

**Luke 5:1-11** *Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup> he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. <sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." <sup>5</sup> Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup> When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. <sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; <sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." <sup>11</sup> When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*

### Redeeming the Cutting Room Floor

Over two hundred years ago, a man sat down with a Bible and began to cut out of the gospels all the parts which he felt were ahistorical, supernatural or a misinterpretation of Jesus' doctrine. With what remained, he made a composite Gospel, arranging pieces of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John into one continuous narrative. While brazen, this would hardly be historically significant if the man was not Thomas Jefferson, a founding father of the United States.

The result was "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" commonly referred to as "The Jefferson Bible." It is the story of Jesus' ministry without miracles, without exorcisms, and without the resurrection. It is the story of a controversial teacher killed by the authorities and ends with Jesus being laid in the tomb. The stone is never rolled aside, There is no empty tomb, no angel pronouncing Jesus has risen. In fact, there are no angels anywhere.

Now this is a Gospel an Enlightenment thinker can get behind! Everything is neat and tidy and believable. No mysticism or supernatural phenomenon here. Just a man that was a good enough preacher to get himself killed – I guess I should be thankful I'm new to this preaching gig, otherwise I could get myself into trouble. But honestly, this is the sort of Gospel so many modern Christians long for, often in secret. It's comprehensible, explainable and doesn't ask you to break from a purely logical paradigm. While few of us are Jeffersonian enough to actually edit the Bible, many of us take a less industrious approach and simply ignore the parts we don't like.

I know there are parts of the Bible that make me uncomfortable. I personally would have less doubt and struggle in my faith journey if two things were different about the Bible – the Old Testament had less divine sanctioned warfare and the New Testament had less miracles performed by the Disciples. I believe that Jesus was both human and divine, but Peter is just a person like you or me. Speaking in tongues, performing exorcisms, miraculous healings: I don't

particularly believe followers of Jesus can do these things now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so why should I believe they could two thousand years ago? Is it simply because the Bible is too sacred to cut up and rearrange, leaving what I dislike on the cutting room floor? Is it the threat of being called a heretic all that keeps me from wielding a pair of scissors?

Well in today's society, some folks will call you a heretic just because you recognize evolution or think two consenting adults should be allowed to marry regardless of gender. So it's not the threat of disapproval that prevents me from cutting out the parts that don't make sense – it's the cutting room floor.

If you cut out all the parts you don't understand, what's left to challenge you? And just as devastating – what's going to connect you to a long, rich tradition that genuinely thinks differently?

I don't want to dismiss entirely Thomas Jefferson's project – his engagement with the scriptures and his own faith is admirable, and retelling the story of Jesus is a faithful thing to do – but if it's a substitute for the richness and the fullness of the Bible then you are reading a book with holes in it. You're depriving yourself of centuries of wisdom and religious experience and missing deep, transcendent meaning because it's on your cutting room floor. And what you have left in your hand is incomplete, ragged and shallow.

There's another famous Bible with holes in it, one that was created by some seminarians back in the late '60s, among them Jim Wallis, who I mentioned in my sermon on Jesus' proclamation of release to the captives. Some eager first year seminarians, Wallace included, got together and compiled every single passage they could find that dealt with wealth and poverty, injustice and oppression, and to what the response of God's people should be to these things. There are several thousand verses on this theme.

Then one seminarian pulled out his scissors and went Thomas Jefferson on an old Bible. He cut out *every single Biblical text about the poor*. Talk about a devotional exercise of patience! It took a very long time. "Let Justice roll down like waters" Snip! "Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." Snip, Snip! "You cannot serve both God and Mammon" Snip! Snip, snip!

As Wallace describes it "When that zealous seminarian was done with all his editorial cuts, that old Bible would hardly hold together, it was so sliced up. It was literally falling apart in our hands. What we had done was create a Bible full of holes."

Wallace continues, "I began taking that damaged and fragile Bible out with me when I preached. I'd hold it up high above American congregations and say, 'Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible; it is full of holes.'" He goes on to say, "Each one of us might as well take our Bibles, a pair of scissors, and begin cutting out all the Scriptures we pay no attention to, all the biblical texts that we just ignore."

And sometimes I wish we would. I wish we'd just channel Thomas Jefferson and go Benihana on the Bible – slice it and dice it until we have a text naked and bare. Because at least then we'd begin to see the holes. And then maybe we can see what it is we are ignoring or rejecting. Maybe it's cut out for good cause – maybe it's something that is directly at odds with a

just and loving God. But far too often, it's like the zealous seminarian's ragged Bible – the passages challenge our comfort zone, our worldviews and biases. If we're lucky, we'll see the value of what we've dropped and begin to redeem that cutting room floor.

I know my private cutting room floor looks a little too much like Thomas Jefferson's. While I consider myself a relatively post-modern thinker, and have my disillusionments with Enlightenment era thinking, I am still greatly influenced by people like Immanuel Kant, as well the intellectual successors of the Enlightenment like Ralph Waldo Emerson. I agree with statements such as Jefferson's when he said, "Question with boldness even the existence of God: for if he exists then he prefers the homage of reason to that of blind-folded fear."

