

## A SERMON FOR BIBLE SUNDAY

**Psalm 119:105**

**II Peter 3:15b-18**

**II Timothy 3:16-17**

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church presented children in the third and fourth grade Bibles on this occasion.*

### SCRIPTURE

#### **Psalm 119:105**

*Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path.*

#### **II Peter 3:14-18**

*So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

#### **II Timothy 3:16-17**

*All scripture is inspired by God 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.*

Though I had grown up active in the church along with my family, it was in seminary that I began to develop a love for this book we call the Bible. So long lasting has been this love, that over the years I have come to describe myself as a textual Christian, for in the text I find my greatest resource for life and faith. Indeed, scripture is

*...a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path.*

As we present Bibles to our third graders today, I want to preach a sermon for Bible Sunday.

Let us pray: *Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, you who are our Rock and Redeemer, our light and lamp, our source of life. Amen.*

### II.

It is not entirely accurate to call the Bible a book. It is more an anthology, even a library. This anthology called the Bible has all kinds of literature within it; and each kind speaks to a different part of who we are.

- It has prose that speaks to our minds<sup>1</sup> and poetry that speaks to our hearts.<sup>2</sup>
- It has historical writing that chronicles ancient events and puts a theological stamp on them.<sup>3</sup>
- It has historical fiction as well.<sup>4</sup>
- It has law and liturgy – boundaries beyond which neither life nor worship shall cross – and sets up systems of judicial process to deal with violations.<sup>5</sup>

And this anthology called the Bible has a range of stories and characters.

- It has a father *willing* to sacrifice his son at the command of God;<sup>6</sup> another who *sacrifices* his daughter because of a rash vow he has made to God.<sup>7</sup>
- It has a king who grieves both an infant son for whose death he is responsible<sup>8</sup> and later an adult son who is killed in battle trying to wrest the crown from that same king's head.<sup>9</sup>
- It depicts another father who runs to greet his wayward son who has returned home after squandering his inheritance.<sup>10</sup>
- The Bible has a widowed daughter-in-law who refuses the entreaty of her widowed mother-in-law to remain with her own people and whose steadfast love leads her mother-in-law out of her bitterness and anger.<sup>11</sup>
- The Bible portrays struggles for fertility,<sup>12</sup> pregnancies that bring beautiful births<sup>13</sup> and births that end in tragedy.<sup>14</sup>
- It has wise sayings<sup>15</sup> which would do Benjamin Franklin proud and myths depicting through story and saga the deepest meanings of Creation and Fall, sin and evil, redemption and hope.<sup>16</sup>
- It has a book of deep, philosophical rumination on life.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The “Succession Narrative” of II Samuel 9-20 through First Kings 1-2 is a prime example.

<sup>2</sup> The Book of Psalms.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12-50; Exodus 1-15; Joshua and Judges, Ezra and Nehemiah fit this category.

<sup>4</sup> Jonah is a good example.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 20 through the remainder of the book, plus Leviticus, are good examples.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 22.

<sup>7</sup> Judges 11:29-40.

<sup>8</sup> II Samuel 12:15b-23.

<sup>9</sup> II Samuel 18:1-19:8.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 15:11-32.

<sup>11</sup> The Book of Ruth.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 15:1; 29:15-30:24; I Samuel 1.

<sup>13</sup> I Samuel 1:19-28; Luke 2:1-7.

<sup>14</sup> II Samuel 13:15-23; I Kings 3:16-28.

<sup>15</sup> The Book of Proverbs, especially 10-29.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 1-11.

<sup>17</sup> The best example is the Book of Ecclesiastes.

- It has what may be the most passionate love poem ever written<sup>18</sup> as well as the deepest primal scream of a man who has lost everything and demands a hearing from the God he refuses to renounce.<sup>19</sup>
- It narrates the story of a prophet who runs away from God and then pouts when people he despises repent and are accepted.<sup>20</sup>
- It depicts another prophet who wrote so beautifully of a Suffering Servant that all Handel had to do was compose the music.<sup>21</sup>
- In all its literary forms, the Bible has clarion calls for justice and<sup>22</sup> for the care of the poor and needy;<sup>23</sup> and it forewarns reversal of fortune for the rich who ignore that call.<sup>24</sup>
- The anthology of the Bible depicts a court prophet confronting a powerful king about the king's adultery and arranged killing of the woman's husband;<sup>25</sup> and it narrates the king keeping that same prophet in office for the remainder of the king's life and rule.<sup>26</sup>

