

**Leaning into the Text with our Lives:
A People's Approach to the Bible David R. Weiss
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I want offer you a scene from Exodus 3, the well-known tale of the burning bush. Moses *is* in the wilderness, tending sheep when his curiosity is piqued by a seemingly ordinary bush ablaze with a fire that does not consume it. More amazing still, out of the bush comes a Voice that not only promises liberation for Moses and his people, but also insists that Moses himself, over his strong objections, will play a role in bringing about mat liberation.

This Voice finally names Itself at Moses' request. Although sometimes interpreted as the evasion of a name, really the name fits this God of who promises liberation better than any other name could. Often in the Bible names are the footholds that allow us to stand in relationship with the person named. Moses' wants to know how to be in relationship with this Voice. And God - after promising to free a group of slaves, lead them to a land, provide for their life, and be their God - God says, "If you want to be in relationship with me, remember that my name is **YHWH**: I will be who I will be."

The name tells Moses at least two things. This is a God whose divinity is rooted in making and fulfilling promises; nothing more than this needs to be said. Except for this one thing more: this is a God who will not be boxed in by any limitation on the way to fulfilling those promises. This God can promise liberation because this God is Liberation, not as a concept, but as an activity, as a divine energy now directing Itself toward these people in this moment.

That's the scene. My intent is not so much to walk through it as a text - although that is surely worth doing - but rather to share some thoughts on how to approach Scripture that have emerged for me as I have lived with this scene. I've titled my reflections, "Leaning into the Text with our Lives: A People's Approach to the Bible." I suppose if you could call it a "Communal Participatory **Liberationist Hermeneutic**," but that seems a bit clumsy.

So I will identify seven essential facets of how I think a whole people might approach Scripture well, with hope, power, and integrity. Seven is a lot, I know, but I really believe each one is essential. Something gets lost if any of them is left out.

First, *your life*. When I suggest that we "lean into the text with our lives," I mean that we must claim the full authority of our lived, embodied experience. Our lives - our

joy and grief, our hope and despair, our daily rhythms and our sublime ecstasies - all of this is an arena in which God is active. The biblical text is the result of people daring to claim such authority for their lived experiences long past. It is time for us to claim such authority for our lived experience today. And with that lived experience to lean into the biblical text. I do not say that our individual lives always have final authority; we are certainly capable of being mistaken. But our lives *are* texts into which God does venture, and when we acknowledge this, we will be able to meet the biblical text as a partner in a conversation about God across time and place. It will be a conversation sometimes marked by agreement and sometimes by disagreement; sometimes by confusion and sometimes by discovery. But it will be a conversation that is richer, fuller, and *more revelatory* when our lives become part of it.

Second, *community*. I said "*your life*" a moment ago, because there is no generic, general lived experience. There is only your experience. And your experience. And your experience. We are, each one of us, utterly unique. And yet we do this leaning into the text best as a community venture, as a *People's* approach. Just as the authors of the biblical text, we, too, have biases and blind spots. We, too, are capable of imagining our personal prejudices as prophetically visionary. And we, too, are prone to read the misfortunes of life as personal judgments against us. And the best guard we have against either of these extremes is the company of each other. Thus, the best way to engage the Bible in theological conversation is in the company of others. I know it isn't always convenient. Sometimes it isn't even possible. But, honestly, the Bible is a community book, and we -together - are part of its community. I think that's true for all Christians, but for those of us who have often found the Bible used in damaging ways against us, we have all the more reasons - to protect ourselves from either arrogance or despair - to venture into its pages together.

Third, *claim the text as witness to gracious liberation and welcome*. The Bible can be made to say many things. Any good biblical theology will recognize that the (small 'w') words of the Bible are human etchings that seek to bear witness to the (big 'W') Word of God. The weight of any particular biblical text is measured by its capacity to bear witness to the (big 'W') Word. The technical term for this is "canon within the canon." It is the honest recognition that the Bible does not speak with one voice and that we have no choice but to make a faithful claim about where we hear God's Voice among the many voices that cross its pages. Part of the challenge here is that most of us are trained to hear the Voice of God in a particular - and in what is seldom a particularly life-giving way - long before **we** notice what's happening. Just as many of us internalize shame about homosexuality before we realize we've internalized shame about ourselves, many of us internalize a Voice of God that speaks primarily in rules,

demands, and judgment before we ever realize that were other Voices we might have preferred to internalize. This is a sometimes long but utterly essential transformation of perspective. Listen carefully; we *must* be able to confess that the Voice among the voices, the Word among the words, belongs to a God whose deepest Self is gracious liberation and welcome. Until we can enter the text to speak with this God, we are better off not to enter it all. Every Christian makes a choice about the Voice that holds trump value in the Bible. *We* must be exceptionally clear about the Voice we place our trust in.

