

“Why Should We Value the Bible So Highly?”

Psalm 19 Exodus 20:1-17 James 1:19-27

You will recall that one Sunday I placed pieces of paper in the bulletin on which people could write down their questions about the Bible. Some wrote the following very excellent question, “Why should we be interested in a book written 2,000 years ago?” It’s a really good question don’t you think? How many other books from 500 years ago, a 100 years ago, even 50 years ago do we treasure, let alone two to three thousands years ago?

Let us lay aside for today the issue of the “historical value” of the Bible, or any book from long ago. Historical value, as important as it is, for the way it gives us a glimpse into the life and culture of past years, is not enough to build a faith on. A living faith that can gather a group of people, like us today, requires something a great deal more “engaging” than a book of historical interest, as fascinating as that might be. After all the church, in spite of what some may think, is not an antiquarian society. We are not like the society with the wonderful name, Society for Creative Anachronism!

By the way, have you every gone to one of their events? They are great fun and truly educational. I looked up their self description on their website, it is as follows, “... a group dedicated to researching and recreating the Middle Ages in the present. Many groups meet weekly, and at these meetings we dance, talk, study, learn, revel, and make plans.” They go on to say, “The avowed purpose of the SCA is the study and recreation of the European Middle Ages, its crafts, sciences, arts, traditions, literature, etc. The SCA “period” is defined to be Western civilization before 1600 AD, concentrating on the Western European High Middle Ages. Under the aegis of the SCA we study dance, calligraphy, martial arts, cooking, metalwork,

stained glass, costuming, literature ... well, if they did it, somebody in the SCA does it (Except die of the plague!)

No, I think it is safe to say that the Church, which seeks to worship the God of the Bible, and seek God's will for our lives today, is far more than a Society for Creative Anachronism! This is true even if from time to time we do wear the odd bathrobe during a nativity play, pretending to be ancient shepherds from the first century! This is true even if we do read and study a book written two to three thousand years ago.

Today's Scripture passages: Psalm 19, Exodus 20:1-17 and James 1:19-27 offer us deep insight into "Why we should Value the Bible so Highly." They speak powerfully to how this ancient text can be alive and well in our day or any day. We touched on it in last week's sermon when following C.H. Dodds' lead, we said that the main point is not that God "authored the Bible" so much as God authored the lives of the people who wrote the Bible. Today our focus shifts to those who read the Bible many generations later. Because the Bible is a living "Word" the Bible can become a vehicle for God's Holy Spirit to "author" not just the lives of the ancient writers of the Bible, but also the lives of readers of the Bible, like us in every time and place.

Now it is entirely possible to read the Bible and to have its words leave us totally unmoved by the experience. The brain synapses are working. We can see and identify the letters, the words, and comprehend the dictionary meaning of the words. We might, with thought and study even comprehend much of the author's original meaning, but the text remains a dead text to us, rather than a living word. Now, at times we can simply attribute this to the fact that "the Spirit blows where and when it wills." We may attribute the deadness of the text to our simply not being in a receptive mood. When this

is all that happens our reading of the Bible is at best an exercise in reading. If this takes place in a Bible study or in worship and others have a similar experience, the church becomes little more than a Society for Creative Anachronism.

Our text from James is making a similar argument. He speaks of people reading the text but not connecting with the text personally, incorporating the Word of God into their daily lives. He says that we are to “welcome with meekness the IMPLANTED WORD.” I love that phrase, “the implanted word.” For the Bible to be a living text, it has to take root in our lives.

The writer of James argues that when the Word of God becomes implanted in our lives that it bears fruit, it will be discernable in our daily lives. So it is that we are exhorted to, “Be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

James speaks of the emptiness of religion that is all ritual, or simply showing up in church or Bible study. He argues that religion that does not end up being incorporated into the our daily lives is “worthless.” True religion, he tells us, means that we get angry less often; that we remain silent more often instead of gossiping or saying negative things about people; that we “care for the orphans and widows” more often and in general keep ourselves “unstained by the world.” True religion, in the words of that song about the ant, helps us to “eliminate the negative” from our lives and communities and to “accentuate the positive” in our lives and communities. The end result of such a living faith is “LIFE!” Jesus said that he came to bring us “abundant life” and through the generations countless people have found, and continue to find “abundant life” in Christ.