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When we arrive at the second section of the Bible:

- We find Gospels written to present an itinerant rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, the Son of God.<sup>27</sup>
- We find well-remembered teachings ("You have heard it said, but I say to you..."),<sup>28</sup> parables,<sup>29</sup> and miracles over disease, demons and nature.<sup>30</sup>
- Its central character faces abandonment, betrayal, sham trials, political intrigue, and mob violence.<sup>31</sup>
- It depicts one man conscripted to carry Jesus' cross,<sup>32</sup> a Roman soldier moved to confession of faith by his death,<sup>33</sup> and other soldiers gambling for his garments.<sup>34</sup>
- It narrates eleven disciples drawing straws to determine who should replace Judas after deliberation and prayer have not made the choice obvious.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Song of Songs.

<sup>19</sup> The Book of Job.

<sup>20</sup> Jonah.

<sup>21</sup> The Servant Songs in Isaiah: Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 49:1-6; Isaiah 50:4-11; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

<sup>22</sup> Amos 5:18-24; Micah 6:6-8.

<sup>23</sup> Ezekiel 34.

<sup>24</sup> Amos 4:1-13.

<sup>25</sup> II Samuel 12.

<sup>26</sup> I Kings 1.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 1:1; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 1:1-17; 20:30-31; 21:25.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 5-7.

<sup>29</sup> Jesus left over forty parables, primarily in Matthew and Luke.

<sup>30</sup> Mark features these most prominently.

<sup>31</sup> Mark's passion narrative unfolds these most dramatically, Mark 11-15.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 27:32.

<sup>33</sup> Mark 15:39.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew 27:35.

<sup>35</sup> Acts 1:12-26.

- It has letters showing the life and struggles of the early church that were not intended for our consumption but that show how the faith that grew out of the resurrection makes its way into an entirely different culture than that in which it was born and became a world religion into which we have engrafted.<sup>36</sup>
- It depicts a teenage boy falling asleep during a long sermon of Paul's<sup>37</sup> and man short of stature climbing a tree so he can hear Jesus preach.<sup>38</sup>

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In addition, this book has bequeathed dozens of phrases to our common language:

- The apple of his eye<sup>39</sup>
- At wit's end<sup>40</sup>
- By the skin of our teeth<sup>41</sup>
- Eat, drink and be merry<sup>42</sup>
- Feet of clay<sup>43</sup>
- Handwriting on the wall<sup>44</sup>
- A fly in the ointment<sup>45</sup>
- And there is nothing new under the sun.<sup>46</sup>

## II.

The church has long maintained that the Bible is “inspired by God.” That belief has meant different things in different eras of church history, including giving birth to a literalism the last few centuries that can limit the ways texts can function for us and, I believe, the way God can speak to us through them.

When the Apostle Paul writes: “All scripture is *inspired* by God...” the Greek we translate “*inspire*” means “*God breathes*.” To say that scripture is “*inspired by God*” is to say that *God breathes* through it. God gives it life and it gives us life.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The primary references here are the Letters of Paul in the second half of the New Testament.

<sup>37</sup> Acts 20:7-12.

<sup>38</sup> Luke 19:1-10.

<sup>39</sup> Psalm 17:8.

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 107:23-27.

<sup>41</sup> Job 19:20.

<sup>42</sup> Ecclesiastes 8:15.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel 2:31-45.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel 5:1-31.

<sup>45</sup> Ecclesiastes 10:1.

<sup>46</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9.

<sup>47</sup> See Robert Gnuse, “Inspiration of Scripture,” in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2003), 2255-2260.

This divine breathing can occur every time we step into what Karl Barth called “the strange new world within the Bible”:<sup>48</sup>

- When we use its words for *devotionals* before we go to bed at night or when we wake up in the morning
- When we share an advent booklet in which its passages are features each day or week during that *season*
- When we take a class at church and *study* the scriptures
- When we trust a friend with our *ruminations* about them
- When we listen to a *sermon* on them
- When we sing a *hymn or anthem* in which they are put to music
- When we take a *course* on them in college, even one that is critical of them or the faith out of which they have arisen –

When we do any of these things, God is *breathing – bringing life* – to the *interaction* we are having with the *text of scripture*. That is what *inspiration* means. That is the way that scripture is “*inspired by God*.” God breathes through it, bringing us life.

