraid in the face the breakdown of our economy, the growth of violence and the subtle temptations of power politics and to engage my context with the good news of God's love for the world.

But to explain why my connection to this story is so strong, I need to retrace my own journey with the Bible and allow you a glimpse into my own struggles to come to grips with this vulnerable book.

## 2. My story

a) I grew up in a Mennonite preacher's home with the Bible very much a part of daily life—I was comfortable with it because it was woven into the very fabric of life. All of life was set into the framework of the biblical story and both joys and sorrows were interpreted within that context. Whether it was my Father's stories of the revolution Ukraine or the hail storm that destroyed a crop or the birth of a new sister—all were interpreted within God's merciful providence. Morning began with reading God's word and the evening ended with Mom's Bible stories. And lots of discussion and even argument about the implication for daily life scattered in between.

b) In the Christian high school that I attended, the Bible was given a somewhat different place of authority, though it took me some time to recognize that. Here the literal interpretation of the Bible was stressed and belief in every word emphasized. Doubts or questions were discouraged, truth was certain, spelled out in a closed belief system and all I needed to do was believe it. The emphasis was on believing and then witnessing to others. I accepted this framework for a while. But when I began to really read the Bible more carefully, it no longer worked for me. I discovered stories that I had a hard time applying directly to my daily life. I did not understand how all the stories of battles, lists of genealogies, poems of revenge could be part of God's work. At the same time, the belief system I was given did not help me as I struggled with my first year of teaching school. The tight literal framework into which I had put the Bible was too small!

c) And so I began to struggle with the Bible. I began my search for truth, for a foundation, for a certainty that I could rely on. This led me to CMBC or CMU as it is now known. Here I began to work on scholarly methods for interpreting the Bible... I became intrigued with historical critical ways of reading... It was refreshing and stimulating to use my mind in my study, to ask questions, to voice the doubts that I had. A crucial breakthrough for me was to realize how very human the Bible really was. This realization has guided all of my studies and given me the freedom to look for God working through human efforts also in our day.

Yet something subtle began to happen as I began to apply a scholarly framework to all of my biblical studies. I began to ignore those passages, particularly the miracle stories, which didn't fit my rational, historical framework. These rather fantastic stories had to be put aside so that my framework would not collapse.

It was only very gradually that I began to realize that the scholarly framework, even though very helpful, was also getting too small.

d) Life began to have its painful moments as I got older, had to deal with my own family issues as well as larger social political concerns. I began to see how life is not fair, and many people are hurting. Often I felt powerless to change anything. At times I felt caught up in the system of our North American way of life, acting not as I wished to but as I felt forced to. At other times I felt victimized and oppressed and hurt by the structures of our society. I began

to read newspapers more critically and discovered how one-sided they often are in their portrayal of reality. I began to listen to those most hurt by our society, the aboriginal, the refugee, those with physical and mental disabilities, those sexually abused.

Now I began to read the Bible for different reasons. The parts that now received the most attention were the poems such as those in the Psalms or prophets where there is so much pain and anger expressed.

I began to resonate with the stories of minor characters in the Bible, the women whose stories didn't get told. I began to feel the freedom to interpret the stories so that the minor characters such as the midwives who rescued Moses, or the bent-over woman who was healed on the Sabbath became central to me. The Bible was important because it could express my innermost emotions and feelings.

The framework that I now used to assess the value of the Bible included not only rational criteria but asked also how the Bible fit with the feelings and emotions that were part of my response to reality. I simply didn't dwell on those which didn't make sense to me.

This framework added much to the former framework, but I had trouble dismissing those passages which were not hopeful to people in pain, those which seemed to glorify war, those which oppressed. I could not forget that in much of the Bible women were seen as secondary characters, that they didn't receive much of a part in the salvation story told in the Bible.

e) And so I began to wrestle with the Bible in a new way, coming to it with suspicion knowing that it could oppress as easily as save. I read the passages where Paul tells women to be silent, I read the verses about men being created first and therefore being given leadership--passages used by the church to dominate women. I began to wrestle with what I thought were two opposite approaches to the Bible: that of feminism (an approach of suspicion) and that of my Mennonite tradition (an approach of obedience.)

But I wrestled with this polarity in the context of the gospel of Mark where both obedience and suspicion sit side by side: suspicion of the human voice which can easily move to domination, and obedience to the divine voice which frees and liberates us. I began to see that how we use the Bible depends in knowing when to be suspicious of the human voice that

wants to dominate us and when to be obedient to the divine voice that comes to us in a very human scripture. The focus became not only interpretation but also discernment about how to use a Biblical passage. I began to realize that the responsibility to hear God speak through the Bible was really mine!

Slowly I have come to the realization that there are many voices within this book we call the Word of God. There is a conversation going on right within Scripture. Some voices echo the accepted realities of our day. They accept the need for force, the need for kings and armies, the need for political intrigue, the need for strict rules that dominate certain groups of people. However, there are other voices which struggle against this view, often interrupting the more dominating viewpoints. These voices give us an alternative perception of reality. They believe in prayer, in the power of God to work transformations, in miracles that only God can do.

Often these are minority voices, couched in the language of legends or poems, embarrassing foot notes to the dominant voices. These are stories of a world we may not yet see, but one that God has promised to us.

And so I have found that I need the Bible to help me to question the certainties of our status quo knowledge, to break down the frameworks that want to limit my understanding, to keep me open to mystery, to keep me growing and maturing in my relationship with God.

I need the Bible to give me an alternative view of reality, a view that does not discount miracle or the power of prayer, a view that may be embarrassing and make me vulnerable within what is accepted in our world. Above all, I need the Bible to give me new vision, to help me see a world that is not yet fully here, yet a world that can give me hope and courage. I need a vision of the kingdom of God where the blind will see and take courage, where the powerless will gain power and use that power to heal. I need the Bible to help me to be open to the divine voice amidst all the human voices that bombard me with their knowledge.

And so I still read the Bible, sometimes neglecting it but always returning, knowing that God has used this very human vulnerable book to witness to his power to change and transform lives and communities. Thanks be to God for this vulnerable Bible with its many foot-notes.

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<sup>i</sup> Brueggeman, Interpretation and Obedience, p. 28.