

UMC of Auburn – 7/24/16

**MESSAGE: “The Gift of the Bible”**

**Text: II Timothy 3:14 - 4:5**

***Purpose:*** the purpose of this message is to emphasize the importance of Bible study with integrity in forming the Christian life and to invite the Auburn congregation to join in such an adventure.

***Review and Introduction***

- I. Why does the Bible Matter?**
- II. What is ‘Bible Study with Integrity’?**
- III. Invitation to a Bible Adventure**

***Response to the Word: The Upper Room and Daily Reflection.***

Three weeks ago, Pastor Russ Peppe spoke to the question, ‘Does God have a plan for our lives?’ Two weeks ago, as I began my adventure with you as pastor, I spoke of my experience of God’s plan or call upon my life. Last week, I spoke of baptism as an outward sign of an inward change ignited by the grace of God through Jesus. Today, I invite you to an adventure of Bible discovery that may endure for a lifetime!

That’s the way I often introduce Vacation Bible School, Sunday School or Youth Fellowship: “Join us for a Bible adventure!” It is an adventure, for it takes us to places, times and experiences that comfort, challenge and champion a changed perspective. The fact is ‘I love the Bible’, and...I struggle with it, too. The Creation narrative and the stories of the human condition redeemed by God resonate deep within my soul. The Commandments given through Moses and the courageous ethic of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount compel me to grow in my understanding of justice and compassion. The Easter transformation that restored my life after I thought all was lost invests my life with meaning, hope and purpose. I encounter God in the Bible, almost every time I read it.

But there are certainly things I struggle with. I struggle to understand how whole cities (men, women, children, animals) put to the sword when the Israelites took possession of Canaan could possibly be part of God’s plan. I struggle to understand how some can be eternally saved and others eternally condemned. I wrestle with some of the miraculous descriptions that seem to contradict the science of today. I continue to ponder the question once more asked by a parishioner this week, “Since God made everything, who made God?” What does it mean, then, when we read in II Timothy the words of the Apostle Paul, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness...”?

There are those, of course, who believe, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it!” For them, the human writers of scripture were essentially unnecessary, for the Spirit of God is the true author, and scribes could only use the words dictated by divine command. I have a dear friend, a dedicated student of the Bible who has memorized hundreds of verses. He is affectionately called, “King Jamsey” because he believes the King James authorized version is the one that carries God’s wording. Completed in 1611, it was an English translation of the Bible from ancient sources available at that time. Some of the more recent translations are actually based, in part, on even older sources that were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1948.

There are others who insist, “The Bible is full of contradictions, so it couldn’t possibly represent God’s ideas and perspectives.” They discredit any authority the Bible may have and shelve it next to Plato and Shakespeare, a classic perhaps, but one that many talk about and few actually read. They underestimate God’s ability to communicate through human witness.

I believe God does speak in and through scripture—powerfully, in fact, but it is essential to meet the Bible on its own terms. It is the product of centuries of believers who labored to understand God’s claim upon their lives and the contemporary events of their experience. It is a library of many kinds of literature: laws, metaphors, parables, history, sermons, prophecy, songs, poetry, stories, proverbs, genealogy, eyewitness accounts, biography, even arguments and complaints! It is an unfolding series of snapshots of God throughout the generations of human experience. God doesn’t give us the whole enchilada all at once, but reveals and teaches over time.

We learn some things about God just by looking at and experiencing the world God made. We can also learn about God by studying that world and the laws that govern it. We certainly learn about God from the teaching and example of parents, mentors and community. But we encounter God best through God’s own self-disclosure and revelation in the words of the Bible.

Let’s suppose, for a moment, that you receive free tickets to the Franco Center to hear a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. Until now, your exposure to live performance has been limited to local contra dances. You arrive late because the tickets were given to you at the last minute, and you barely had time to travel, find a place to park and be ushered to your seat. You know nothing about Handel or *The Messiah* and forgot, in your haste, to request a program. The music you are hearing certainly doesn’t sound like ‘Turkey in the Straw’ at the contra dance. Now let’s suppose a musical scholar who specializes in Handel is seated beside you. He talks you through the performance and into an appreciation and love of Handel’s music. Now suppose what your encounter would be like, if George Frederick,

himself was seated beside you giving explanation! In the Bible, we hear God's voice speaking.