Fourth, *participatory*. The God we encounter in the Bible is (or ought to be) a God of gracious liberation and welcome. But just as importantly, this God expects us to participate. In the momentous scene with the Burning Bush, God promises a whole new future to the Hebrews, but God also asks Moses to play a leading role. And while the psalmist might sing about the Lord bearing the people up on eagle's wings, there were undoubtedly a lot more **callused** feet than feathered wings involved in the Exodus. So this gracious liberation and welcome isn't a promise that we passively receive, it's a promise that we claim by participating in its unfolding. And that is not only an important theological observation, it is also an essential aspect of *how we read the Bible*. This is not someone **else's** story; it's yours. The biblical text reads differently once you have chosen to become an active participant in the gracious liberation and welcome it promises.

Fifth, *outward-moving, other-oriented*. This promise of gracious welcome and liberation is absolutely made to you. But it is also absolutely made to everyone else still longing for freedom and welcome. We don't get to keep this promise to ourselves. And the moment we do, it acts like hoarded manna: it gets sticky and foul-smelling. Another important theological observation that is also an essential aspect of *how we read the Bible*. This is not just your story; it's a story seeking to gather others into it as well. And the biblical text reads differently once you have chosen to become an active participant in the gracious liberation and welcome it promises to others besides yourself.

Sixth, *poetic & creative*. When we lean into the **text** with our lives we *will* have unexpected moments of insight. We will see places where our lives, our experiences, our embodiment, touch the text with fresh insight. But this will happen more often if we can see the places where this touching happens indirectly, evocatively, but often still very profoundly. All of us are capable of noticing these places of subtle touch, but often we are blessed if there is a poetic voice in the company with whom we read (or in our library) to help us see these connections. Something similar is true when we read the Bible as participants in the promise of widening and gracious welcome and liberation. Because we are continuing this story in the texts of our own lives, we must read with a

particular readiness to be surprised, with a particular creative spirit to see where new pathways to and fresh possibilities for liberation and welcome lie.

Seventh: *open ended*. It goes without saying, and yet it *must* be said because the Christian tradition has an unhappily consistent record of thinking that *this time* it has given the biblical text a definitive reading once and for all. No. Every time a new life or new experience is brought into the conversation the reading will be different. Every time a new manner of oppression appears - or a new moment of liberation is realized — the reading will be different, Patterns will emerge, yes. But it seems clear to me that God preferred the tabernacle to the Temple as a dwelling, because the Tabernacle walls could billow with the Wind. We should always read the Bible with a breeze in the room just to remind us of the billowing Wind.

I call this "A People's Approach to the Bible" because it isn't scholarly or specialized. It's communal, public, and participatory. We need the best creative scholarship we can find, but just as much we need models that enable us to meet the Bible as we are and as it is. I hope this model makes a contribution in that direction, empowering us to "lean into the biblical text with our own lives."

Discussion Questions for David Weiss's Presentation: Leaning into the Text with our Lives: A People's Approach to the Bible

In my presentation I identified seven facets to this approach:

- (1) bringing your life to the text;
- (2) reading together as a community;
- (3) claiming the text as witness to God's gracious liberation and welcome;
- (4) reading while *participating* in God's gracious liberation and welcome;
- (5) reading while *extending* God's gracious liberation and welcome outward to others;
- (6) reading with poetic and creative energy in seeing connections and opportunities;
- (7) open-ended - no reading is **once-and-for-all**.

#1 Thinking about these facets, which one or two of them strike you as being most important *for you* to remember when you approach the Bible? Why?

#2 In Exodus 3 Moses has his life-altering encounter with God in the form of a burning bush. Speaking with poetic suggestiveness on another occasion, I observed that this image of a bush that hosts a flame without being consumed is evocative for us. If bushes can host God without being consumed, can bodies? Can bodies - even sexual bodies - like burning bushes, host the presence of God without being consumed? Drawing on your own lived experience, in what ways is that suggestion revelatory, liberating, challenging, or perhaps problematic for you? As you listen to the others at your table share their responses, notice how your reaction is shaped by the other voices in your reading community (i.e., at your table).