

Sermon BUMC
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How did we get this Bible? This collection of gospels, letters, poetry, law, legend, and genealogies? This collection of stories about people's experiences with God and God's experience with people? How did these writings get gathered together and considered scripture?

These are questions I had never considered until I was sitting in my first Bible class at Belmont University as a freshman. I had already read much of the Bible and been devoted to it because of my time in a Bible-forward youth group. But I had never pondered how we actually got this book, these stories that I had come to believe were the Word of God.

Many years later I was on the other side of the classroom as the professor teaching many freshman students in their first Bible class at Belmont. When it was time to talk about canonization, the fancy word for how all of these different writings came to be considered scripture, I found myself telling the students about the communities that shaped these texts and brought them together and considered them scripture.

For the Hebrew Bible, these stories that became included in scripture were first passed down orally from generation to generation for centuries. These stories helped to shape the identity of the Israelite as people who worship Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel.

These stories helped to answer questions like, How did we get here? What is God like? How was the world made and what does that mean for our place in it? Why do we do these certain rituals, wear these certain things, eat these certain foods? How do we live faithfully to God? These stories answered very human questions.

Then later in Israel's history, the people start writing down the stories, poetry, genealogies, and law. The experience of exile was a catalyst for this. They wrote down these stories so they wouldn't forget, so their children growing up in Babylon would know who they were and whose they were. They wrote to stay connected to their community, God, and their very own identity.

Later when the Israelites were able to return to their homeland, having these stories written down helped to guide them in figuring out what it meant to be faithful to God in their new context, redefine their identity as a people, and figure out how to work and live together.

These stories that became the Hebrew Bible were impacted and shaped by the community that told them, and in return, the community that told them was impacted by these stories.

These stories that make up our Hebrew Bible weren't the only stories that the community of Israelites over centuries told. But these are the ones they chose to set apart as saying something

about God and how God might have humans live faithfully in a way that other stories did not. I like to imagine the Israelite people passing down these stories generation after generation and eventually setting them apart as scripture saying, “These are our best stories. These are the ones we want to make sure you remember. These will help you know God. These will help you live.”

The Hebrew Bible IS the Bible of Jesus and the early church. When they talk about scripture, this is what they mean. But we know that the church eventually canonized its own set of stories, which became the New Testament. So, how did these stories come to be? Once again, the answer is primarily through community.

The church began with stories about Jesus, this Good News of how he lived and worked and treated people. These stories, in connection with the Holy Spirit, transformed people’s lives! More and more people wanted in on the story of Jesus and wanted to live like he lived. As the church grew and grew across the vast Roman Empire, people began writing these stories about Jesus down. We know them as the Gospels.

Then as they needed guidance about how exactly they were supposed to live as the beloved community, church leaders wrote letters instructing them further. Communities of Christ followers passed around these gospel stories and letters.

There were many more than what ended up in our New Testament, and the ones that made the cut did so in large part because the communities of faith found these ones to be the most helpful to living a life of following Christ. One big deciding factor for the writings that became scripture was that they had to be helpful to more than just one church context. The story had to be formative and impactful not just to the Roman church or the Corinthian church or the Philippian church, but to all the different communities in their different contexts. The stories that are in our New Testament are the stories they decided that tell us about who God is and how we might live faithfully in a way that these other ones don’t. I imagine our spiritual ancestors deciding on the books to include in the New Testament saying, “These are our best stories. These are the ones we want to make sure you remember. These will help you know God. These will help you live.”

These stories that became the New Testament were impacted and shaped by the community that told them, and in return, the community that told them was impacted by the stories.

If community is what birthed our scripture, then it would stand to reason that a central way to understand these stories is to do so within community. In fact, for the majority of Christian history there was no private Bible devotional reading. Firstly, because many people could not read or could not read the language the Bible was written in. And secondly, because books were so expensive to have that they were not widely available.

Reading the Bible on your own between you and God is a wildly new phenomenon when you look at the grand scheme of Christian history. Reading the Bible on your own is not a bad thing,

in fact I would recommend it. And, reading the Bible in community perhaps helps us to engage with it in a different and necessary way than we can do on our own.

Gathering around these stories is something Christ followers have always done. And we see that here in our passage for today in Acts 2, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship” (v 42). The apostles were telling the stories of Jesus, which would eventually become scripture.

These folks gathered in Acts 2 did not only share the stories of Jesus but also, broke bread together, they prayed together. They witnessed miraculous things that inspired them. They looked after each other so that no one went without, even when that meant that they would go with a little less.

Communities of Christ followers still practice all these other things today. **It all works together to shape us into who God calls us to be and how to live faithfully. All these other aspects of following Christ in community help us to better understand scripture and what it all might have to do with us.**

This passage in Acts 2 paints a beautiful picture of community. I love the details this passage describes, that they had “glad and generous hearts” and “goodwill of all the people.” It sounds perfect, idyllic. And what’s awesome is that church is always like this! We exist in a community with our hearts glad and generous and full of goodwill 24/7! Right???

Well, not any group of humans that I have ever been a part of has ever existed in this kind of harmony constantly. But don’t worry, there’s Good News, the early communities of Christ followers ALSO did not exist in this state of goodwill-ed bliss constantly either!

The epistles of the New Testament reveal to us that even though people know Jesus and are trying earnestly to follow him, they are still human and, therefore, imperfect. The epistles written to the different early church communities reveal so many struggles and shortcomings, ways of totally getting it wrong, and attempts at reconciling.

For example, in the letter to the Corinthian church we can deduce that they had leadership disputes that sowed dissonance, community members were suing each other in court, they were having disruptive worship services and discrimination at the communion table, and—most shocking of all—they were disagreeing about theology.

We see in the letter to the church in Rome that they were also struggling. In Acts 2 they were breaking bread together, in Rome were struggling to agree what was even okay to eat let alone who to eat it with. At the church in Philippi two of the leaders had a falling out and couldn’t seem to reconcile. That is a far cry from everyone “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teachings and fellowship,” and “having goodwill of all the people” that is described in Acts 2.

And yet, all of these examples, and more, are also found in our scripture. This makes me feel reassured that the real life, living and breathing, trying and failing

Christian communities I have been a part of also fall within the story of God. For they are reflected in what our spiritual ancestors decided are our most important stories.

As a community of Christ followers, we are imperfect people trying to follow God reading stories about imperfect people trying to follow God. By the grace of God, we catch glimpses of what is described in Acts 2. We partner with Christ to embrace and create the ultimate hope that Isaiah describes where all is just and good and fair.

And when we fall short of this beautiful vision, I don't think the Bible, or God for that matter, is saying "Try a little harder next time would ya?"

But rather all of scripture together, the good the bad and the ugly, is whispering to us, **"WELCOME to this lineage of imperfect people attempting to live in community with one another and with God! You belong here. Come on in, you're home."**

So we tell each other the stories again. We ask for advice and forgiveness. We extend grace. We break bread and take care of each other and our neighbors even when it costs us. We pray our hearts would be filled with gladness and generosity whenever they start to drift from a posture of goodwill. And we tell the stories again, and again, and again to remind us why we do this.

These stories we call scripture have been shaped by the communities who told them generation after generation. And in turn, those communities were shaped by the stories. We best understand the Bible in community because the stories themselves are impacted by our telling of them together. And in return, we as a community are impacted by these stories.