

Discomfort food

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There is a way of using the Bible that focuses on the comfort that it may provide. Such a way is exemplified in the Gideon Bible, which points to particular Bible verses for immediate comfort and encouragement. So for those seeking “comfort in time of loneliness,” the Gideon Bible points to Psalm 23, Isaiah 41:10 and Hebrews 13:5-6. For “comfort in time of sorrow,” 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 and Romans 8:26-28. Other entries, with corresponding verses, offer “courage in time of fear” and “peace in time of turmoil.”

This approach treats the Bible as comfort food. While there’s nothing wrong with comfort food (I like macaroni and cheese as much as the next person), an exclusive or too-frequent diet of comfort food is fattening and not very nutritious.

What’s misleading about treating the Bible as comfort food came home to me recently in my reading of Bible passages in the office of morning prayer. As an Episcopalian, I read the morning prayer office on a daily basis. It includes readings from the Psalms, the Old Testament (outside the Psalms), the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. The readings include entire Psalms and large chunks of chapters.

What struck me in this reading and praying was how much the Bible is filled with conflict and confrontation. Consider these samples from a month’s worth of readings.

From Psalm 89: “God is much to be feared in the council of the holy ones, great and terrible to all those round about him. Who is like you, Lord God of hosts? O mighty Lord, your faithfulness is all around you. You rule the raging sea and still the surging of its waves. You have crushed Rahab of the deep with a deadly wound, you have scattered your enemies with your mighty arm” (7-10).

From Psalm 97: “A fire goes before him and burns up his enemies on every side. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees it and is afraid. The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. . . . Confounded be all who worship carved images and delight in false gods! Bow down before him, all you gods” (3-5, 7).

Here is a fearsome God, of exceeding might and righteousness. This is a God who will not suffer other gods or idolatry lightly. He is ready to enter into conflict with his enemies and those who stray from his ways. It seems that the Psalms, a favorite source of biblical comfort food, are not all that tame or simply reassuring.

The fiery rhetoric of the prophets, represented in the office’s Old Testament readings, is similarly unsettling. To take just one example: “Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. . . . And it shall be like people, like priest: I will punish them for their ways, and repay them for their deeds. They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply; because they have forsaken the Lord to devote themselves to whoredom” (Hos. 4:1, 9-11).

The office’s New Testament readings for my sample month come from Acts. They are filled with Paul’s travails as he faces deadly opposition from the authorities. “I am on my way to Jerusalem,” Paul tells his fellow believers, “not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me” (20:22). Arriving in Jerusalem, Paul is accused of defiling the temple and attacked by a mob bent on killing him. He is rescued by the Roman authorities, who stop Paul’s beating but arrest him and bind him in chains (21:27-33). Not long after this a conspiracy of 40 people plot to assassinate Paul, an attempt he survives because he gets wind of the plot and forewarns his Roman captors about it.

So we see that Paul’s proclamation of the gospel stirs opposition to a lethal level. The gospel here brings not reassurance or ease of mind, but high conflict.

Of course, the same is true with Jesus and his ministry in the Gospels. In the sample month, the office's readings come from the Gospel of Luke. We find Jesus accused of "speaking blasphemies" by the Pharisees (Luke 5:21). With the scribes, they plot "so that they might find an accusation against him" (Luke 6:7). We know where this all leads: straight to the cross and Jesus' death. All the Gospels, and not just Luke, are structured around Jesus' Passion, which is a direct result of his confrontation with the authorities and their traditions.

Rather than comfort food, a diet of the Bible consists of conflict and confrontation. It is in conflict with the world as it is and points to a better but difficult and often disturbing mode of life. We read it first and foremost not to be reassured but to be awakened, to be stirred to a new life that comes with struggle—and only by way of death.