We are all familiar with the quote from Augustine; “Our hearts are restless, till they find their rest in thee.” I suspect every minister uses this in a sermon or conversation many times throughout their career. Well I’m going to do something I’ve never done before and quote that great theologian, Billy Corgan, former lead singer of the rock group *Smashing Pumpkins*. In a recent book, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, author Cathleen Falsani has an interview with Corgan. In it he speaks of his spiritual path out of a troubled childhood and what his musical role has been for kids who have followed him. Falsani writes that Corgan told her that, “The Goth kids . . . are searching for something, he says, and its not him. But he can try to point them in the right direction, toward the things he was searching for as a Goth teenager and as a depressed, self-absorbed young adult.”

Essentially Corgan says, “They’re looking for God.” The problem is, he says, that the negative is constantly reinforced through the news and by life itself. Corgan says, **“Everybody is walking around all thirsty.”** Wow! How’s that for spiritual insight! “Everybody is walking around all thirsty.”

The problem is, he says, that to reach them you “have to speak from the context by which they view the world.” That’s the tricky part isn’t it? As people of faith how can we share the living Word of the Bible people who are “walking around thirsty” in the “context by which they view the world?” Difficult as this is, this is one of the Body of Christ’s major tasks in every generation. James seems to suggest that the best way he can think for this to happen is for people of faith, who have a living faith, meet people where they are in their lives. Approach them with a humble, embodied faith that seeks to meet people’s real needs.

I love the imagery that the writer of James uses for dishonest and honest religion. “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror and, going away, immediately forget what they look like.” Those who do not have a living faith in which the “implanted word” has taken root forget what they should look like as a child of God!

The Bible becomes a mirror for us. Every day as we look into the Bible we can see reflected there, through the help of the Holy Spirit, who we are to be today as a child of God. James says, “But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.” There is a blessing when the living word is implanted in our hearts, souls and minds!

I asked the pastors of the congregation to share their thoughts on Scripture in their life’s journey, what they’ve learned, how its changed, moments that have touched and changed them. Frank Deitz wrote about visiting detainees in the U.S. Immigration facilities in Los Fresnos and El Paso, Texas in the 1980’. You need to remember that in the 1980’s civil wars were raging in Nicaragua and El Salvador and the young people Frank was visiting had come to the United States to escape this and seek political sanctuary. They were being held in the “corralon” or “Big Corral” while they awaited their hearings.

In many cases, Frank says, they were the ‘one son sent away’ from Salvadoran and Nicaraguan village homes, to find work and a way to assist in continuing their families futures.” Frank noticed that almost all the young men carried three things with them on their arduous journey: a toothbrush, torn newspaper or magazine articles about the torture and violence in their

homelands, and portions of the Bible that were well worn and usually underlined and marked up with denotations.

Frank was curious about this small collection of things. He understood the toothbrush and the news articles, but he was especially curious about the choice of Bible passages they brought. Frank says that almost all of the young men said about these Scriptures, “This is my story!!!” Frank discovered that what they tended to bring were portions of the Gospels, some prophetic texts, the Exodus story about the flight from slavery to the promised land, and some of the Psalms. This was their canon within the canon. These were the texts that had implanted themselves in their hearts, souls and minds. These were the texts that sustained them and gave them hope!

Frank writes that he was deeply moved by these conversations. He writes that “All that I had read and discussed [about the Bible] took on a decidedly more personal and helpful focus for my own journey along life’s way. ‘Getting through’ to the ‘other side’ in life’s challenges by often discovering ‘a way through no way’ (that wonderful Gospel expression) has richly blessed my ‘always.’ In ways beyond words, I have come to understand deep in my soul that ‘God is still speaking...’ in such surprising, marvelous ways ‘known and to be made known.’ The passion in the eyes, voices and tears of those young boys keeps me knowing and growing, reaching and trying.” Isn’t that a marvelous description of how and why the Bible Should Be So Highly Valued!

In closing I would like to just briefly comment on the other two passages from Exodus and the Psalms. The Exodus passage contains the well known Ten Commandments. So often when one mentions the Bible to people they

automatically think of passages like the Ten Commandments and they think of it as a list of do's and don'ts, mostly don'ts! Even the James passage could be read as a list of do's and don'ts. But to reduce the Bible to this is to miss most of the power of the implanted word. Yes, we find guidelines for living and we find ideals to aim for, but the Bible is about much more than this. It is about developing a living relationship with God and coming to see ourselves as children of God.

Good parents are not thought of primarily for their lists of do's and don'ts. True, good parents must, from time to time, enforce discipline and take disciplinary action, but this is not the essence of being a good parent. A good parent will be remembered for the loving atmosphere they created, for the time they spent with their children embodying that love. The same holds true for the God we discover in and through the Bible.

I love the way that Eugene Peterson translates the portion of Psalm 19 that goes, "The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together. The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road. The life-maps of God are right, showing the way to joy! Amen. May it be so!"

