

“We’ve spooned up thin gruel.”

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“Third Grade Thinking”

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It happened at my college reunion banquet. It happens often. She was a classmate’s wife who discovered that the fellow in the Hawaiian shirt sitting next to her was a preacher. Me. Before I finished my chicken leg, the questions started. She said she struggles with her Sunday school Bible stories. How could they get all those animals on Noah’s Ark? Did Eve come from Adam’s rib? What about creation and evolution? Where did Cain find his wife? What does the number 666 mean?

In her case (bless her), she had a genuine interest in learning. Most don’t. Shallow criticisms of the Bible from persons who criticize out of their own shallow assumptions are boring. Atheism itself is funny. I’ve never met an atheist yet. How can you deny the existence of something nobody can prove? Enjoy the irony. If we can prove God, then God must be less than us. Who wants a God you can prove, because then that which we call God is a thing, a noun, rather than the abiding truth, goodness, most loving, all just, pure spirit, and ultimate reality which is beyond and within all. God isn’t a being, but being itself. I can no more prove God than I can prove I love my children. I can show it, but that’s not proof.

I’ve never met an atheist yet. I’ve met people who flirt that they are atheists. What they really reject are narrow forms of religious expression or clumsy and cartoonish ways God has been represented. Most folks who criticize religion actually criticize what they assume about religion. This is what 4th century Augustine realized. Augustine, one of the fiercest church critics who became one of its fiercest adherents, confessed how he ignorantly dismissed the Bible as silly, irrational, and coarse. Augustine confessed how “passages had been death when taken literally but when they were explained in their spiritual meaning I began to blame myself.” He also admitted that he attacked doctrines of the church, which, after his conversion, he discovered really weren’t doctrines of the church.

Approach the Bible howsoever you wish – literally or metaphorically, a human creation or divinely inspired -- so long as you listen for the proclamation. What messages do the stories conjure in your imagination? If the Bible doesn’t change you, you aren’t reading it right. The Bible is more a friend than an instruction manual.

Here’s a few teasers. Noah’s ark isn’t a boat, it’s a box. How long does it take for bodies to decompose in water? Adam is a pun on the Hebrew word for earth, an earthling. Out of earthling comes male and female. Adam and Eve is a saga portraying children growing up and become self-aware. 666 is the decoder ring number for Nero Caesar. Cain found his wife because humans were already all around the Garden in the land of Eden. Genesis is a modern work, composed 400 years before Jesus. Moses didn’t write the first five books of the Old Testament.

Part of this confusion is our own fault since the heart and soul of church is Sunday school, Bible study. We can run the risk of failing to mature past a third grade, pop-sickle stick puppet understanding of the Bible. There’s nothing wrong with third grade, if you’re a third grader. We’ve spooned up thin gruel. We delight in Christianity lite. The Jeopardy category was Bible Books. Only one correct answer. Low expectancy is a sin.

We attack what our ignorance or pride finds threatening. Most who scoff at certain Bible texts scoff from third grade thinking. They don't take time to listen. They want to hear what they want to hear. Just give yourself a chance to delve deeper into these Bible stories. Listen to our Bible podcast now on Youtube or via Grove Presbyterian Church's Facebook page.

Everyone is religious. Even those who call themselves atheists have an ultimate concern, a god. The question is: Which is your god? What we prefer are gods we can manipulate, who serve us. A friend returned to Christianity after realizing his experiments searching for the meaning of life were about bending the world to his will. Christianity, he realized, seeks to serve the divine will as revealed in Jesus. I don't believe in Bible. I believe by the Bible.

And as much as my faith cannot embrace Biblical fundamentalism, if I've been mugged and left on the side of the road, I'd rather they were near instead of the cynics.