So I gravitate toward the parts of the Bible that are philosophical and ethical in nature – the Sermon on the Mount, Paul's Epistles, and the voice of the prophets like Isaiah. Genealogies bore me, tales of wars and kingship trouble me, and I have difficulty relating to the supernatural with the exception of the resurrection of Christ. I find I have to be mindful and self-conscious about this bias, and reread texts with an eye for the mystical and the mythological.

Because Jefferson's story of a teacher sealed forever in a tomb simply won't do. If we are going to have a rich theology – if we are going to have a full theology – it will have to make room for myth and miracle; it will have to harness the power of the resurrection. Myth and miracle are too prominent and important of religious expressions to simply ignore, or to cut away with scissors. And we are part of a tradition that grounds its greatest voices and leaders in mystical, epic call stories: Whether it's Moses and the Burning Bush, Isaiah and the live coal upon on his lips, or Paul and the Road to Damascus.

Today, we are given the call story of the most prominent Apostle, another story of a life-altering, otherworldly encounter with God. Because Jesus is the intense focus of the Gospels, it's easy to think every verse is about him. But I think this passage best seen as part of Peter's story, and not Jesus', the story of how Peter transitioned from a worldly vocation to a heavenly one, or how he went from fisherman to fisher of men. While this is the first of many mystical experiences with Christ for Peter – who was witness to the Resurrected Christ – this is the one that sets him down the road from some dude manning a fishing boat to the saint with the keys to the pearly gates.

And it's on Thomas Jefferson's cutting room floor.

The story of the miraculous harvest, that these simple fishermen would go on to defy all odds and found one of the world's major religions, 2 billion strong and counting. If you can't see the miracle of the fish at least see the miracle of the fishermen!

Monday evening I found myself in a spiritual discussion group was pondering with most everybody else in the room whether the Apostle Paul could be considered a mystic. He certainly had a mystical experience on the road to Damascus, but his theology is a far cry from the Gnostics or, say, modern-day Sufis who seek out mystical experiences to learn from God experientially.

I'm not sure whether Paul fits the traditional definition of a mystic, but the conversation was an important reminder that the great leaders of our tradition were ones who experienced the

divine in a supernatural way, in a way that pulled them out of the world into the otherworldly. Moses was just some guy shepherding sheep. Peter was just some dude manning a fishing boat. They were then swept up into the presence of the divine and transformed by God.

Everyday transformations are less epic and mystic, but are very real. The stories and the religious expressions of our ancestors inform and shape us, and help us to be ready to hear God's voice speaking in our own lives, in our own time.

Earlier I posed the question that if we cut out all of the parts of the Bible that we don't understand, like or agree with, what is left to challenge us? When God speaks to us through scripture, I think it is far more likely to be from a passage that is originally difficult to comprehend or strikes us as unbelievable. The comfort and tidiness of what we understand is less likely to inspire us than the complexity and even contradictions of our cutting room floors.

My advice to somebody unfamiliar with the Bible is to read it through it casually, find the parts you love, and keep them close to your heart. But the next step is to reach down to that cutting room floor – the parts you didn't like or glossed over – and pick up something challenging. Then wrestle with it. Last year for a seminary paper I picked a passage that made very little sense to me. It was in Genesis when Jacob wrestles the angel by the river and comes away with a limp and a new name: Israel. In fact, Israel means "one who struggles with God." Which I think is a quite fitting name for Hebrews. A passage I saw as fragmented and choppy, contradictory and just plain bizarre now has a special place in my heart after prayer, research and engagement. I'm still not sure what to make of it, but I'm further along in my spiritual journey because I engaged it.

If this was a conventional congregation, I would not be preaching on the Jefferson Bible but the seminarian's Bible that is stripped of social justice and God's concern for the poor. But I think this congregation is eager to hear those words, and trust me I will preach them. But our holes are elsewhere, and I think often great stories like this one – where a Disciple is called into a new life in Christ though witness to a miracle – get lost because of uneasiness with miracles.

Lent is around the corner, and the texts of this season of Epiphany have been revolving around the theme of call – Lent is a time when we are called into greater discipleship, a time of reflection and introspection. It's also a time when we acknowledge our incompleteness and seek wholeness in God.

So this is a fitting time of year then to redeem the cutting room floor and bring it back into conversation with what remains bound in our personal Bibles. I'm not saying the Bible is inerrant – surely there are contradictions and bad advice to be found in its pages. But what I am saying is that none of it is arbitrary, and I do think you will be surprised to find out that it is often the passages that challenge you most or seem to make the least amount of sense that ultimately become most meaningful through engagement.

And while the Bible is too inspired to understand in entirety, we don't have to hold a Bible with holes in our hands. We don't have to be gentle with a fragile and maimed text falling apart from arrogance or neglect. Because it's OK if it all doesn't make sense; it's OK if you wrestle with and even reject parts; it's OK to keep it all together without using scissors. Because

a book of complexity and a book of nuance and even a book of paradox and contradiction is much better than a Bible of holes.

AMEN.