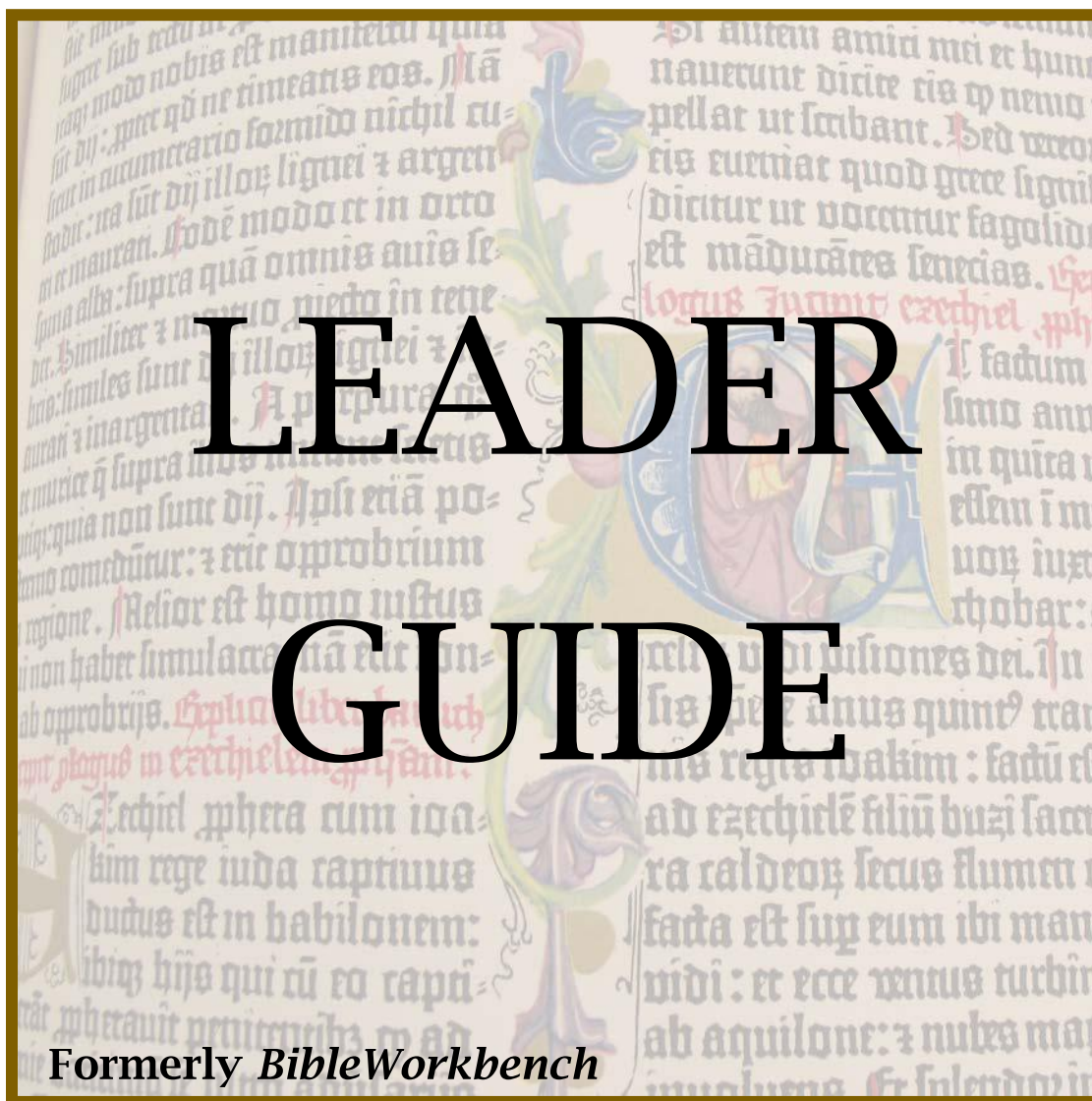


READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Exploring our story through biblical stories



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READING BETWEEN THE LINES ~ LEADER GUIDE

In *The Secret Sits* Robert Frost writes:

We dance in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

The name of the dance is MAIEUTIC. From the Greek word for MIDWIFE, “maieutic” describes a learning process at the heart of the Educational Center programs and at the core of Reading Between The Lines (formerly BibleWorkbench).

The Reading Between The Lines leader has two primary tasks as a maieutic teacher. The first is to introduce the biblical narrative and to keep the narrative, not any interpretation of the narrative, the central focus of the group. The leader delivers the text without interpretation or commentary.

Second, the leader must equip the group to engage the text themselves, as individuals in a community. The midwife leader does his/her work by posing questions that arise out of the text, questions that are between the lines, in the gaps, where the spaces invite the reader into conversation with the story. Participants are invited to respond as spontaneously as possible from as deep a place within as they are able.

