

Vocabulary of Faith: Scripture

During the weeks leading up to Easter....in this time we call the Season of Lent... we have been journeying through our vocabulary of faith together and looking at words we often hear around the church, but that we may have not given much thought to.

We have examined church words like Lectionary and Transfiguration.....Theological terms such as “Prevenient Grace...”

A few weeks ago....we looked at the word Evangelism and talked about how we can reclaim its original meaning of being Messengers of the Good News.

We thought about the word Temple..... learned about the history of Temples in the ancient Jewish world and reflected on the fact that through Jesus, each one of us is now a temple....each one of us is a connection point between God and the world....

Last week, we thought about what it means when Jesus offers the promise Eternal Life...

And this morning we will be taking some time to think about a word we throw out there every single Sunday....Scripture....

It is my hope that during this time together we can take some time to truly reflect on what exactly the Bible is....and what it isn't. And to be honest, I wish I would have begun the series with this word.... because I think the way we view scripture informs or should inform every theological term we come up with as a church....

But.....as the old saying goes....better late than never...

Our scripture passage from James this morning emphasizes the importance of allowing God's word to guide us in the way that we live. We are invited to not merely be hearers of the word, but doers of the word as well.

James reminds us that without the word, without scripture we lose vision of who we truly are....it somehow ties us to the overarching story of how God has worked in the world and continues to work in the word....so our task of understanding all the things that the Bible is...and the things that the Bible is not...is extremely important to our lives as Christ-followers.

Now as we begin to dive into what the Bible is and what it is not...I want to first say that this topic goes well beyond what a single sermon can articulate. The Bible is many things to many people and what I plan on sharing with you is only a small piece of all the perspectives and understandings of what the Christian and Hebrew scriptures are.

It is my hope that this can simply be a starting point for us to consider a few perspectives on our scriptures and that this might encourage you to spend some time looking deeper into the what our sacred scriptures

So, let me begin by sharing some things that the Bible is....

First, the Bible is a Library...

By that, I mean that the Bible not just one book....but rather it is a collection of sixty-six books, thirty-nine in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and twenty-seven in the New Testament.

This collection of books was written over a span of 1200 years with many authors, under multiple kings of Israel, as well as during exile under three pagan empires. Differences in style and even in the evolution of different languages have been detected by scholars as one moves from book to book. There are also different emphases in each book.

That is because each was written from a different perspective. When I began taking religious studies classes in college, this idea startled me....and I remember thinking that If there is one message—one gospel— how can there be different versions or perspectives of them?

But One of my professors helped me understand this idea by using a courtroom analogy.

He said that While serving on a jury, you may hear discrepancies between various testimonies. Yet, as the judge will tell you, discrepancies do not mean contradictions. Each witness saw the event described from a particular angle and at a particular time in the unfolding of the scene. It doesn't mean that their testimony is false...or that the testimonies cancel one another out....it just gives you the view of the same truth from a different angle.

While we believe that God's Holy Spirit prepared each writer's life for this extraordinary calling....Each writer or groups of writers still had their own backgrounds, interests, and styles as well which shows up in their writings.

That is why as a Pastor, one of the first things I do when preparing to preach on a text, is research who the author or authors of the text were and who their audience was....this isn't to take any divine nature away from the text, but rather gives it even more meaning as we understand it in its rightful context.

Next...the Bible is a People's History

We often call the first section of our Bible's the Old Testament...but really, I think it is important for us to recognize it as the Hebrew testament as well.

Millions of our Jewish Friends uphold this text as their history. It is their guide...it reminds them of where they have been and where they are going.

It is what has held them together as a people through trials for thousands of years...

In fact, much of the Hebrew testament was written down during a time of trial for the Jewish people....the Babylonian exile...

During this time when they were removed from their homeland....and knowing that their temple had been destroyed....it was of the utmost importance for the people to take all of these stories...all of their traditions and experiences which had been passed down orally from generation to generation...and write them down.

In fact, it is interesting to note that when the majority of Hebrew Testament was written in Hebrew language...that was actually during a time when most Jews were speaking and writing in Aramaic... the language of the Babylonian empire....yet they knew that in order to preserve who they were as a people....and not just be assimilated into the larger culture...that they had to keep their history and language alive....

And it was that history.... that text...which kept the Jewish identity intact through occupation after occupation...and through the great diasporas.

A couple of weeks ago we had a wonderful Book Review session that our Co-Chairs Karol Gleason and Marian Clemens organized.

Our guest lecturer, Fred Lawson shared about the book entitled “The Bible as History.” In this book, it talks about all of the archeological evidence that has been found that supports many of the stories found in the Hebrew Testament....confirming migration patterns....landmarks and major geological events that fit within the Biblical narrative. It was a wonderful presentation and I hope to check that book out now myself.

Now of course, every single event may or may not have happened word-for-word as it is presented in the old testament...don't forget that slight changes can happen to the details as a story is orally passed down from generation to generation...but nonetheless....the Bible is without a doubt...an important testimony to the history of the people whom Jesus was born to and in whose tradition he embraced and lived in.

Next, the Bible is the Sacred Word of God. Now up to this point I have been focusing on much of the human elements of the compilation of our scriptures, but I want to emphasize that knowing the history and context of these writing in no way, shape or form should detract from us understanding them as holy and set-apart by God....

