

“Read It and Weep (Not)!
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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Who among you have caught on to the word-game craze called Wordle? Just 2 weeks ago my sister Alice texted me a link and I was hooked. In the days following, I saw social media come ablaze with people reporting how many tries it took them to guess the mystery, 5-letter word of the day. If you haven't played Wordle yet, the premise is simple. You are given 5 empty letter boxes, and you guess one word. If you guess the right letter in the right position, the letter box turns green. If you guess the right letter but in the wrong position, the box turns yellow. Any letter that you guessed that is not useful turns dark gray—remember NOT to use those letters again. You get 6 tries, and when you get to that turn and all your boxes turn green, there is great rejoicing.

In a world of apps and networks that flash banners and ads at you, always trying to link you to something else, Wordle feels remarkably simple. It only uses two colors plus gray and black. There are no ads. It's free. They don't take your personal info. And, it only allows you to play once per day, so you can't get too obsessive about it. The Washington Post called it a 3-minute brain snack.

Our history of trying to understand and interpret how God speaks to us feels kind of like Wordle. Some parts of the bible I read, and I think that people were blindly grasping for meaning, using whatever tools they could access, and they really, really missed the target. Still, somehow, a longing settled within them to know that God's word was out there. Time after time after time, they would try to discern holy meaning in the world around them: the earth and heavens, birth and death, rulers and wars, love and justice. Sometimes, the meaning was right in front of their faces but they could not see it. Sometimes, they found and embraced it and that word lit them up.

In the period when Ezra served as scribe and priest to Israel, they had only very recently returned from a period of exile in Babylon for 70 years. Their city, their temple, their walls, had lain in ruins for many years. After their years of separation, they had to learn how to be a people together again. They had only just rebuilt the walls to Jerusalem when someone remembered there was a book that had once bound them together as a people, the Torah. Coming from their fragmented places and experiences, they called upon Ezra to read the Torah to them at the water gate. You should know that among that crowd of people, almost all of them were illiterate. They did not have the option of reading the scrolls for themselves; only someone as educated as a scribe could do that. It took from early morning to midday—let's say six or seven hours- for Ezra to read the text to them. Imagine that these are words that this

generation may not have even heard before; perhaps the generation before had forgotten them, or rebuked them; Their faith had lost hope; in their depression, they told their captors, when asking for a song about their God, “How can we sing a song of our Lord in a strange land?” Perhaps knowing the harsh reality that the Torah is a story that did not keep them protected or safe from Babylonian conquest, they simply stopped telling it.

But this gathering of people wanted to know; they wanted to hear. And as Ezra read from the scrolls, to men, to women, to all who could hear, he held their attention. Some heard with understanding. Others heard and needed interpretation to really get it, and so the Levite priests helped them grapple with its meaning. As they heard, they lifted up their hands and shouted, Amen, Amen! And pointed their faces to the ground and bowing in worship. These words? They stirred the people to weeping. We are not sure why. Did they weep because they realized how much had been lost? Did they weep because they were confronted with injustices they had simply accepted, only to find that God calls injustice unacceptable? Did they weep with joy, that finally, at last, the right words settled into the right places, and they finally lit up?

We don't know why they wept, but we do know that Ezra responded along with Nehemiah, their governor, “Do not weep!” For this was an occasion for celebration, to drink wine and enjoy rich foods and share an abundance with the poor.

We do not yet even know the ways COVID has shaped our individual bodies, with some combination of sickness, caution, or fear. We do not yet know the extent that the bodies of our communities, with periods of isolation, categorizing what is clean and unclean, safe and unsafe behavior or gatherings, we as a church will need a time of reckoning. We do not know yet what it means to us as humans to have a span of time, or waves of time, where we do not touch one another. We do not see smiling faces. We will need a time to come together again and ask, what does it mean, especially in times we have grown used to being so fragmented, to be part of the body of Christ? We will need to ask, what is the purpose of the church in these changing times? What does it mean to us and to the world today?

When Jesus stepped up to the pulpit in the Jerusalem Temple, he proclaimed a purpose. It was his first public speech. In it, he laid out his mission, and the mission he saw for the people of God at that point in time. It wasn't a new purpose. He was quoting from a very old purpose, already shared in the scroll from Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” For Jesus, out of all the texts of the Hebrew scriptures, those were the words that lit him up with passion and meaning and sense of purpose.

If asked to share what our purpose, together as people of God might be, I wonder what you would say. From time to time I go through the exercise of trying to articulate what I believe that purpose might be, and it does change through time and experience. I would welcome the chance to listen to what *you* think that purpose might be, and share what I understand it to be, and wonder and pray together. But the words Jesus quoted are good ones, and always worth

returning to when we feel like we have lost our purpose, or when our ability to act as the body of Christ feels disconnected.

The bible is a complex book; at times its speakers show questionable ethics. Read as a history it is mostly unprovable, if not flat-out wrong. Although Ezra's reading of the Torah specifically includes both men and women, our bible, mostly put to page by men, leaves us guessing at the lives and voices and faith of all those people who were not men. The bible is as flawed as we are. And yet, in our Presbyterian tradition this is the book we use as our basis for worshiping God. Even if sometimes the bible makes me mad, I love it with a gentle compassion, because I know it is the result of thousands of years of people faithfully grasping for words to describe their experience of God. Sometimes they get it wrong. And sometimes, they get it right, and it lights up with wisdom, and love, and it opens us up to God. Its aching beauty can make me weep. I fall in love with its characters, over and over again, and they become conversants with me as I go through life today. Its story reminds me that I am part of a much larger story, a story God is in fact not done telling yet. It is our common document we share, with Christians today of every nation and every tongue, and with Christians of every generation going back to Jesus himself, Jesus, whose faith and teaching and life was a *continuation* of the Hebrew bible which shaped him and continues to shape us, as it shapes our Jewish siblings in faith.

As this story continues, we might feel like we are grasping for meaning. But if, instead of grasping for air and lamenting our emptiness, we reach for one another, we reach for the poor and those whom Jesus always noticed along the margins, we might find a clearer picture of what God's love and mercy looks and feels like. Thankfully, God's mercy gives us more than 6 tries to get it right.

From Spirit to story, from story to seekers, from seekers to seers,
from seers to scribes, from scribes to scrolls, from scrolls to scripture,
from scripture to screen, from screen to sighing, from sighing to salvation,
God is there. She shows up to shape her love and care into something we might sense.
We ask the Sacred: where we are scattered, sew us together and strengthen our seams.
Sustain us as one body. **Scheme** with us as to what we might become. **Save** us. Amen.