

Livestreaming at 10:25 AM on Facebook: [First Christian Church Decatur](#)

[Click here to see the Worship Bulletin.](#)

“People of the Book”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 9, 2021

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 the overall importance and some challenges of reading and receiving the Holy Scriptures.

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)

Isaiah testified that the Divine Source of Love and Life
sends forth into an ever-expanding universe
a Word, the Word, the Logos,
in print and in voices, in bodies and in spirit,
and that Word did not return to God unfulfilled.
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 to apply daily, faithfully.

They say some very young disciples
were caught stealing cherries
from the cherry tree of a deacon in the church.
“Do you know what the Bible says about thieves?” she asked.
“Yes, ma’am,” said one of the children.
“Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”

We Are People of The Book

That’s what Alexander Campbell called us to be and share.
He said we are people of the Book, meaning the Good Book, the Holy Bible.
Campbell, one of our founders, far and away the most prolific,
was a teacher and preacher of great influence and vision.

In 1839, Alexander Campbell addressed
why someone might read the Bible in the first place:
“The [follower] of God reads the Book of God to commune with God,” he said,
‘to feel after [God], and find [God],’
to feel [God’s] power and divinity stirring within...
to have [one’s] soul fired, quickened, animated
by the spirit of grace and truth.
[One] reads the Bible to enjoy the God of the Bible.”

Read the Bible to enjoy the God of the Bible.
To enjoy, emote, engage with the Holy Spirit.
Faith emanates from within, from the heart,
with the Bible feeding feelings of faith.
Yet Campbell affirmed we meet God at the intersection of faith and reason.

Draw deep upon reason, scientific research, raw intelligence.
Dig deep into your capacity for logic that God instills and cultivates.

“...This warm stirring [that Campbell affirmed]
was not merely a matter of warm feelings.^[1]
Campbell read much by thinkers,
Christian and otherwise,
who emphasized the life of the mind and the search for truth.
Campbell taught [us] to read the Bible
through the lens of ... scientific method...
Campbell ... argued that “the Bible is a book of facts.”
If you could use the scientific method on the facts of nature,
then you could use it on the facts of Scripture.
“When I at last took the naked text,” said Campbell,
“and read it with common sense,
the Bible became a new book to me.”

We Are People of The Book

The Book is a constant source of inspiration and instruction.

I was 23 years old in a seminary classroom.
The professor and classmates spoke of preaching and preparation.
The student beside me said, “*I had to preach at my church internship.*”
I thought to myself, “*I had to preach at my church internship.*”
She said, “*I started to prepare to preach the night before.*”
A voice in my mind said, “*I started to prepare you to preach before you were born.*”
The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

The Word from Jeremiah 1:5 rang true then and still rings true today.

*“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.”*

That, my friends, was a call.

God’s Word does not return unfulfilled.

In 2015, I was diagnosed with cancer.

The day before surgery a friend sent me a card, sharing 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.”*

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)

We are People of The Book

The Bible is a substantial, significant collection of spiritual narratives
gleaned from oral and written traditions
covering a span of 1,200 years.

The Old and New Testaments are literal testimonies
of people's encounters and experiences of the Holy.

They share their tales in so many ways:

psalms, psalters, songs,
genealogies, stories, myths,
prayers, laments, philosophies of religion,
rules and guidelines for communal living,
calls for liberation, demands for justice, mercy for
all.

The Bible airs real people's real personal doubts, questions,
wondering, and wandering journeys toward God...and away from God.

Every single biblical encounter with God is unique to that person.

No two are alike.

What is also fascinating is that -- moving from Genesis to Revelation --
you can witness the growth and evolution of theology,
gauge people's understanding of God
from Creator to Judge to Deliverer to Redeemer to Grace Giver.

I encourage folks to read the Bible in bite-size chunks.

My weekly sermons may focus on no more than 5 or 10 lines of scripture at a time.

That should suffice for reading the Word,

to be read not for information but for formation. .

Start with where you are.

Do you like to read stories?

Songs?

Rules?

Laments?

Philosophy?

Letters about the Church?

