

Treasure Chest

“It’s where you can hear the voice again.”

Deuteronomy 10:1-5

God’s Thinkers and Tinkers: taking care of God’s stuff #4

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Treasure

There is a large chest like a foot locker that sits in my mother’s basement. It’s been there since my Grandmother’s death 30 years ago, when it was brought from her house to my parents’. In it are all kinds of fascinating things.

I have opened it and reached into its layers to find some of my grandparents’ possessions that have been preserved for safe keeping. There are certificates of my grandmother’s nursing education and my grandfather’s military papers. I have discovered cards and letters from relatives and friends, and pictures taken at different moments of their lives. There, on the tray that occupies the upper layer of the chest, are some of my grandfather’s and grandmother’s watches and pins: probably not worth much in the world of exchange but priceless to my sister and me. There also is a hard-bound journal that has a few entries written by my grandfather in 1918, soon after he was married to my grandmother, when he was younger, even, than our son is today. He was a young man clad in the wool uniform of a soldier, on his way across the Atlantic and marching from one battle to the next through France and Germany. One of the final entries he wrote was simply this: *November 11, 1918. The War ended this morning at 11:00.* When I read that, it was almost like hearing the guns cease and seeing the relief on war-weary soldiers’ faces.

Of all the things my grandparents did and said, this chest holds some of the most precious stuff of their material legacy. It contains things that identify them, offering a picture of their looks, their thoughts, and their yearnings. It even holds their words, which when read, allow their voices to rise once again.

To me, it’s a treasure chest.

Contents priceless, holding gems that extend through time the essence of who they were: the true treasure chests of the world are not to be found buried in beach sand and holding mere pieces of eight. They are the containers of our heritage and our compasses. They hold the voices that give us substance and direction for the future.

This is how the treasure chest that was the ancient Ark of the Covenant should be understood.

Some might say that Moses confronted God in the burning bush and a person standing 20 miles off could have heard the thunderous voice when God spoke. So, they might say it sounded on the mountain when the 10 Commandments of the Covenant were given. Others would say that the voice is known inwardly, when the heart comes in tune with turns of life events; or in dreams that provide insight so profound you'd doubt that a person could understand it on their own. In any case, if God has spoken at all, it's been the conviction of the faithful through the ages that it was not a momentary word: said once in time and space to make for just a brief encounter. From our earliest history, the God's people have claimed the continued presence of God's word in written form.

There it was: etched into the tablets of stone and contained in the treasure chest Ark: God's Word once spoken on mountain high present to be heard again...and again...and again. Even after the Temple was destroyed and the people were carried into activity and the ark was gone, it has still been written on the paper of scrolls and books. Treasure chest Ark, now treasure chest Book: within is the legacy of the Lord.

The Word of God

Someone concludes the reading of the scripture in the sanctuary; then looks up from the page and says, "The Word of God for the People of God." And depending on how well the people of God have been prepared, the response that comes from them is "Thanks be to God. Amen."

Some friends asked me about saying this. "Why do we do that? After all, not *all* the Bible is the Word of God;" they said, "and who knows what is and what isn't God's Word?"

I wouldn't be taking my friend seriously if I didn't recognize that they were asking what a lot of thinking people wonder. I also wouldn't be taking the Bible seriously if I didn't read it closely enough to see the very things that give rise to their question.

For instance, you can read one point of view in one spot, and read quite a different point of view in another. For instance, the Gospel according to John shows Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple near the very beginning of his ministry while Matthew, Mark, and Luke describes this as taking place near the very

of it on Palm Sunday, like it's the last straw for the leaders. Some books like Numbers and I Samuel present God as one who demands that Israel annihilate enemies. Jesus, in all four Gospels teaches to love your enemies, turn the other cheek when you're hit, and forgive those who wrong you. Some people even suggest that the God of the Old Testament is completely different than the one depicted in the New.

So, for some who read it, the Bible seems imperfect and inconsistent: hardly like what you'd expect if you're looking for a single, uniform message from a perfect deity.

How do you make sense of its power to change lives? Like a man who said that his life was filled with a lot of regrets and disbelief until he was alone in a hotel room one night. He was feeling lost and down, so he pulled open the drawer of the night stand and discovered a Bible left by the Gideon's. He opened it and began to read and the power of God's love and forgiveness washed over him. Because of the Word, he asked Jesus to be his Lord and every aspect of his life was rescued: saved. He'd opened his treasure chest, you see.

How do you understand the power of the Book when it gives hope to millions? How can you say that it's not the very Word of God when its stories have shaped whole societies through history and set us on a course of demanding justice and peace throughout the world?

Maybe it isn't the kind of writing that requires precision and consistency to speak for God. Maybe it can be a collection of accounts about how God did things that made a difference and a record of the various ways God's action was understood. Maybe it includes different kinds of writing like history and instruction and poetry. And maybe you have to pull it all together: words spoken by God, alone; and words written by people who were inspired by God in their thinking and sharing, thousands of minds and hearts beating together in the power of God's Spirit. Then it speaks with messages too deep for us to fully explain. Treasures in a chest which has moved on from being an ark and now has a cover.

Conversation. That's what this started out to be. This passage in Deuteronomy is out of a story about God speaking to Moses who is supposed to hand the message over to the people. This is God's first gift to the people he's just saved from bondage in Egypt. And it's a gift that is supposed to shape them into the people of God they were intended to be. So God gave them the Ten Commandments, the Law to live by that set them on a way to worship God and get along with each other like they belonged to God and belonged together.

When Moses came down from the mountain he discovered that they were already breaking the covenant in the worst way before he could even tell them about it. So in his anger, which was probably also God's anger, he broke the tablets. They were no more. Now, God presses to keep the dialogue going and speaks to Moses again. He says, "Make a couple more tablets of stone and I'll write it up again. Then make an ark, a box of acacia wood, a treasure chest, and place within it this Law etched in stone.

This is the beginning of God's conversation with Israel. From now on, instead of making idols out of wood or stone and bowing before them in effort to get the gods to do as they say, they will do the opposite.¹ They will come to the treasure chest: where they may hear *God* speak and *they* will endeavor to be and do as *God* says.

The Word of God for the people of God. And they will discover life in those words; in those words they will discover God saying something new and vital to them.

Care for the Word

So now I hold this Book. I shudder to think of its power to speak. The treasures it holds! And to think that you and I are made to care for it: God's thinkers and tinkers in possession of the stories and directions that shape life and change the world!

May you venture to open it and be numbered among spirits who come alive with the richness of the Word. May the men and women whom we count as heroes of the Faith speak to you about the relentless love of God. May their experiences become your lessons to learn and share; and may their stories come to shape who you are and train you to watch and listen for the voice of the Holy One who still lives today.

¹ Ronald E. Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* vol. II. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1998. p 363.