

Betsey Moe
Sermon 6.14.09
“The Living Word”

The Bible is the topic of questioning today: Can you be a good Christian and not know the Bible? And how can I make the Bible more understandable? We heard a portion of Psalm 119, where the psalmist talks about the word of God as “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Now we will hear from the Apostle Paul as he writes to Timothy, a younger person he is mentoring in faith and leadership.

2 Timothy 3:10-17

10Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, 11my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. 12Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 13But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. 14But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Today I brought my first Bible: nothing fancy, just your run-of-the-mill Revised Standard Version, red-letter edition from 1981. The good people of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Clarkston, Washington, made sure that every third-grader was given one. Even though there were several Bibles around my house, and I could have picked one up and started reading, there was something about being given my very own that was particularly motivating. I remember sitting on my bed the first night I had it, cracking it open to Genesis 1, and determining that I would read it cover to cover. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Ahh, I recognized those words. And then I got to the part where Adam and Eve ate the fruit – “Oooh, juicy disobedience!” And then, Cain killed Abel! At this point, I tiptoed to my bedroom door and turned the lock --“Should a third grader be reading this stuff?” I plowed ahead. More killing, more evil, God spoke to Noah. By this time, my eyelids were feeling heavier. I figure that at 8:45 p.m. – way past my bedtime -- I reached Genesis 10: “The descendants of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madi, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. The descendants of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah. The descendants of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, Shushooooo....”And so ended my Bible reading plan.

The two questions of faith for today – “Can I be a good Christian and not know the Bible?” and “How can I make the Bible more understandable?” seem to come from the third grader within each of us. The third grader knowing deep down what a holy privilege it is to be holding an ancient text, the third grader thinking that somehow because I am holding this book, God is calling me to something bigger. But at the same time, many of us may feel like the third grader who has put in some honest effort to read these words, but has given up – more than once.

I love that Presbyterians (like our Lutheran brothers and sisters) have a great respect for the Bible. Presbyterians put such a high priority on rightly interpreting scripture that we require those preparing for ministry to study in a seminary for three years beyond a college degree; and during those three years, Presbyterian students are required to learn the original languages of the Old and New Testaments (Hebrew and Greek). Not all denominations require this. While it is important to have an educated clergy, it is also important that *you* expect to be *empowered* by us – empowered to do your own reading and interpreting. Presbyterians view the Bible as a Mount Everest that may offer the grandest views in the world, but should only be tackled by experienced climbers who have trained and have all the right equipment. So how can we re-frame our perspective of this book so that we all feel empowered and excited to start the journey?

In the Apostle Paul's second letter to Timothy, an aging Paul is addressing a young Timothy with advice on making it in ministry. Paul knows the spread of the gospel *depends* on all believers being empowered to do God's work. He knows that he cannot single-handedly carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. About three-quarters of the way into his letter, Paul talks about the role of scripture in the life of every believer. And this is where Paul has written that famous passage, "All scripture is inspired (or 'God-breathed') and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness – *so that* everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (3:16-17).

There are many people who will quote this passage in order to make the point of how important it is to know scripture, to read one's Bible. But Paul does not open his letter to Timothy by saying, "Know scripture," as if reading and understanding scripture is itself the end goal. Paul sees the big picture of God's love for people which God has shown unmistakably in Jesus Christ. His life has been transformed by an encounter with the living God, not by words on a page. The overarching emphasis in Paul's letter to Timothy is on the person of Jesus Christ who has the power to make all things new.

Some people may look at Bible reading as one more discipline to introduce into their schedules, one more task that they need to get done in a day. For me, it is helpful to remember that my relationship with the Living Word is why I read the Bible. When I think of the Bible sitting on my nightstand as containing the words of a dear friend calling to me, inviting me into a conversation, I am much more likely to open it up and start or continue on the journey. First and foremost, God desires relationship. Any discipline we engage in is our response to God's gracious invitation; it is not something we do in order to impress God or earn God's favor.

Isn't this relationship enough? – some might ask. Can I be a good Christian and *not* know the Bible? The person who wrote this question is not the first person to have asked it. In Paul's time, as Jewish men and women were converting to Christianity, there were definitely some questions about how useful their Hebrew scriptures were after the coming of Christ. Could it be, some may have wondered, that hearing the gospel message and embracing a relationship with God through Christ was all that was necessary? Were the stories and laws they had known since their youth – mainly what we know as the first five books of the Bible – still worth passing on? I think this is the question that Paul was addressing when he told Timothy to continue in what he had learned.

