

I. Advanced organizer

A. **Imagine with me that you are 90 years old.** You've had a long life; longer than many of your friends. You've married. You've had children. Your children have had children. And in these last several years, a few of your grandchildren have even had children. You are a great grandparent. But it has become clear that your time is waning. Your partner has already passed, as have your brothers and sisters. You are the last in your immediate family circle, and before you leave this earth, your eight year old great granddaughter tells you she wants to read your family's story. She asks you to write it. You set upon the task of considering your story diligently.

1. You write down snippets you can remember. You pull up emails and text messages from a lifetime ago. You begin forwarding things to your granddaughter, the girl's mother, who agrees to help with the project. She does some digging herself and finds some writings that seem relevant from a decade ago that your partner wrote before they died; a blog post, a number of social media posts. There's a journal of your sister's that's been discovered. You're hopeful that as all these resources come together, you'll be able to examine them carefully, sort out the dates, draw upon them to tell one coherent story.
2. But time isn't on your side. You lay down for a nap one afternoon, surrounded by journals and old social media posts, and you don't wake up. Your granddaughter decides to complete the project, but she can't synthesize all these sources. She could never have enough of the big picture to quite know how to put it together; what you would emphasize, what you'd leave out. So she decides to compile them. She creates a website inviting others to share their stories or writings they've received from you over the years, and words pour in. There are poems you wrote as gifts to friends on their birthdays twenty years ago. There are so many pictures of you and your siblings on vacations, at one another weddings, celebrating the births of your children, comforting each other in loss and divorce, gaining weight, and losing it, and sometimes gaining it again, growing older, grieving one another's passing. There are stories from your children and grandchildren; their memories of things you said, ways you confused them, ways you made them laugh.
3. And when these sources are edited and compiled into this anthology from your life, **it is not the story you'd imagine you'd write.** But every son and daughter, grandchild, and friend who reads it, hears you singing to them through the pages. Through this layered expression of all kinds of written pieces, your story is shared. Your voice speaks. Those who love you and miss you find comfort in the work. For them, the book is precious, for though it doesn't tell them everything about you, it shares enough. **It brings you into contact. It becomes sacred.**

B. Well I started with this little imaginative exercise, because we have a few teachings left in our **current teaching series called "Recovering the Sacred"**. In the series, we're looking at the books of Ezra and Nehemiah for some inspiration, as we consider how a spiritual community might rebuild after a season of significant trauma and disruption, just as we ourselves are trying to do after more than a year of virtual only community life.

1. As we've been touching on, this season of "reordering" is about more than coming together after the pandemic. Even before Covid, many of us hit some version of what Father Richard Rohr calls "disorder" - something about life got in the way of the "order" we once experienced, which may have led to some sort of crisis of faith, or reason we needed to look for a different church, a different understanding of spirituality, and so on.
2. And today's topic, the concept that I want to focus on from the story we are looking at today, has to do with what I'd call **"Sacred Texts"**. **What role do sacred texts play in a reordered life of faith?**

3. As a community in the Jesus-centered or Christian tradition, our Sacred Texts are found in the Bible, both the Hebrew Bible like we've been looking at in this series, coming to us first from the Jewish tradition, sometimes called by Christians the "Old Testament", as well as the New Testament that recorded stories from the life of Jesus and communication around the early church, the folks who were trying to carry Jesus' teaching and mission forward.
4. But truth be told, in a community like Haven, **we've got a number of folks with different kinds of relationships with this set of sacred texts.**
 - a) Some of us were raised or had our faith formed in evangelical or other **Bible-centric traditions**. Many of us may have had positive experiences with the Bible throughout our lives while we were in the season of "order", but once we hit some sort of "disorder", the Bible may have felt like less of a source of life and perhaps more of a weapon, something to be used by those in power to try to control us or condemn us or those around us. For some of us, the wounds of that experience are still tender, and it can be hard for us to think about the Bible at all without feeling their sting.
 - b) Others of us - that's not our story. **Perhaps we've spent much of our life not really knowing much about the Bible at all**, or only the bits and pieces we've picked up in culture. Perhaps our primary lens for understanding the Bible has actually been through our participation in Haven, through teachings by people like me, or conversations with folks in our community.
 - c) And some of us are perhaps **in their own category**, perhaps discovering the Bible in a season of reordering and so they have developed a relationship with it that has simply been helpful and fruitful without some of the negative hang-ups others share. Or perhaps folks have moved through an experience of disorder with the text and are coming to a different place, a place of healing and reclaiming.
 - d) Wherever you personally are at, I think it's helpful for us as a community in a season of corporate reordering to think together about what role our sacred texts might play in the life of our spiritual community, and how, like in the example I used, those texts might connect us ultimately to the one behind the texts themselves, the one whose stories are being told. Ultimately, how might making space for these texts together in the midst of our recovering community help us connect with God?

