

Person of the book

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [December 13, 2011](#) issue



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My Bible needs to go to a nursing home. The gold on the edges of the pages has faded to dingy yellow, the leather cover has a shiny worn look, and the embossed words on the binding are almost invisible. I smile when I remember that this is the "New" Revised Standard Version.

I bought this Bible 25 years ago at the bookstore at my graduate school in Chicago. It has traveled with me almost every day in a book bag, along with my church directory, planning calendar, seminary students' papers and a new novel, all jumbled together. It accompanied me on mission trips through four continents, sat on countless podiums, lecterns and pulpits, and stayed up late with me Saturday nights when I was struggling to find a sermon worth preaching.

There is cellophane tape over many of its torn pages, which I assume is a testimony to my favorite passages. (Why do only Bibles use this tissue-thin paper?) Many of the verses are underlined, some pages are dog-eared—and alongside Psalm 42 there's a notation I made in grad school; it claims that the psalm was sung at the baptism of St. Augustine in 387. I don't always remember a chapter-and-verse citation, but I usually remember where that verse can be found on a page of this old Bible. When the Daily Common Lectionary leads me to the last pages of Revelation, I grimace because I no longer have those pages—they were lost about ten years ago along with the maps that traced the missionary journeys of St. Paul.

I should get another copy, but I can't bring myself to put this old book on the shelf. The older my Bible becomes, the deeper it travels into my heart. That's not because there haven't been new suitors. One of the strange ironies of being a pastor is that parishioners keep giving me Bibles as Christmas presents. But those new Bibles are on my shelf, while the tattered one continues to find its place in the book bag I tote around every day.

I have been a Presbyterian pastor for 30 years, but I grew up as the son of a fundamentalist preacher who used to wave his Bible in front of his congregation. During those formative years I must have developed a sense that the book was something I would now call sacramental—a physical sign of a mystical holy grace.

In seminary and graduate school I learned how to appreciate higher criticism of this text, although that was certainly my most frightening learning experience. In those days it felt as if my faith were dangling over a cliff, clinging to a branch. But after letting go from sheer intellectual and spiritual exhaustion, I was amazed to discover I fell only inches from where I started.

The more I understand about the Bible's dust-and-grit humanity, the more holy it becomes to me. Long after I'd left behind my father's theory of the inerrancy of scripture, I found a Bible that had even more authority because it revealed how God inspired humans who stayed human when they wrote. Communities of faith, whose members have already committed every sin and faced every peril they could possibly experience, recorded in fallible ways the infallible truth of our redemption. That makes me love both God and ancient human words about God all the more.

I have long believed in the theories of oral traditions and the redaction editors of the Old Testament. The mysterious Mr. Q who was a source of the Synoptic Gospels is not that mysterious anymore. I realize that we have no idea who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, and I read most of the book of Joshua by peeking through fingers over my eyes as I silently pray, "Really?" But if my house were on fire, this old Bible is still one of the first things I would grab before running out the door.

I cannot discard it on the shelf of previously read books for the same reason I dare not enjoy a glass of wine using the chalice that sits on our church's communion table. It is what's in the cup and what's in the book that's holy, I get that—but somehow the vessels of grace also become sanctified over time.

There have been many nights when I could not sleep and finally surrendered to the restlessness and went into my study. There I pulled out my tattered old Bible and read words like, "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?" (Ps. 56:8). Then I could finally go back to sleep.

On the dark nights there is a reason that I don't go to my Kindle to read those words of spiritual comfort. Just holding the cherished, tattered old book reminds me of what I believe in—a great faith that has persevered even though it's been tossed around with everything else.