Frost describes what happens in a Reading Between The Lines session when people gather to sit in a circle or ring and suppose, wonder, explore, excavate, and seek while the Secret that is the lectionary text for the day sits in the middle and knows. It is a dance not intent on finding out what the story *really means*. It is, rather, intended to engage the Secret of the Holy or Divine Mystery of the story that can never be fully known or captured or defined or held hostage or even understood. Werner Erhardt once said UNDERSTANDING IS THE BOOBY PRIZE. Understanding the text is not the same thing as having it inform, invade, ignite and change us. On the contrary, understanding quite often ensures that nothing ever happens below the head.

Walter Ong, a Jesuit professor at St. Louis University, suggests that the proper question is not WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN but rather HOW IS THIS TEXT AN EVENT IN MY LIFE? “Meaning” questions go right to the head and encourage abstractions, theologizing and endless debate. When one discovers how the story is happening around and between and inside oneself, the world tilts and life can be reinvented.

Reading Between The Lines is lectionary based in the sense that every Sunday a text is chosen from the Hebrew Scripture and New Testament writing from The Revised Common Lectionary. The exploration begins with the text “out there and back then” and through three simple questions moves to “inside and all around us”. The three simple questions are:

- WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE TEXT? Who are the characters? What can we know or suppose about them? What is going on between them? How do they reflect the religious, political, social and even economic struggles of that day?
- HOW IS THE STORY OR TEXT HAPPENING AROUND US? How is it happening in world or nation, office, school, church, neighborhood, day care center, around the corner or over the dining room table? Where do you find it on the front page of your newspaper or on the evening TV? How are the figures familiar and the tensions alive?
- HOW IS THIS STORY YOUR STORY? What do you know of the story happening between you and people who matter to you? How is the story a drama going on within you where you meet the same characters engaged in similar life and death struggles?

“What is happening in the text?” is the door into the story found both on the page and in our world. It is essential, therefore, that the group begin by entering into the story giving the story time and room enough to come to life in them. It is as if the story or text is a world of its own into which we are privileged to enter rather than stand outside and observe. This story world can be thought of as a “bubble” to walk around in, explore, circumambulate, discover. It is within the bubble that those in the circle begin to recognize and feel the story and its reality as part of them. All the questions in the bubble arise out of and address the dynamic of the story or textual images and metaphors. Only after the characters, events, truth between the lines of text or story are aroused and heated up as in a retort will the following questions about the world and self have the energy they require to work.

The assumption is that the story is alive even if sleeping, dormant inside each of us. The Reading Between The Lines process and materials are designed to awaken a basic patterning that is universal as well as scriptural-- an elemental patterning that brings energy and new vision to what is happening in the story as we experience it in our lives. Each story invites a choice for greater consciousness and awareness of how one relates to God and the Mystery. Each poses challenging questions that bear a cost and promise to be heard or ignored.

Lectinary choices that lend themselves best to this method are narrative stories from Hebrew Scripture and the life and teachings of Jesus in the gospels. When there is no story line, a text can nevertheless be rich when its symbols and images offer metaphors that easily bridge ancient Israel and 21st century America. Epistles challenge the circle to wonder what is hidden between the lines of a letter that was written in the context of 1st century struggles that may well translate into and express contemporary concerns.

A Reading Between The Lines session devoted to the Lazarus story in John’s Gospel explores what is happening between Mary, Martha and Jesus at the death of Lazarus and how Jesus, rather than going into the tomb to rescue or drag Lazarus out, calls to him in the dark tomb and invites him to decide whether or not he will stay dead or

risk coming back to life. Choosing life, Lazarus appears, still bound by grave wraps and is given by Jesus into the hands of his friends who then have the responsibility of unbinding him and setting him free.

Such a session continues by looking around our world at those who are walking dead in tombs that hold them captive – the captivity of poverty and disease, of addictions and violence, of wealth and religious bigotry, of shame, guilt and denial, of depression and aging and loneliness. Who cares and whose voice calls to them to come out? How are they deciding? Who are those waiting and willing to welcome the bewildered Lazarus, unbind him and set him free?

And how is such a story our story? What is the tomb that holds us hostage? Where are those dark places between and within us that keep us dead? Who around or what inner voice inside calls us to choose between staying dead or coming alive? Who are the friends nearby or within us who have the power to unbind and set us free? How are we making these choices for and against Life every day? This day? What might be the cost and the promise of hearing that voice? Of coming out and starting over and beginning again? What cost and promise is there in simply staying dead another day or year or forever?

