

There’s something about reading and interpreting the Bible that really gets to me. It’s intense! I have to admit that, while I memorized the books of the Bible when I was a young girl in confirmation class, and in my twenties, I spent time with some people who really liked discussing parts of the Bible and trying to understand it, most of the time, I just floated along in my little boat of Faith and accepted that God was in my life and took things as they came to me. I haven’t really spent much time studying and absorbing the meaning of Scripture before now.

In this role of emerging pastor, though, I find that I’m being encouraged to look at the Bible with new eyes. This means that I have to take some time to look at other peoples’ views and beliefs – I also have to read commentaries, research on historical perspectives and background, and reread the passages themselves within different versions. It’s mind-boggling! There are so many different opinions out in the cosmos about what the Bible means – how can we know what’s the right interpretation?

My guess is – we don’t know and I’ll even go out on a limb to say that it really doesn’t matter. More on that later...

Take the tumultuous story of one of the Bible’s most beloved characters, King David. His story is ripe with options for interpretation from many angles and belief systems. Here’s a very brief run-down on his life:

God chose him from all of Jesse’s sons – a shepherd boy with a lute, he was anointed to be king at around the age of 15.

David had literary and musical talent, which got him into the court of Saul, King of Israel – it is likely that David is the author of many of the Psalms. Being musician at the king’s court should have been an advantage for David, but Saul was either a victim of depression or laden with jealousy (resources conflict here) – and Saul spent much of his life dealing with a love/hate relationship in his own heart about David. Twice, Saul could have been killed by David during one of their odd interactions, but David chose to allow him to live – even though it meant he might have to face Saul again with the tables turned.

David was brave and creative at war. Goliath legend aside, it seems David was a capable strategist and honorable soldier who knew how to make the most of his resources. He is credited with reclaiming Judah for the people – he served in many wars throughout his life, and inspired men to give it all under his leadership.

At the age of 30, when David became King of the United Tribes of Israel and Judah, he was able to do much to bring peace and happier days for his people.

He established Jerusalem as the holy city and capital, and brought the Ark of God to it. With Bathsheba's help, he eventually fathered Solomon, who was another respected and much-loved king. Supported by David's finances and creative advice, Solomon would build an awe-inspiring temple to God to house the Ark, and would serve wisely to the end of his days.

Some say David was also a prophet of the Messiah – the Psalms attributed to his authorship often refer to suffering and persecution of the coming Christ and emphasize the fact that David was chosen by God to spread the Word. To modern-day Jews, David is revered as the one man who lifted their people up and brought them to their spiritual home – ancient worship rites and honored traditions that are still in use today can be traced to practices David designed.

After reading David's story, I can accept all these very positive things about him that help me understand that he was chosen by God to establish the lineage of Jesus, God's Son. He deserved it – he was a faithful, devoted servant and all this stuff proved it.

We all think about and admire Good David.

But, David also had faults, and he did some things that revealed a darker, doubtful and stubborn being who was pretty human after all. These characteristics and the actions that define them are also described in the Bible, but the manner in which they are interpreted seems to influence how David is perceived.

David was a murderer. Soldiers kill – it's the sad fact of war, and so David killed his share of men in battle. But he also used his power to have some men killed who got in the way of his rise to power or who kept him from more base pleasures (David was also quite passionate).

One of them was Bathsheba's husband Uriah, who was sent to the frontlines of the war so he could conveniently be killed off. Since David also committed adultery with her, (and he tried to hide their relationship) this was a double-whammy of bad judgment on his part. The two eventually married, and the child of this union died shortly after birth – Solomon came along later. Many scholars cite this event in David's life as the beginning of the turnaround in his rule – things started to go a little sour after he hooked up with Bathsheba, possibly because God was punishing David for straying from the right path.

David was an irresponsible father – one son seduced and raped a half-sister and another son plotted against him – both sons more or less got away with it, because David looked the other way. He seemed to have problems with knowing when to assert his power in instances not related to war.

David was an ineffective politician. Some of David's wheeling and dealing in the never-ending situation with Saul forced him to live in exile for years, both in and out of Judah. One time, he more or less deserted his people to fight for a king on the other side against Saul – acting on his own behalf. It seems David didn't trust that God would come through on his covenant to make him king of the Promised Land, so he took matters into his own hands. The people felt betrayed – luster surrounding David's rule tarnished.

