

A God who does laundry (Lent 5B) (Psalm 51:1-12)

## On giving Eugene Peterson's *The Message* another chance

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

March 19, 2021

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

I recently read Eugene Peterson's *Eat This Book*. It is a wonderful guide to reading scripture faithfully, so that we might be formed and transformed by what we encounter in the text.

It's Peterson at his pastoral best. I've learned to remind myself that he was a man of exceedingly kind eyes and deep laugh lines when I happen upon paragraphs that come across as overly stern. I devoured the book (appropriately), marveling at how hungry it made me for the actual Word of God. And then I got to the last section, about *The Message*, Peterson's paraphrastic translation of holy scripture.

Reader, I cannot tell a lie. I am a fangirl of Eugene Peterson, but I can hardly bear to read the Bible as he rendered it. I applaud his purpose—making ancient scriptures accessible to a new generation of believers—but to my ear, it is just so relentlessly hokey. Still, after reacquainting myself with the earnest story behind Peterson's capstone project, I committed myself to reading some passages in *The Message*, including Psalm 51:1-12.

Yes, parts of it are hokey. Yet I am unexpectedly captivated by his recurring metaphor of laundry. It is, after all, as pervasive and oppressive a fact as death and taxes. The hamper in the upstairs hallway is always in danger of overflowing; it turns out the window seat in our living room is not a seat at all but a place to fold and

stack clean clothes (which in turn tend to just wait there until someone needs the sweatshirt at the bottom of the pile). If I wish to comprehend the concept of abundance, all I need to do is consider the laundry.

And in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Psalm 51, God does the laundry.

"Scrub away my guilt / soak out my sins in your laundry," the psalmist croons. "Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean." There is something deeply compelling about a God involved in household chores.

I suspect God is diligent and detail-oriented when it comes to laundry. God reads the tags outlining fabric care; God even reads the machine manuals and knows what all the cycles mean. God never forgets that God put a load in before breakfast, never leaves it to mildew all day long. God plucks the favorite shirt out of the pile and pre-treats it with some good old-fashioned Fels-Naphtha soap, thereby avoiding the dreaded permanent stain. God does the laundry as a generous act of love, bereft of resentment and free of fury.

We do not need a domesticated God, but perhaps we do need a domestic one. Even if it is a little hokey.