

“Holy Scripture, and the Importance We Give to It”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 15, 2019
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scripture: Isaiah 55:8-13 (NRSV)

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
¹² For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

We Are People of The Book

This morning we are going to explore our collective understanding as Disciples
of the importance we invest in the Holy Scriptures.

They say some very young disciples were caught stealing cherries
from the cherry tree of a saint in the church.

She shooed them away, saying, *“Do you know what the Bible says about thieves?”*

“Yes, ma’am,” said one of the children.

“Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”

We Are People of The Book

A distinct church memory of an extraordinary day,
a Sunday that began in ordinary fashion:
The first time I opened a Bible without being told to do so.
15 years old.

Church of the Living Hope.
Thinking more about the crease in my bell bottom pants
& splash of colors on my alpaca shirt
than anything in the spiritual realm
or anyone else's hopes or needs.

Dad walked to the pulpit.
He announced that he would be reading a certain chapter and verse.
I watched my father adjust his glasses and open the Bible.

This teenager ascribed to a certain level of distance between me and the Bible.
The Bible includes over a thousand pages of fine print,
some of it in red ink,
some of it obscure and confusing to this high school sophomore,
most of it foreign to my life and understanding and concerns.

My dad, the Rev. George Calvert, Pastor of Living Hope,
leaned on the pulpit as was his practice,
thumbing through to find his place.
A wave of curiosity washed over me.
I reached forward to the pew rack and picked up a Bible.
That was a first.
More firsts were to come.
I thumbed through and found the announced passage.
The order of the books in the Bible was easy,
having been drilled in SS to memorize the order,
earning a gold star next to my name
on the poster board in the church hallway.

George Calvert read maybe four, five lines of scripture.
He stopped, prayed, and began to preach.
Over the next 15, 20 minutes or so,
Dad unpacked those four, maybe five lines of scripture,
explaining what they meant to Jesus Christ,
to God's people then,
to God's people today.

As he preached,
my eyes alternated between

following along with the few highlighted verses
and watching him as the teacher in him took over.

And then, the sermon was over.
George had finished delivering the Word.
The Word was not finished, however.

Something in me had changed.
It was not a call; it was a revelation.

More than a casual insight,
I had an unplanned, unexpected, unasked for awakening.
The universe's Divine Source of Love and Life sent forth a Word,
in print and in voice and in spirit,
and that Word did not return to God unfulfilled.

Isaiah said God said,
*"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* (Isaiah 55: 11-10)

Later, over Sunday dinner, Dad and I talked.
I mentioned how surprised I was
that he had preached a full message
on just a few lines of Scripture.
He said that was pretty normal,
that most if not all of his sermons
were grounded on only a few lines of God's Word.
I said I'd never noticed;
I had assumed that every sermon, everyone's sermon,
had to cover the waterfront, from Genesis to Revelation.

The concept of incremental growth through Bible study and exploration blew me away.
The revelation was eye-opening, mind-expanding, spirit-forming.
We—the whole people of God—draw nearer to God and one another
one or two or five lines of scripture at a time,
absorbing, taking in, feasting on the Word of God
in manageable lessons and learnings.

Then Dad said that he had noticed me picking up the Bible,
and he has watched as I followed along.

I hadn't noticed him noticing.
Will wonders never cease?!
I realized that day in an ordinary service with an extraordinary revelation
that the Bible, which to this teenager was a huge, monolithic tome
with hundreds and hundreds of pages in small print
of what had once seemed incomprehensible,
a strange and distant book filled with complex psalms and prose,
narratives and histories,
was not so distant or strange or incomprehensible, after all.
In that Sunday morning worship service,
my perception of the Bible shifted from it being distant,
from an unattainable, undervalued resource,
to becoming legitimated; readily accessible wisdom;
attainable spiritual resource and guide;
a source of comfort and challenge
that became a constant in my life.

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The Book is a constant source of inspiration and instruction.
From that ordinary day forth,
I welcomed in biblical pages of wisdom,
passages of solace, and pericopes that spur us to act.

I'm a senior in high school.
A friend returns from the Army.
He tells of parachuting the first time,
being so afraid he prayed the 23rd Psalm all the way to ground,
reciting it over and over and over.
As I heard his story, I imagined him falling, afraid, alone,
so in my mind I prayed with him as farmlands grew closer and closer,
*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."*

I was 23 years old in a classroom
and the teacher and students were speaking of preaching and preparation,
The Word from Jeremiah floated into my mind;
the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.
I listened to a voice that was not my own say:
*"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,
and before you were born, I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* (Jeremiah 1:5)

That, my friends, is a call.

The Word does not return unfulfilled.

In 2015, after I was diagnosed with cancer and the day before surgery
a friend sent me a card with a passage from Isaiah 41:10.

*“Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”* (Isaiah 41: 10)

Comfort and hope.

The Word *“...shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* (Isaiah 55: 10)

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Since that first Sunday when I opened the Bible without being told to do so,
I have opened it a few more times,
and have learned a thing or two...or three.

The most important is to read the Word with humility.

The more you think you know, the more you have to learn.

Every time you think you are examining the Word it's really examining you.

And the Word is best grasped, in my experience, in community.

The human context and congregation are humble, authentic, organic fertile grounds
in which this Word takes root, blossoms, and grows.

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Whether you are at a turning point and what seems like a point of no return,
the Word of God bears witness in print and in spoken language,
in the arts and in our hearts.

The Word is ever-present, ever-living, ever-changing us,

making us new, drawing us closer to God and one another and our true selves.

One of the ways we receive God's Word is through the Holy Bible.