Rather than a discussion group talking about such questions, the dance in the circle invites each person to respond to the text as spontaneously as possible from as deep a place within as they are able. Reading Between The Lines guidelines are often posted on the wall or table as reminders:

- **“I Statements” are encouraged.**
The goal is to explore how you respond to the text. This is not to discount tradition and the scholars, but rather to discover that how you hear, feel, think about, and react to the text is of primary importance.
- **Pauses between responses are important.**
A subtle reminder: we are not in a discussion group. The aim is to engage the text, not one another. What we hear others say can be crucial. Why they say what they do is a conversation that can take place over coffee later.
- **Our goal is not a right answer, consensus or agreement.**
The richness and value of the experience may depend upon the very opposite.
- **There is no expectation that you defend, explain or justify anything you say.**
Which may be hard to remember...even if you are doing this alone.
- **Silence is part of the process.**
Alone this may simply be about taking your time and allowing some in between spaces. In the silence there is a chance not only to ponder what others have said, but to hear the echo of your own voice.
- **You can change your mind as often as you like.**

“How do I know what I think until I hear myself say it?” In this process, once you hear what you have said, feel free to change your mind not once but over and over again.

- **Honestly try the non-verbal exercises.**
This is not an art or theater competition. Silence your inner critic and be prepared to be amazed and enlightened.
- **What is said in the group stays in the group.**
In Reading Between The Lines we touch sacred ground in ourselves and each other. Have the respect for the group and for yourself to honor that confidentiality.

Reading Between The Lines is mailed/emailed in six seasonal issues throughout the year: Advent, Epiphany, Lent and Easter, and three issues in Pentecost. Every Sunday in the six issues includes:

- A **biblical text** from the lectionary.
- **Entering the Story: Themes and Motifs:** Some brief contextual notes to help you get started. A placement of where this story belongs in the flow of the larger Bible story. Historical background to help you understand the story better.
- **Exploring the Story:** A series of questions that develop the three overarching questions of WHAT IS HAPPENING? HOW IS THE STORY HAPPENING IN THE WORLD AROUND YOU? And HOW IS THIS STORY YOUR STORY?
- **Between The Lines:** Contributions by the Editor and Contributors suggesting alternative ways to engage the same text; questions that may open up another avenue to the same story.
- **Exploring Further:** Includes newspaper and magazine articles, poetry, prose selections, random quotations, and brief scholarly writings. These reading are offered to enrich the text and provide challenging material for reflection.

Additionally, each issue contains:

- **Opening Lines:** A letter from the Editor summarizes the issues offerings.
- **Parting Lines:** Several short articles that have been gleaned from journals, magazines, newspapers and current books.
- **Sermon Sampler:** a sharing of sermons by preachers who share some of the same values as the Contributors of Reading Between The Lines and usually demonstrate how the method is transferable to the pulpit.

Leaders need to remember that the questions and suggestions for engaging the text are offered as possibilities rather than a rigid curriculum or finished lesson plan. Just as the Bible story is unfinished until it has been met in the circle as an elusive Secret or mystery, so the Reading Between The Lines session is only complete when leaders fashion and hone the questions to fit their teaching style and the world of their group.

In developing a set of questions, leaders will profit from remembering:

- To use words in the questions found in the text. When other words creep into the questions the leader is most often fishing for what he or she thinks to be right responses.
- Questions need to be open-ended rather than closing questions anticipating a final or right answer.
- YES and NO questions tend to end rather than further the exploration.
- Acknowledging a response is not agreeing, rewarding or even rejecting what has been offered. Part of the art of leading is developing a response that welcomes the contribution without evaluating it.
- Questions that elicit a response are worth asking more than once in slightly different words. Letting people ponder and asking the same question again can be valuable.
- The best sequence of questions develops in the circle itself when a leader who is grounded in the text for that day is confident enough to key the next question to the responses of the participants.
- Leaving with one or more questions to work on during the week is important. Hopefully the story will haunt and continue to stir and challenge in the days that follow.

In addition to questions to ask, the proposed plan for a given Sunday will often include activities designed to foster engagement with the text and an awakening of the story at a deeper level than thinking. An assumption is that everything we know is not just in the head but in the body and, perhaps, in the sinews. We know more than we think we know. Access to this other knowing often happens by inviting people in the circle to use art materials like crayons, pastels, paint or clay to express parts of the story in color and form. It is important to make clear when art materials are introduced that there will be no “show and tell,” that the results will not be analyzed, and that if comments are made they will be about one’s own work and no one else’s. In body movement as well as art other parts of psyche and soul have an opportunity to speak. Something as simple as standing up with eyes closed and calling Lazarus to come out of the tomb and then turning around and taking a posture of Lazarus there in the dark listening or ignoring the call can be valuable. Silence can work miracles. Inviting people to write down responses to more personal questions can encourage the next and most difficult step without fear of having to say it out loud with threat of being judged or censored.

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At the heart of the Reading Between The Lines method are those questions that await us between the lines, beneath the words and in the gaps of the biblical text. They are the questions that a leader poses in order to bring the Bible story alive within and around those who dance around the Secret.

When the process happens and what has been read on the page reveals itself as part of who we are and what we are about, we learn that these are questions that can

make or unmake a life, questions that have been waiting patiently to be asked of us and our world and questions that will not go away.

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