Parables?

Begin with what interests you, with what piques your curiosity.

Read a little, then meditate, giving the seed time to germinate.

Share your experience.

We are People of the Book

When I got to seminary,

I was amazed to discover that

there are so many helpful ways of reading the Word,
of seeing each line or phrase or story in its context.

I have made it my mission

that one need not go to seminary to be amazed and informed.

Let the Church know the depth and breadth of biblical study.
Let the Church know the joy that God is still speaking.
As good a book as the Bible is,
 it is not the last time God communicated with us.
That is Good News.

Read the Word with humility.
The more you think you know,
 the more you have to learn.
Think you are examining the Word?
It's really examining you.
The Word is best grasped, in my experience, in community, in conversation.
The human context and congregation
 are organic fertile grounds
 in which God's Word takes root, blossoms, grows, transforms.

We are People of The Book

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

 You may recognize this passage 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)

We often hear the Bible referred to as inspired.
Inspired in Greek is *theopneustos*, literally means "God breathed."
God breathes, and creation begins.
God breathes, and healing happens.
God breathes, and lives are renewed.
Inspired, inspiring, inspirational the Word has not returned empty.

We are People of The Book

Serious challenges have arisen over our approach to the Holy Bible.

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 from the Scriptures the Truth
 --that is Truth with a capital T.

We've succumbed to the mistaken concept

that the Bible is way too technical to be understood by laity.

Au contraire!

Remember that Isaiah trusts the Word God sent to you will not return unfulfilled.

No need for academic degrees or special initiations or becoming an expert.

Alexander Campbell 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.*”

Open your heart and let the Word speak to you!

We are People of The Book

Secondly, consider the problem of the notion

that interpretation of the Holy Bible is limited...

...limited to one opinion, one belief system, one construct,
one that is mine...or theirs...or ours...

When interpretation of the Word is confined, controlled, contrived,

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.

As disparate in thought and mind as we are,

so, too, is the Bible remarkably, wonderfully diverse.

It is as widely diverse in its theologies of God

as the east is from the west.

Some Biblical examples and concepts contradict.

Some 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.

We are People of The Book

Possibly the toughest challenge we face today

is the newly contrived term to describe the Bible

as infallible or inerrant, which means ‘without error.’

“The terms biblical infallibility -- the Bible cannot contain errors –
and biblical inerrancy -- the Bible contains no errors –
are close cousins of the same idea,
one that scriptural religions prize and promote,
most especially Christian and Muslim fundamentalists.^[2]

While individual Christian apologists have posited
an infallible and inerrant Bible for millennia,
it is only recently – since the 1970s –
that entire Christian denominations
have advocated for this position,

We speak of a phenomena that peaked
with the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.
This statement grew out of a conference attended by
...evangelical/fundamentalist leaders
who were reacting to modernism,
unhappy with critique of biblical historicity,
accuracy, and literalness.”

Let's be realistic.

Whenever a language is 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
are transcribed by hand in dim candlelight
by monks and scribes in dusty, dingy, confined spaces,
there are bound to be errors and changes,
and that is okay!

The Abbot of a monastery had been down in the lowest level of the library,
researching original biblical manuscripts,
when he burst into the sanctuary, interrupting the prayer service.
"We've been wrong for centuries!" he exclaimed. "It's not celebrate; it's celebrate!"

We can live and accept that the Bible is not inerrant or infallible.
What matters is that God is not inerrant or infallible!

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)

The repeated use of the word "inerrant"
leads people to venerate what was
created by humanity to pass on the story
rather than venerating

the Creator who made humanity to embody the story.

“The Bible is not an idol to be venerated,” said 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.

You and I study and adhere and celebrate a living Word,
a Holy Bible that includes human errors,
knowing full well that God is not a mistake,
that any errors in the text are human made,
and 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 and simple richness
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.

We are People of The Book

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.”

Just like 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)

That’s a passage we do understand!

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

-
- [1] Richard Hughes, Christian History, Issue #106, 2013.
- [2] Matthew Quartey, Spectrum Magazine, April 18, 2019.