

## Faith and History: When the Church Has Gotten It Wrong (and Right)

Part of the **"With All Your Mind"** Sermon Series

Psalm 90

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"Let me tell you a story." That's history at its broadest definition, perhaps. Of course, it's not just about the story — history studies our past stories, analyzes them, seeks to understand them, in part so that we might have a better understanding of the story of our lives unfolding before us every day.

That's what history does, but of course, that's what faith does, too.

So let me start with a story today — a story borrowed from Diana Butler Bass, a professor and theologian who has a PhD in church history. She tells the story<sup>1</sup> of having dinner with a friend. In catching up on life, the conversation turned toward Dr. Bass' work, and how that is born out of her commitment to the church. "I don't understand how you still can be a Christian," her friend said. "How is a historian, of all people, able to be a Christian?"

"I know it isn't the easiest thing these days," Bass said, "but I just can't get away from Jesus. I love Jesus and his teachings."

"Jesus?" her friend said. "Oh, I don't have any trouble with Jesus. It's all the stuff that happened after Jesus that makes me mad." In other words, a lot of the stuff that Christians have done in the name of their Christ, no small amount of it in contradiction to his teachings.

Her friend's comment has remained with Bass, mostly, she says, because she has heard countless others say similar things. She says, "Jesus fascinates millions, but Christianity, the religion that began with Jesus, leaves countless people cold. What happened after Jesus —

oppression, heresy trials, schisms, inquisitions, witch hunts, pogroms, and religious wars — witnesses to much human ambition and cruelty ... this dismal historical record surely was not what Jesus intended as he preached a merciful kingdom based on the transformative power of God's love." As a result, she says, "For spiritual searchers and secular people alike, the Christian God is not worth the trouble of the questions that history raises."

Christians, of course, have wrestled with this. And with the admission that I am oversimplifying things, I think the Christian response to these questions swings to two extremes.

One extreme is to claim that human history is not God's fault. People have free agency, and the church in the past failed to live up to Jesus' ideals. History then becomes, essentially, a litany of Christian mistakes. This line of thinking often results in a willingness to toss out all tradition in hopes of doing better in the future.

The other extreme sees God in every moment of human history. God controls history, according to this line of thinking, a sort of divine marionette moving every person and action. Natural and human evils, then, are an expression of God's judgement. History then becomes a fearful, moralizing lesson for people to get right with God, lest they face terrible consequences in this life and beyond.

History as a litany of mistakes, or history as a long, fear-based, moralizing lesson.

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*

Neither extreme feels particularly helpful to me, nor particularly faithful.

Now please don't get me wrong — especially since I suspect we, Shandon, by and large are more likely to swing to the first extreme rather than the second, let me say clearly: when an institution as powerful as the Church perpetrates wrongs, an honest accounting and genuine repentance is needed. In our own Presbyterian tradition, a few in particular come to mind.

There was a day when Presbyterians offered the most biblically sensitive, theologically sophisticated arguments for how one could follow Jesus and own slaves, at the very same time.

And there was a day when Presbyterians would decide that no, women really shouldn't preach, at least not yet, because of all the trouble it would cause.

And there was a day when Presbyterians would deny equal standing in the church to any LGBTQIA person, no matter how much of their life had been devoted to Christ and his church.

Those were not our best days. About these and many other things across all manner of Christian traditions, the church has been wrong. The church has been dangerously, terribly, wrong. And when the church has been wrong, especially in ways that have threatened or compromised the humanity of any of God's children, the church needs to own it. In part because it is necessary for healing, but also because that is the only way we have any chance of learning from our history.

We are nothing without our history. "Because while the church has not gotten it completely right, it hasn't gotten it completely wrong, either. When we take a realistic view of our history, we can see that we have, at times, embodied the heart of our founder."<sup>2</sup> A realistic view of our history, though, a realistic view of any history, across all ages and disciplines,

means coming to terms with the fact of limitations and finitude. Not one of us can tell every story. We see the world through our own eyes, and there's nothing wrong with that. We just have to remember that's what happens, though, because every time we choose which stories are told, we by default also choose which stories are not.

