

GROWING *Together*

10th Anniversary Series

ON READING OUR BIBLE

Our Bible, its books of history, prophecy, poetry, and correspondence, grew out of the experience and life of God's people. Led by the Holy Spirit, the people of God told their stories, expressed their fears, confessed their faith.

Each book, and often each passage, of the Bible has its own history. Ordinarily, an event happens. And then:

- #1 - the story is told and retold;
- #2 - circumstances prompt the writing down of the story;
- #3 - we read and interpret the passage in the light of our experience and the faith of the Church;
- #4 - but the possibility remains that a new meaning is still to be realized or discovered.

During Lent, we read in John's Gospel the words "the Son of Man is to be lifted up" (3:14, 12:32). The imagery of an obscure Old Testament event, Moses' placing a metal snake on a pole in order that by looking at it the Israelites in the wilderness could be saved after being bitten by a snake (Numbers 21:4-9), becomes the basis of understanding not only Jesus' death on the cross but also his enthronement in glory. John's usage of Old Testament images (without even specifically referring to them) shows how the snake and tree from stories of the Creation, Fall, and Exodus assist us in interpreting the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now let us go through the above steps. From the "event" (in this instance, the human condition of sinfulness) comes the story of the Garden of Eden (#1), which the Israelites cherish over similar, yet different, stories from other religions that also involve serpents or snakes on the pole, and together these stories form other religions that also involve serpents or snakes and trees. Another event occurs in the wilderness that puts the snake on the pole, and together these stories become part of the written record of God's people (#2). For centuries these stories were interpreted by prophets, rabbis, and the people (#3), but in Christ a whole new possibility of interpretation (#4) came into being.

Bible stories are retold and understood in the light of the life of the community. Must we be professionals to understand the Bible? Hardly! We learn from the teaching and preaching of the Church, the people of the Book. By availing ourselves of several English translations and comparing them, by reading the footnotes in our Bibles, and by using at least one widely accepted Study Bible, anyone can begin to capture the shades of meaning and levels of interpretation that a text suggests. In joint Bible studies, each of us brings personal experience to the interpretation. We learn from each other.

Our understanding of God's revelation is dynamic, ever expanding as new events are seen through God's word already received. In Hebrew, *dabar*, meaning "word," carries this sense of dynamic creativity. To call the Bible the Word of God is to sense this creative force. The Bible is not a systematic or static statement giving factual information. Our Bible calls us to be in dialogue with its stories, its poetry, its laws. The Bible also calls us to be in dialogue with others, not only of our own faith community, but of other faiths. We need to be asking each other: What does that Bible passage mean or say to you today? We need also to be willing to listen to their replies!

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For reflection and discussion:

- Something may be true but might not really have happened. What does this mean in terms of the Bible?
- Which parts of the Bible are the most helpful? Which parts cause you the most trouble?

The 1994 Growing Together Series was written cooperatively by: Rita Gillies (Roman Catholic), Dr. Chris Lind (Anglican), Rev. Bernard de Margerie (Roman Catholic), Rev. Dr. Ken Peterson (Lutheran) and Rev. Betty Lynn Schwab (United).

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