In preparation for today's message, I revisited three manuscripts of sermons I have preached on this theme during my years of ministry. I have always preached the importance of doing Bible study with integrity, but I noticed that each time I preached I grew in my appreciation of the human element in the composition in scripture. I suppose it would have been far more efficient for God to deliver the Message to us by angels, but for whatever reason, God chooses, again and again, to deliver the Message through human testimony.

So what is Bible study with integrity? For one thing, it means understanding context. Don't pull a verse from the Bible and bonk someone over the head with it! My nephew, who just became pastor of the Chichester United Methodist Church in NH, got a tattoo on his arm this week. He has been talking about it for years, but finally got one that includes three Bible references. Someone challenged him on Facebook, "What about Leviticus 19:28?" That verse prohibits the Israelites from making gashes in their body or tattoo marks for the dead.

Travis replied, "What about the verse right before it?" Leviticus 19:27 warns against trimming the hair on your temples or the edges of your beard. His point was, "If you're going to hold me to "no tattoos," I'm going to hold you to "no trimming of your beard." The context of both verses is the holiness code which was given to guide the Israelites away from the idolatrous practices of the nations around them. In other words, the prohibition was against idolatry, not really tattoos.

There are other dangers to pulling scripture out of context. Perhaps you have heard of the woman who wanted to hear from God, so she announced that she would close her eyes, open the Bible, and stick a pin in a verse to receive God's message. The first time, she read the verse, "Judas went out and hanged himself." That wasn't exactly what she was looking for, so she decided to try one more time. This time, the verse read, "Go thou, and do likewise." She decided to pray instead.

Bible study with integrity also means learning the who, what, why, where, when and how. Who wrote this? To whom was it written? What does it say? Why was it written? Where was it written from? When was it written? How was it put together? Was it edited? What does it mean for us today? What is God saying to me through it?

Most importantly, studying the Bible with integrity means allowing scripture to challenge the assumptions we hold. Sadly, people can make the Bible say anything they

want to. In the 17 and 1800s, Christians on both sides of the slavery debate used the Bible to support their claims. You can find Bible verses to prejudice both sides of contested debates of today as well, but where is the integrity in that? The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself. Embrace the whole counsel of God, not just the words of one witness at the expense of all others.

Even among those who do have a comprehensive knowledge of the scriptures there may be a failure to let its teachings penetrate one's heart. I was with a collection of pastors one day who were discussing a verse in the Bible that made them feel uncomfortable. Each had a tidy explanation that 'solved' the problem for them; none seemed to consider the notion that maybe their assumption itself should be questioned!

Integrity looks like this: Let's say that I believe justice is the most important virtue and that anyone who harms another should be punished. I read in the Bible that Jesus said, "Love your enemy and do good to those who hate you." I have a choice. I can say, "That's the most stupid thing I have ever heard" and ignore it. I can lessen the force of Jesus' words by pretending he meant something other than what he obviously meant. Or, I can say, "Hey, maybe justice isn't the most important thing, maybe God values mercy every bit as much." If I say this last thing, I have allowed the Bible to speak to me and change my misconception.

I used to really struggle with Jesus' words, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...one's foes will be the members of one's own house-hold." "How can this be?" I used to ask. "This does not sound like the Jesus who supported the commandment, honor thy father and mother! This does not fit with Jesus' words, 'Blessed are the peacemakers.'"

Then I had an experience that opened my eyes to what Jesus may have been getting at. I began to honestly confront some issues in my past that I had never faced. There were people I needed to forgive and others to whom I needed to apologize. Through my efforts to be truthful, I discovered some were avoiding me. My growth brought to the surface things that some did not want to face. Jesus words began to make sense.

Now. If you are like me—one who loves the Bible, but also struggles with it—one who discovers God in its pages, but also has honest questions about how to apply its teachings today, then I want to issue an invitation. This is an invitation to an adventure that will potentially transform your life. This fall, I will be facilitating a small group study on Adam Hamilton's book, *Making Sense of the Bible*. Adam Hamilton is one of the leading voices in Methodism today, and this book is one of the best summaries of how the scriptures came to

**be that I have found. In the book, he helps readers recognize the dynamic interplay between human witness and divine inspiration. He also offers perspective on how to apply the scriptures with integrity to some of the burning issues of our contemporary experience. If you would be interested in participating in such a small group adventure, please sign your name with a contact phone number on this clipboard as it circulates.**