In preparing for this sermon, I was reading an essay about "The 10 Worst Moments in Church History." It was a real delight, let me tell you. But I was slogging through it when I came to number 4, which read: "The fourth worst moment in Church History was the Reformation."

Now, I never want to assume too much about the knowledge anyone brings into this room, so as a reminder: without the Reformation, the Presbyterian Church wouldn't exist. The Reformation in the 1500s split the church. It had all been one Roman church, one Roman catholic church. Part of that church split away during that time, and become the Protestant church, of which we today are a part. So from our point of view, the Reformation may not have been perfect, but it doesn't belong anywhere on a "worst moments" list of church history.

The explanation of the entry began this way, though. It read, "Since we are Catholics, we have to believe the Reformation was bad."

Now, it is not my intent here to debate the merits of Catholicism vs Protestantism. It's simply to point out — If you want to come up with a list of the 10 worst moments in church history or even the 10 best moments in church history, well, it depends who you ask.

The same is true of a holiday we observe this weekend — Columbus Day. From an American-European perspective, Columbus discovered America. That assessment would, of course, come as a complete surprise to all of the indigenous peoples who had been calling

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<sup>2</sup> Again, Diana Butler Bass

that same land their home for years upon years.

History is often told from the perspective of the most powerful, because they have the opportunity to shape the narrative. We do well to remember that, because when God entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ, we learned a powerful lesson — that we are to listen to the lost and the least; that the first shall be last and the last shall be first; that those who are passed by, they shall be lifted up. If you only consider the so-called creme-of-the-crop, you're missing out on a big part of Jesus' teaching.

The Society of Biblical Literature, an incredibly nerdy gathering of thousands of biblical scholars and historians that I can refer to that way because I have attended more than once myself, has a whole track of their study dedicated to what they have called "The Bible From the Under-Side."

That is, a whole swath of academic and ecclesial study dedicated to reading and hearing texts from perspectives different from those that dominated the field for so long. It lifts up voices long overlooked, or even long silenced. And it has enriched and expanded our whole understanding of biblical interpretation in so many ways, it's unquantifiable.

This line of thinking is what helps us marvel even more at the way Mary says "yes" when the angel Gabriel visits her. Because for ages and ages, the standard interpretation was simply that, of course she would say yes. She was young and in a precarious position and in no way would stand up to God's own angel. But if we consider the story from her perspective, if we consider, for even a minute, that she could have had enough agency to say no, her "yes" becomes all the more astonishing, all the more miraculous.

It took female biblical scholars to offer this possibility. Because we all see through our own eyes.

This is true in history, and in scripture. There's always more than one point of view.

Which, when it comes to reckoning with the painful parts of church history, we acknowledge them, but we do not let them define the church. Because if we throw out tradition, even the complicated parts, we miss out on the moments when history helps us write the story of our present, and our future.

That's why Howard Zinn wrote *A People's History of the United States*, and why Diana Butler Bass wrote *A People's History of Christianity*, telling the story of our history through the stories of individuals.

Because while the dominant story is that of the Inquisition, there is also the story of Peter Waldo, who gave his money to the poor and preached a grace so extreme, he gathered enough followers in South France to defeat the Inquisition when it came that way.

And while the dominant story is that the Christian church did not stand up as strongly as it could have against the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust, there is also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, along with a group of likeminded others, plotted the overthrow and end of Hitler based on their theological convictions.

And they are but two of countless others, which means that even when the church's past suggests we have been devoid of God, looking from another perspective reminds us that God is ever-present, that God continues to work through people in all circumstances. And that includes people like you and me. That is how history beckons and invites us into it.

Embracing our history from every angle is actually what allows us to see, and hear, and follow when God shows up, and says, "Look, I am doing a new thing," yet again.