The Holy Bible is sacred writing for the whole people of God.

The combined texts of the New Testament and the Old Testament,
also known as the Hebrew scriptures,
are foundational for Christianity.

Disciples of Christ recognize divine truth in these words from 2 Timothy:

*“All scripture is inspired by God
and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction,
and for training in righteousness.”* (2 Timothy 3:16)

You will often hear the Bible referred to as inspired.
Inspired in Greek is *theopneustos*, literally means "God breathed."
In these Scriptures you will discover the breath of God;
 God will breathe hope into you, through these words.
God's Word will not return unfulfilled.
God breathes, and creation begins.
God breathes, and healing happens.
God breathes, and souls are resurrected into new life.
Inspired, the Word has not returned empty.

We are People of The Book

The Word that we have before us in printed form known as the Holy Bible
 is a collection of human documents spanning around 1,200 years;
 documents written over many generations, many places,
 many periods of time, many cultures,
 in many languages and accents and handwritings.

The Word we have before us provides readers and overhearers,
 cynics and followers to discover afresh a life-giving God,
 to unearth a God who loves you,
 who seeks to have a relationship with you.

While not intended to be strictly a history book,
 the Bible does reveal the laws and life stories and myths of the Hebrew people,
 the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ,
 and the birth and experiences of the Early Church.

The Bible is remarkably, wonderfully diverse.
It is as widely diverse in its theologies and understandings of God
 as the east is from the west.

Some stories and concepts contradict each other;
 some are in conflict, some corroborate each other.
Some passages are what some of us may find morally repugnant.
Some pericopes point you directly to God,
 while some make you wonder what is going on.

Through it all, we look to the Holy Scriptures for words of truth and light for today.
Here is a primary source for grasping God's will for us.
Here is a primary source for guidance and instruction on how to live in community.
Here is a primary source for churches and their people to gather around,
 something we share in common,
 something that is a starting point for conversions and conversations.

We are People of The Book

Three main challenges rest before us when it comes to the Holy Bible,
each of which the Christian Church addresses head on.

First, the blessings of the Age of Enlightenment and growth in historical criticism
have, sadly, unfortunately, left too many of us to believe
that only the learned, only experts, only trained clergy
can glean truth from the Scriptures.

We've succumbed to the mistaken concept
that the Bible is way too technical to be understood by laity.

Au contraire!

Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Christian Church,
encouraged us to have the desire to *"wrest control
of the interpretation of the Bible from clergy
and make it a public function open to the common gaze
and a process in which all Christians could participate."*

Isaiah reminds us to trust that the Word sent to you will not return unfulfilled.
Open your heart and let the Word speak to you!

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Secondly, into a culture and era when we've divided ourselves into tribes,
comes the notion that interpretation of the Holy Bible is limited...
...limited to the one understanding,
one that is mine...or theirs...or ours...

You get the point: My way or the highway, Bud.

When interpretations of the Word are limited, confined, controlled,
that one-way track leads straight to the hamlet called Intolerance.

"All people deserve a fresh hearing of the Gospel," said Alexander Campbell.

Come to think of it,

more fresh hearings, more diverse interpretations lead to more conversations.

Sharing conversations that matter

are a formula for building community, which is the cure we so deeply crave.

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Our third challenge in the modern era
is the relatively recent reliance on

what I call an unhealthy use of terms to describe the Bible
as infallible or inerrant, which means 'without error.'

Any time languages are translated from one to another and then to a third,
like from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek then into English,
all done when manuscripts of documents written over 1,200 years

were transcribed by hand in candlelight
by monks and scribes in dusty, dingy, confined spaces,
there are bound to be errors and changes,
and that is okay.

This by no means lessens the Bible's authenticity;
in fact, it magnifies the Word's indestructibility.

God's "truth has nothing to fear from investigation." (Eugene Boring)

My fear is that the use of language like inerrant
leads people to venerate what was created
rather than focusing on the Creator.

"The Bible is not an idol to be venerated." (Alexander Campbell)

These Scriptures are a beloved tool, a guide, a gift, living testaments of faith,
an opening to help direct our awe and veneration to the Creator,
to focus our souls on the One to whom the Bible bears witness.

I can study and adhere to and live with a Bible that includes mistakes,
knowing full well that God is not a mistake,
that any errors in the text are human made,
and that what matters most is that we love one another.

God loves you and wants you to love one another.

The Bible, in all its rich complexity, points us to a forgiving, loving God of grace.

It is we who err and stray like lost sheep.

*Someone once said we spend the first 6 days of the week sowing wild oats,
and on the 7th we pray for crop failure!*

Yes, we goof, even those who have set down in black and red ink
the essence of Divine, Holy, Sacred teachings and poems and psalms.

And that is okay.

God is not made smaller by admission of our errors in biblical translations;
actually, this makes God's forgiving, redeeming nature
even better, grander, more extravagant.

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Someone once complained to Mark Twain
that the Bible was all jumbled up, inconsistent,
and filled with passages he could not understand.

*"I have more difficulty with the passages I do understand," said Mark Twain,
"than with the passages I do not understand."*

From the day I started reading the Word without being told I had to,
to this Sunday morning that is fast becoming extraordinary,
in my life the Holy Bible has revealed a remarkable truth:
God's Word gives me and mine such comfort and hope.

Isaiah said God said the Word “...*shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*” (Isaiah 55: 10)

The Good News is that the passages we do understand,
the psalms and parables and prophetic messages
that speak into our hearts and minds,
testimonies that comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,
all share one joy, one hope, one faith in common:
they are the revelation of a Living God,
living still, speaking still, loving one and all,
now and forever more.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!