II. Our Story for today is found in **Nehemiah 8**.

- A. The set up for this is that as we saw last week, the officer from the Persian emperor's court, Nehemiah, has come to Jerusalem with a calling to rebuild the walls there and help the city become a safer place to inhabit. He does this and it's successful, and rather than returning to Susa when the project is done, Nehemiah stays on in Jerusalem and serves as the governor there, at least for a season. This is the situation in the background when we encounter today's story.
- B. ***When the seventh month arrived and the Israelites were settled in their towns, 1 all the people gathered together in the plaza which was in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly which included men and women and all those able to understand what they heard. (This happened on the first day of the seventh month.) 3 So he read it before the plaza in front of the Water Gate from dawn till noon before the men and women and those children who could understand. All the people were eager to hear the book of the law.***

4 Ezra the scribe stood on a towering wooden platform constructed for this purpose.

Standing near him on his right were Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Masseiah. On his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5 Ezra opened the book in plain view of all the people, for he was elevated above all the people. When he opened the book, all the people stood up. 6 Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people replied “Amen! Amen!” as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

7 Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah—all of whom were Levites—were teaching the people the law, as the people remained standing. 8 They read from the book of God’s law, explaining it and imparting insight. Thus the people gained understanding from what was read.

- C. So we’ll go on in a minute, but I just want to take a pause to clarify what we’ve heard so far. What this story in Nehemiah is saying thus far is that after the temple of Jerusalem has been rebuilt and all the walls and gates restored, and folks are settling in all the neighborhoods there, there was an experience in which the people decided to have a big rally, the community gathers and asks the scholar and priest Ezra to read to them from the torah - what is called here the law, which would mean essentially he’s reading from the first five books of the Bible which tradition attributed to Moses. So Ezra holds a mass Bible reading where he reads from the top of this tall podium and the whole community shows up for it, and not only do they show up, but they demonstrate a kind of reverence for the reading of the text by standing up. And this reading of sacred texts goes on for several hours - as the story says, from dawn till noon at least. The people are responding in emotional ways - some raising their hands, some bowing on the ground.
- D. Some scholars look at this story as being one of the core stories that demonstrates the important transition the Jewish community was undergoing in this season of it’s history - as it moved from being a faith based in oral tradition and priestly practices to the written word, **the Jewish people are becoming a “people of the book”**. Let’s read on to hear what the story says happens next.
- E. ***9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priestly scribe, and the Levites who were imparting understanding to the people said to all of them, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping when they heard the words of the law. 10 He said to them, “Go and eat delicacies and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared. For this day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”***

11 Then the Levites quieted all the people saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy. Do not grieve.” 12 So all the people departed to eat and drink and to share their food with others and to enjoy tremendous joy, for they had gained insight in the matters that had been made known to them.

13 On the second day of the month the family leaders met with Ezra the scribe, together with all the people, the priests, and the Levites, to consider the words of the law. 14 They discovered written in the law that the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should live in temporary shelters during the festival of the

seventh month, 15 and that they should make a proclamation and disseminate this message in all their cities and in Jerusalem: “Go to the hill country and bring back olive branches and branches of wild olive trees, myrtle trees, date palms, and other leafy trees to construct temporary shelters, as it is written.”

16 So the people went out and brought these things back and constructed temporary shelters for themselves, each on his roof and in his courtyard and in the courtyards of the temple of God and in the plaza of the Water Gate and the plaza of the Ephraim Gate. 17 So all the assembly which had returned from the exile constructed temporary shelters and lived in them. The Israelites had not done so from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day. Everyone experienced very great joy. 18 Ezra read in the book of the law of God day by day, from the first day to the last. They observed the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day they held an assembly as was required. (Nehemiah 7:73b - 8:18)