### III.

To be sure, the library of scripture is subject to *gross misuse*. Throughout history, and certainly in our day, scripture has been misused by both its friends and foes.

People of various political stripes – revolutionary zealots, authoritarian leaders, people who live with privilege and seek to protect it – have used this book, and specific texts within it – to buttress

- Minds already made up
- Hearts frozen like ice
- Wills set on one pathway with no intention of changing course
- As well as prejudices, hatred, grudges whose bearers have no intention of giving them up.

The Bible has been used as a weapon to justify terrorism; vigilante violence; and dominance of men over women, abusive parents over children, wealthy over poor, ruler over subject.

- It has kept people in marriages far too long and forced them into marriages arranged or unwanted.

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<sup>48</sup> This is the title of an address given by Karl Barth in 2016. A PDF is available here:  
<https://jochenteuffel.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/barth-the-strange-new-world-within-the-bible.pdf>.

- It has kept violence in households unreported; and excluded people from participation in synagogue, church, society.
- It has been used unapologetically to justify slavery and keep slaves obedient to their masters.
- It has been used to frighten the young about natural changes going on in their bodies that most do not understand at the time and react with a mixture of fear, curiosity and mystery.

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But one of the great strengths of the Bible is that it *recognizes* the capacity of its words to be *misused*.

- In the story of the Fall, the serpent and the woman are depicted as arguing over what God has said, arguing over the Word of God, the words of God, the scriptures.<sup>49</sup>
- When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, he and the devil lob passages of scripture back and forth as if they are water balloons, or worse, hand grenades.<sup>50</sup>
- The second letter of Peter acknowledges misuse of Scripture as a problem when he writes:

*...our beloved brother Paul wrote to you  
according to the wisdom given to him...  
There are some things in [his letters]  
hard to understand,  
which the ignorant and unstable  
twist to their own destruction,  
as they do the other scriptures.*

My friends, just because someone quotes the Bible or does something in its name does not mean they are doing the will of God. “This I know for the Bible tells me so.”

To counter this the Bible itself calls us to “*test every spirit*” – every “*in-spir-ation*,” every instance of God’s *breathing* – to see if the breath upon us is indeed the breath of God. This testing is the role of the church communally, led by the “the teaching elder,” and of each individual – to study scripture and *test every spirit*,<sup>51</sup> ultimately applying what Tyndale referred to as “the medicine of scripture,” each to our “own sores.”<sup>52</sup>

#### IV.

But beyond its misuse, the Bible has also been the source of inspiration in overturning some of the ways it has been misused:

- Swords have been beaten into ploughshares in its name.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Genesis 3:1-7, especially vss. 1-3.

<sup>50</sup> Luke 4:1-13.

<sup>51</sup> I John 4:1-6.

<sup>52</sup> William Tyndale, prefixed to the translation of the Pentateuch, 1530, found on the frontispiece of Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

<sup>53</sup> Isaiah 2:4.

- Women have found inspiration for equality in church and culture, even among some of the words of Paul: “In Christ there is neither male nor female...”<sup>54</sup>
- The abused, the poor, the denied, the held back, the held down, the silenced, the shamed, the imprisoned, the fallen, the mistreated, the beaten, the enslaved, even descendants of the lynched have found their way to liberation and release in
  - God’s action leading the people of Israel from slavery to freedom<sup>55</sup>
  - In Daniel’s rescue from a lion’s den<sup>56</sup>
  - In Jesus’ inaugural sermon declaring that he has come to set liberty to those who are oppressed.<sup>57</sup>

The Bible has inspired Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Lincoln in their leading our nation out of slavery and into the still unfinished land of freedom. It still inspires us on that march today.

## V.

As all over our country, and in many parts of the world, the church of Jesus Christ is emerging from COVID: Some with rigor; some, tentatively; some with wounds that may turn out to be mortal.

When all is said and done, the church still has the gift we have been uniquely given: the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is our central gift, what makes us who we are, and we may emerge from COVID as the only entity left in society to serve as custodian of this anthology.

In the post-COVID world,  
We will pass on what we have received.  
And like the dry bones in Ezekiel’s valley,  
We will stand on our feet,  
An exceedingly great host.<sup>58</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>54</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>55</sup> Exodus 14-15.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel 6:10-28.

<sup>57</sup> Luke 4 :16-20,

<sup>58</sup> Ezekiel 37:10.