Paul says that those sacred writings that Timothy has known since childhood instruct Timothy for salvation through his faith in Christ.

I think it is remarkable that in all of Paul's zeal for this new way of Jesus Christ that he did not abandon or at least downplay the discipline of reading scripture. There was something about the Jewish scriptures that brought life for Paul after he met the risen Christ. Once Paul had experienced forgiveness and transformation and began his work in the community of faith, it was as if the meaning of the scriptures he had learned as a child finally became clear. I imagine that the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit yet not being entirely cut off from God became for Paul a story about his own struggle with temptation and God's relentless faithfulness through it. The story of God setting the Israelites free and leading them through the wilderness became for Paul a story of his own release from the captivity of perfectionism and hatred of other human beings. The laws that God gave could now instruct Paul – and all believers, he believed – for a life of obedience. Because Paul had a relationship with the Living Word and now saw everything through the lens of that relationship, the old, old scriptures came alive and had a new power.

There are many adults in the church who did the Sunday School thing as children and say they heard all, or most of, the stories. (You realize, don't you, that you probably didn't hear the juiciest ones.) The memory many people have is that reading the Bible seemed tedious or dull or not particularly meaningful. But a lot happens in our lives between age 10 and age 40, or 60, or 80. Our perspectives change in light of crises and victories over the years. It is worth re-visiting the Bible since our days as third graders. Those same stories that we think we know well enough will have fresh things to say to us.

I cannot resist doing a small commercial for a little book called, *The Bible's Plot* about understanding the bigger picture in the Bible. Here's what the back cover says about whom the book targets; see if you fit any of these descriptions: "This book is specifically intended for those who do not know where to start when reading the Bible; those familiar with individual Bible stories but not how they fit together; those who try to read portions of the Bible and feel they do not know what is going on; those who desire to know how God has worked in the past and might work in their lives today." I'm thinking we may not have enough books in the narthex! I encourage you to use tools like this one -- because reading the Bible with understanding *can* be an intimidating task – it can seem like an Everest -- but there is help.

There are also some wonderful classes and small groups here at HPPC that are made up of people who simply want to know more – who have opened themselves up to the possibility of still being shaped and surprised and inspired by scripture. People who attended the classes on Matthew and on Genesis this last year gave consistent feedback. They said, "I had not studied these stories since I was in third grade, and they are so much richer now!" (O.K., maybe I added the third grade part.) Some said, "These stories are for *adults!* It's like I'm learning what they *really* mean for the first time." If you are someone who has never attended a Bible Study because you don't know your Bible well enough, consider stepping out in faith and trying a small group or a class. Sure, you can just come to worship and hear the word read and preached, but until you sit down and process the words in the company of others, until you give scripture a chance to *read you*, you may be missing out on some significant insight and guidance.

Finally, it is worth recognizing that Paul addresses *why* we bother reading scripture if we get the general gist of salvation. Why does Paul tell Timothy never to stop learning and recalling the “sacred writings” of his childhood? Because the assurance of salvation, especially in hard times, often calls for more than a vague memory of a conversion experience. Paul had lived through persecutions, imprisonment, ridicule, and other sufferings that are left to our imaginations. The stories of God’s faithfulness that Paul had learned from his Jewish childhood were reminders of the reality of Christ whenever Paul felt like giving up. Paul tells Timothy to *continue* in what he has learned because Paul knows that Timothy’s life will not be any easier than his own. Timothy will need these words to instruct him in salvation, to steep him in grace, when Timothy feels like abandoning it all. The Psalmist who wrote Psalm 119 seems to have known this when imagining life as a dim path and saying, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” *We will* fumble in the dark and forget who we are as beloved children of God if we stop reading and hearing the stories. *We will* become paralyzed in the shadows and forget our primary identity as people saved by grace if we stop applying the words of scripture to our lives. Life is hard – Paul knew this – and we need all the encouragement and guidance we can get.

The faith of our childhood, the faith of “Jesus loves me” and red letter Bibles, is a foundation for which to be thankful. *I* am thankful for the unknown ways that God was at work within me in 1981. But as life has become more complex, the stories, the psalms, the words of challenge and words of comfort in scripture have broken open and have become light for me on a path that is riddled with shadows. What sweet reminders of salvation we receive when we open up this book and journey forth.