- F. So to summarize our second portion, after hearing the text, and having emotional responses, and feasting at the sacredness of the experience they’re having, the people come back for more, and on the second day of the reading, they connect with hearing about the tradition of building shelters for the Feast of Tabernacles, an ancient festival. And they realize that they have not experienced this festival, at least in the way it was described in the texts they were reading, and the festival happens to be prescribed for this time of year, so the people feel inspired and build their shelters and recover some traditions around the celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, and it’s all a very joyous experience.
 - G. So essentially in this story we have the tale of a community in recovery discovering a sort of lost treasure again. They are discovering anew the beauty and power of ancient sacred texts and when they come together around those texts, powerful things happen among them. In some religious circles it might be described as “revival”. However you describe the phenomenon it seems to bring new vitality to the community and to their connection with the Divine.
- III. So how might this story be instructive to us as we think about our own connection to the Bible, and the role it might play in “reordering” our personal and collective spiritual lives? I have three insights that I think the story illustrates for us to consider this morning.
- A. **Sacred texts are powerfully experienced when explored in community with others.**
 - 1. This story is not one about one single person discovering and reading anew some ancient documents, it’s about a community receiving the stories of their faith together, and entering together into a conversation about those stories. You have teachers walking through the crowd sharing insights, helping smaller groups grasp what they’re hearing. Folks are eating together, camping out in temporary homes like tents, sleeping alongside one another, chatting about the things they’ve been hearing, collaborating in their understanding. And this all points us to how I think sacred texts are intended to function. Not to be owner’s manuals that simply clearly set out directives for how to live our lives and worship God, but to **engage us in collective conversations with those present, and those who’ve come before us.**
 - 2. If you’re not convinced that’s the case, I’d encourage you to think about what our Bible actually is. Scripture is extraordinarily diverse. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. The Bible is not best understood as one book; **it’s more helpful to consider it as a library (or an anthology)**. Similar to the imaginative document we explored in the beginning, the Bible tells the bigger story of our faith not through one narrative stream, but through story,

poetry, prophecy, and personal correspondence all layered upon one another and in dialogue with each other. There are stories that were eventually collected and transcribed after centuries of being told around fires and dinner tables, there are songs, poems, prayers, there are prophecies of gloom and doom and judgment, there are accounts of the life of Jesus, or of the early church, meant to convince others of what the authors have witnessed, there are letters written between friends. The sixty six books that make up our Bible are written by a variety of people with a variety of motives over several centuries. They give a variety of perspectives and as we've seen even in this teaching series, sometimes those perspectives are in debate with one another. A few weeks ago, in our conversation on sacred heritage, I described this reality this way: **Our very Bible is not a declaration but a dialogue.** So if the Bible itself is in dialogue with itself, how can we not engage it in a way that gives space for dialogue, for debate, for collective meaning-making?

3. In our 21st century world, particularly after the long season of physical distancing we've all endured in the last couple of years, we've all gotten used to interacting with information individually however we choose. A quick Google search can often provide answers within seconds to any question that pops in our head, and we can scroll all night making our own meanings of those things if we so choose, including passages from the Bible.
4. But for most of human history, including the whole era that our sacred texts arise from (a period spanning perhaps as much as 1500 years), **human beings could not interact with information in any way near what we've become accustomed to.** It was only in the 15th century, less than 600 years, ago that the printing press was invented and it became possible to mass produce the written word. Before that time, the vast majority of humans had little to no access to writing materials and so most were illiterate. In the first 1400 years of the Christian church, many towns only had one Bible, and it was chained to the wall of their Catholic Church because of the immense value of that physical book. It took a whole year of copyists writing by hand in order to produce one copy, and there were a handful of folks, generally priests, who understood how to read it. And so to be in touch with sacred texts, you didn't have the option to pull out your phone, or your leather bound book and read the Bible to have a quiet time and "connect with God". **You had to go to the synagogue, or the town square, or the house church, or eventually the cathedral to hear any of the sacred stories form your tradition,** and there you would be with other people, in relationship, being moved by this text together.
5. That's **the world Jesus inhabited** and the work he was engaged in. He was one who knew the texts, who'd studied them, who had remarkable capacity for learning them and understanding the ways they pointed to deep Spiritual truth, and bringing out those insights as good rabbi does, in conversation with others.
6. Of course I'm not saying that there is no value to individual study of scripture, I think that is an important practice and was probably how Jesus formed his own take on the texts he preached on, but I am saying that to get the ultimate benefit I believe the texts can bring us, we need to also be in conversation with others, as that I believe is where the work of Sacred Texts comes to life.

B. Sacred texts need to work with other elements to help us move forward in faith.

1. As you may have picked up on, the summer I'm on a bit of a Father Richard Rohr kick, rereading a lot of his work, and discovering more, and leaning on a lot of those insights in this series. And in that vein, I listen to a podcast this week that was recorded a few years ago, in which Father Rohr was talking about his take on the Bible, and he used an image in that conversation that I found particularly helpful.

