

Listening to God in Scripture – A Lenten Guide

Picking a book of the Bible to read

The most common way people choose to read the Bible is to start at Genesis and work your way through. While this works for some people, many find it frustrating as by the time you get partway into Exodus you encounter lengthy passages of the Holiness Code (legal language with lots of “thou shalt nots”) and on the way huge lists of “begats.” Still, in terms of picking one book, Genesis can be a good choice.

The question to ask yourself is “what am I dealing with in my life right now?” or “what is my community dealing with right now?” Last year, when I was doing a lot of thinking about leadership, I read 1 and 2 Samuel ... which is all about the leadership of the people of Israel from Samuel to Saul to David. This year, as we are working on the core values of our church community, I’m reading Acts, which is about the formation of the early church around the experience of the resurrected Christ. Several parishioners I know who are going through rough times are reading Job. If you’re experiencing a lot of conflict in community or family relationships, 1 and 2 Corinthians are good to read. Some people like to choose the Psalms as a good devotional reading for Lent ... which can be very rewarding because they are songs that get to the heart of our humanity ... the heights of joy and the depths of agony. (I recommend a good commentary as a companion – see below – but I also recommend not just reading the songs but saying them aloud, even singing them, even screaming them sometimes!).

A great default if none of this is clicking with you is to read a Gospel. Mark is the Gospel we are working through this year and it is also the shortest Gospel. Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ humanity and is geared toward the people of Israel. Luke emphasizes Jesus mission to the Gentiles (that’s us!) and also Jesus as a healer and reconciler. John is the most poetic, emphasizes the divinity of Jesus and the presence of the living Christ in the gathered community.

Mostly, just pick something. If you’re unclear, start with Mark or one of the shorter Pauline letters and just see how it goes. The most important thing is not which book you pick but that you pick a book. Just get in the game!

How much do I read? When do I read? Where do I read?

Everyone has a different rhythm to their life and you need to figure out where scripture reading fits in. I find that less is more. Often when we start a new habit we set ourselves up to fail by trying to bite off too much. “I’m going to read the Bible for an hour a day!” we say ... and then find out that we can never meet that standard and get demoralized. Start small. If you’re using a commentary, most of those will divide the book up for you so it’s easy just to use those divisions. But don’t read more than 1-2 chapters at a time and often it’s helpful to read much less so you can spend more time digesting it.

When to read? Pick a time that is easy to protect and then protect it. Many people find first thing in the morning or last thing at night or right when they get home or during lunch to work (e.g. – natural transition times).

Where to read? This is a good time to set up a prayer/study space in your home or other place. Spaces have centers of gravity. Reading in bed often doesn't work for people because our bodies naturally gravitate toward sleep. If you pray/read scripture in the same place every day then your attention will naturally become more focused when you get in that place.

How do I read scripture? Is it just like reading any other book?

First, if you haven't taken Basic Bible, please do so the next time it comes around. During Basic Bible we not only explore the broad story of the Bible, but we talk about a way of reading and praying with scripture called *lectio divina*. Here is an excellent brief article that talks about practicing this way of scripture study (<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Catholic/2000/08/How-To-Practice-Lectio-Divina.aspx>) ... thanks to Susan Adams for sending this my way.

This is not like reading most other books. We are looking to dive deep and listen deeply. Read small chunks. Read a commentary if it helps you answer basic questions and hear someone else's thoughts on the passage. But most important, give yourself time in silence to sit with the text. To ask questions: "Where do I see Christ in this?" "Where does this story intersect with my story, with our story as a faith community?" "Where is God speaking to me and what is God saying." Whatever amount of time you spend actually reading, try to spend at least that much time contemplating and sitting with what you've read. That can be 5 minutes and 5 minutes! Just make sure you're doing both.

Commentaries for Bible Study

The best brief commentary that answers most of the "basic" questions (who, what, where, when) .. is the HarperCollins Study Bible. The notations are excellent and provide the best "minimalist" approach I've seen. One step up from that is the Harper's Bible Commentary. It is one volume and is an excellent companion to reading scripture.

If you're looking for something that has more reflections and thought on passages, here are some commentaries that I and others have found useful. Just remember never to let reading the commentary substitute for your own prayer and wrestling with scripture. The commentary should help open it up for you, not close it off.

There are several series of commentaries that cover all of scripture in many volumes. The Interpretation Series of Bible Commentaries is probably the best of the bunch. The Anchor Bible Commentary series also is one of those “tried and true” series.

Old Testament

Everett Fox’s The Five Books of Moses is a great companion to reading the Torah. Incredible translation and great notes.

Anything by Walter Brueggemann is excellent. He has written commentaries on Genesis, 1 & 2 Samuel, Jeremiah, the Psalms, 1 & 2 Kings, Isaiah.

Ellen Davis has written excellent commentaries on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, and Ezekiel

Robert Alter’s commentary on the book of psalms is good.

New Testament

N.T. Wright’s “For Everyone” series is the best, most accessible series I’ve seen. I think it’s a complete set by now so it’s something I would recommend as a companion for any new testament study.

Luke Timothy Johnson has good commentaries on Luke and Acts, Hebrews, James and 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Colossians and Ephesians

William Willimon’s work is excellent and accessible, too. His commentary on Acts in the Interpretation series is top-notch.

Stanley Hauerwas’ Matthew is challenging and phenomenal.

Some of these can be found in the Cathedral library on the 5th floor but all of them can be found online through Amazon or Googlebooks. Many can be found at your local independent bookseller.

If you’ve found something that’s great that’s on this list, let me know and I’ll add it.

And please, let me know of your experience of reading scripture. I can’t wait to hear from you about it!

In Christ’s love,

Mike+