Church of the Wayfarer is a congregation which rooted in Methodist Movement....and as United Methodists, the church teaches that the sacredness of the scriptures are rooted in three sources which I will read to you in the form that they are written in the official literature of the Church. There it says:

- We hold that the writers of the Bible were inspired, that they were filled with God's Spirit as they wrote the truth to the best of their knowledge.
- We hold that God was at work in the process of canonization, during which only the most faithful and useful books were adopted as Scripture.
- We hold that the Holy Spirit works today in our thoughtful study of the Scriptures, especially as we study them together, seeking to relate the old words to life's present realities.

If I were to summarize those definitions in my own words, I would put it this way....The authority of Scripture comes from the movement of God's Spirit in the lives of those in past and in our reading of it today.

Next, the Bible is A Guide to Faith and Life

Here at Church of the Wayfarer, we strive to put the Bible to work.

In worship we read from the Bible. Through preaching, we interpret its message for our lives. It forms the background of most of our hymns and liturgy. It's the foundation of Sunday School curriculum. Many of us use it in our individual devotional lives, praying through its implications for us and the world each day.

In order to encapsulate all these elements of what the Bible is, whenever I have a scripture passage in front of me, I always try to ask the following questions:

- (1) what did this passage mean to its original hearers?
- (2) What part does it play in the Bible's total witness?
- (3) What does God seem to be saying to my life, my community, my world, through this passage? and
- (4) What changes should I consider making as a result of my study?

So now that we have talked a little bit about what the Bible is, now I would like to take some time and have us think about What the Bible Isn't:

First off, the Bible is NOT a Magic 8 ball...

By that I mean that it doesn't just automatically provide you with an answer....

Taping into the wisdom of our scriptures takes time, prayer, study and patience...

I have a friend who is not a church-goer but with my career being what it is, one time she and I got on the topic of the Bible.....

And she informed me that the Bible did not work for her.....not knowing exactly what she meant by that statement, I asked her to elaborate...

And she shared with me that there was a time in her life when she wasn't sure where else to go with a big decision she had to make...so she turned to the Bible...

And she asked God to provide her with a clear answer to help her make her decision....after which, she closed her eyes....opened up to

somewhere in the middle of the Bible, placed her finger on a random passage and then opened her eyes to see what it was...

The verse she landed on was Proverbs 25:24 which says: “It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious wife....” Needless to say, my friend did not get the type of answer she was looking for....

But of course, that is not how the Bible works....we can't just close our eyes, point to a page and read the verse we find out of context...

The Bible is packed full of wisdom...but we have to access that wisdom in the correct way...

Speaking of taking a verse out of context...I want to offer a word of caution... in life, we encounter a lot of well-meaning Christians and pastors who just love to do something called “Proof-texting.” Proof-texting is when someone selects specific verses, takes them out of their context and use them to reinforce the opinion or viewpoint they are trying to make....while most of the time there is nothing malicious about this, it is important for us as thoughtful Christians to go and look at any verse that is being quoted to or at us....and understand what it means in its full context...

Next, the Bible is NOT a Scientific Document nor was it ever meant to be one...

Here again, is where some well-meaning Christians have unintentionally hurt the credibility of the Bible by insisting over and over again that in order to truly believe the Bible, you must also believe literally in the creation account found in book of Genesis.

In fact, there is a 27 million dollar museum in Kentucky which sole purpose is to reinforce the idea that the Earth was created in 6 24-hour days and that the Earth is no more than 6000-10,000 years old.

There is even a display that features people...with dinosaurs before the great flood in order explain the fossils left behind. The great irony of course...is that this type of thinking turns more people away from the church than ever leads anyone to faith...

And that is because these Christians are totally ignoring the context of the Bible...They are forgetting that the creation poem found in Genesis...is just that...a Poem...

In fact, if you go home and read the beginning first pages of your Bible, you will find there are actually two different accounts of mankind being created...in Chapter 1 you find that God simply makes Man and Woman in God's image...and in Chapter two, we get the more complex story of Eve being made from Adam's rib. And that is because the early writers wanted to take both ancient stories that had been passed down through the generations and include them.

Again, this does not make the creation story or the story of the fall of Adam and Eve any less powerful....in fact there is great wisdom and guidance in these stories....the speak powerful truth...but that does not mean we have to take them scientifically...and in fact, when we try to focus on scientifically proving it instead of simply seeking out what meaning it has for the way we live...we cheapen it and strip it of its power....

Finally, the Bible IS NOT the only source of access to the divine....Often times we think that the Bible is the only place we can look to for guidance to God....however when you think about it, that is not how the Early Church operated at all.

In the book of Acts, the church didn't just rely on its scripture, but also on prayer...and the Holy Spirit to guide them. Yes, the Bible is a great source of wisdom and direction for us...but we can't forget that God is still speaking to us. God continues to put prophets in our lives which call our attention to the work of the God's Kingdom.

God continues to provide each one of us with a unique calling in the world.

God continues to show God's self to us all the time as long as we take the time to slow down and look.

So I know I have thrown a lot out at you this morning....and again...it was hard to condense all the things I wanted to say about the Bible into one sermon...because the Bible is just so many wonderful things....but it is my hope that all of this will simply invite to think about scripture more deeply.

And encourage you to discover all of the power that this sacred Word of God has had for our ancestors...and all of the power it has for our lives today when we approach it with the dignity, care and thoughtfulness that it deserves. Amen and Amen.