2. Rohr described the methodology for spirituality that he teaches at his school as being a **tricycle**. The tricycle, of course, has three wheels. For Rohr, **the first wheel is “experience.” The back wheels are “scripture” and “tradition.”** Rohr believes that all three wheels are needed to move together forward, and if any of them are missing, you don’t have a very holistic reading of the moment or a deep Christian experience.
3. By Rohr’s assessment, a historic error of the Catholic faith, of which he is a part, has been over-emphasizing the tradition wheel, trying to focus solely on and drive with that. On the other side, he believes Protestants have overemphasized the Bible, trying to make that the driving force. But both of these for Father Rohr are ultimately a problem because they’re not honest about the reality that we are always led by our own experience. This is not a bad thing. It can’t be any other way. So rather than trying to hide that truth from ourselves and others by looking for traditions or texts to justify whatever conclusion we’ve come to, we would do better to recognize that we are led by our experience, and that is fine, but we benefit from having the back wheels of Scripture and tradition available to us to stabilize our motion, to keep it from going anywhere, to as Rohr describes it, **“keep experience accountable”**. We need all of these things working together to give us forward movement as individuals and collectives.
4. So in the story, we have a group of people who have had some powerful experiences together of seeing the Divine slowly, over time partner with them to cultivate and rebuild their sacred community, first in the decree by the Emperor of Persia to release the exiles to return from Babylon, then through the gifts of subsequent emperors to contribute to rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, they’ve seen leaders be sent their way like Ezra and Nehemiah. **They’ve had some genuine experiences, but they recognize that in other ways they are unmoored from their history;** they don’t have back wheels to their tricycle that are very functional. And so, as a collective, this hunger seems to be articulated, and as the people begin to recover their stories, their texts, a deeper understanding of who this God is they are connecting to, what tradition they are a part of, what sacred dialogues they are continuing, they get forward momentum. They recover traditions from their ancestors and embody them in their own time, fueling their personal experiences once more in powerful ways. So their experiences lead them to seek out resources that ultimately further their experiences and help them connect more deeply with one another and with God.
5. Haven as we reorder, **what if this was the kind of relationship we too could have with Scripture in our recovery work?** What if we could recover a relationship with the Bible in which we allowed it to serve us in helping direct our experiential life of faith, but not to rule us? What new life, and what new forward momentum in our spirituality might we experience in doing so?

C. Our third insight: Ultimately, sacred texts should connect us with the joy that comes in understanding that we are loved.

1. This I believe is the heart of the sacred conversation that Scripture records. God is love. God loves each of us deeply. Jesus embodies that love in the flesh, even going all the way to offering himself as a demonstration of self-giving love.
2. Scripture is a gift to us intended to help us at our core understand this truth. And that truth should bring joy.
3. In our story, the priests and Levites tell the people not to weep but to celebrate. Discovering the Word of God should not ultimately bring shame or grief or fear but belovedness and joy. If that’s not what the practice of our faith is doing, **if our scripture readings and our traditions aren’t pointing our tricycle more deeply into the ways of**

love, service, compassion, connection with the world around us, then something is off.

4. Friends, I believe that just as the imaginary compilation of texts we considered in the beginning had the capacity to reveal our hearts to those who read them, the sacred texts of our tradition have been given to us ultimately to reveal the heart of the Divine demonstrating love for all of creation and a desire to make all things new, and that is a source of great hope.
5. My hope as we recover the sacred together, is that we too can lean into that spirit of joy that our spiritual ancestors were called to as they studied the sacred texts. We hear the call to joy even, and perhaps especially, in the midst of challenging circumstances. Yes, the world is still a messy complicated place, filled with wildfires, and viruses, and fake news, and oppression, and violence, and toxic theology. But there is also beauty and wonder and awe and kindness and courage and compassion and care. There is also wisdom and freedom and healing and the sacred. There is friendship. There is family. There is love. There is God. And for all this, we're invited not to mourn, but to rejoice. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation?

1. What has your relationship to the Bible been like in the past? How might it be changing in this season, or how might you like it to change?
2. What's helpful to you in thinking about the Bible as a "dialogue", not a "declaration"? What's challenging about that?
3. What do you think of Father Rohr's tricycle metaphor with faith being formed by experience, scripture and tradition? Are there certain "wheels" you feel more comfortable with than others?