Bad David was really bad! And Bad David is memorable because Bad David is us.

It would be easy for us to point to what we know of his life and ask, "How come God chose such a person to be so responsible for the future of the Jews? How could God think David deserved to be anointed and serve as the bloodline for our Jesus? David wasn't perfect – he wasn't a great example of how we should all be. What was God thinking???"

I believe God wisely chose someone that we could relate to, because we need to understand that it's not about being perfect in the eyes of God – it's about recognizing who's in charge, who loves us, and who has the power to forgive. What I didn't share with you was that after a visit from the prophet Nathan, who used parables to tell him the truth about himself, David realized how sinful he'd been, and he **repented with his whole heart - and God forgave him**. Some of that luster may have worn off, and maybe he wasn't quite the champion of the people he had been in his earlier days, but he lived out the rest of his life serving God the right way. David evolved into a strong man of faith, and Jesus could proudly claim lineage with him years later.

I don't know how you might feel after hearing all of this, but I find I can identify more with a whole, human David better than I can with some cardboard goodie-goodie who has no faults and all kinds of talent. I think life is all about choices, and we make great ones and unfortunate ones – but we have to live with what we choose to do – David lived like we do. He messed up – he learned, and asked forgiveness – and he moved on. This is how we should live, too.

I also find that the older I get, the more I believe in the power of forgiveness – from God for me and what I've done, and also from me toward others who've hurt me. I've come to realize that God isn't looking for the perfect Christian – and it's not for me to lay pressure on people to live up to some unrealistic standard. God accepted David – God accepts me – God accepts us all, if we ask him to be in our lives. The simplicity of this is the marvel of our time, and that so many just don't seem to understand it amazes me. So many people make a faith-life much more complicated than it needs to be...

Related to this is my earlier statement about the importance of wondering what version of God's story in the Bible is the "right" one. As I read different versions of David's story for today's message, I found that interpreting the Bible is a very personal thing – Protestants, Catholics, Jews and agnostics all seem to have their own viewpoints and criticism about what's true and worthy of discussion. It's fascinating!

Then, there are those who literally take each word to heart. I find this cumbersome, because many of the themes and timelines don't match as well as the more literal types like them to – and a part of me wonders why this is even important to so many people.

Just like identifying with a "real" David comforts me along my own journey, I feel our Bible gives us many guidelines to get through life and I absolutely trust the messages contained in it. I don't expect it to be flawless in how the stories are told – I don't expect it to be historically precise – I don't expect the quotations in it to be exactly what was said at any given time. I do, however, expect the stories and sayings to represent what God intends for me and for my life, and they should deeply speak to us believers, and help us move along in our faith. I do expect them to be God's word – but I also expect them to come to me from other people of faith who felt called to share – and their humanity had to color what they said and how they said it. I like that regular human beings found enough in what they believed to tell it their way.

While I'm very interested in others' interpretations of the Bible and its status and meanings, I'm not threatened by those interpretations that don't match what I believe is true – I don't believe the words in the Bible are highlighted with mystical angel dust that keeps them from me – I believe they are gritty with the sand of another time, and they carry God's truth as felt by real ancients who loved God as much as I do. My job is to pull them close to my heart and follow through with what those words inspire me to do.

So David's story is our story, and we know how it ends. We can be Good David and pour our best selves into what we do each day, throwing God into the spaces we occupy, and using our gifts and talents for the good of our common cause with others in this life. We can forgive people who hurt us – we can create a worthy environment to celebrate our faith – we can choose to bring justice and hope to those who feel none. We can use the Good David model to shape our actions as believers – this is worthy work!

And when our Bad David pops up, and our actions are not true to what God wants of us, we need to step back, look at ourselves, ask God to forgive us, and move on with renewed commitment to the Good David work. The goal is not perfection – the goal is honest love and respect for God, and our best effort.

Being real, like David, connects us to others and to our true selves.

Being real, like David, brings us closer to God, and that's what God wants.

We want what God wants – it's that simple.

Be real...Amen.