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"Understanding the Bible" GPPC 1-5-20
Psalm 147:12-20, John 1:10-18

One of my preaching professors says many years ago he accepted the invitation to become the interim pastor at a local congregation. As it is with most preachers, he spent quite some time crafting his first sermon for the church. He worked on delivery and content hoping to make a good first impression on folks. After the service he walked a bit nervously to the coffee hour to hear what response he might get from the faithful.

He writes, "The first one to meet me at coffee hour was a young man who came up and said, not very supportively, 'I completely disagree with what you said.' I thought back over the various theological statements I made in the sermon, thinking that they hadn't seemed to me very controversial and puzzled a little bit about what he thought was wrong. Then he explained to me. 'You said that Mark wrote that the disciples had left their nets and followed Jesus, . . . but everyone knows it wasn't Mark who wrote that; it was really the Holy Spirit and Mark was just like a pen in the Holy Spirit's hand.'

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“Well,” says my professor, “that was my first but not my last encounter with those Christians who have moved from the valid view that the Bible is the inspired word of God to what I think is the remarkable view that the biblical writers were somehow just Dictaphones for the Holy Spirit.” (From a sermon by David L. Bartlett, Nov. 16, 1975.)

I want us to think about two questions this morning. One, how do we interpret the Bible *responsibly*? And two, how might we read the Bible more *fruitfully*?

In recent years some people have simply dismissed the Bible as irrelevant or a “fairy tale.” But that’s not an option for Christians. On the other hand, it’s become popular to say, “I’m a Bible believing Christian.” Or “We’re a Bible believing church.” When people disagree on controversial issues such as the rights of LGBTQ folks, reproductive rights, capital punishment, and war, one is likely to hear, “Well, so and so just doesn’t believe in the Bible.”

Of course, the real problem is that “so and so” does not interpret the Bible as I do. And no one reads the Bible without interpreting it. I think it

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was minister Will Campbell who told about getting into an argument with a man who said he took all of Scripture *literally*. Campbell said, “That’s good. Jesus says he came to proclaim release to the captives. What do you say we go on down to the jail and let some prisoners out!”

Scripture must be interpreted. And throughout the centuries Scripture has been interpreted in many ways—sometimes allegorically, other times typologically, still other times metaphorically. In the 1800s a *new* way of interpreting the Bible was born. It was known as inerrancy. By this term people meant that every single word in the Bible had been written by God without error. The people who wrote the words down were said to have been like machines with God moving their pens across the parchment. This new interpretation was condemned as heresy or false teaching by the larger church. But the inerrancy approach has been embraced by fundamentalists and some evangelicals in the 20th and 21st centuries.

There are fatal flaws in this position. For example, what do you do with texts such as Psalm 137:9 which says, "Happy shall they be who take

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your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

What are we going to do with 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 which says women must pray and prophecy with a veil on their heads? Should we go out and buy a bunch of hats?

How about we tell women to be silent in church as we read in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35? (Try it, and let me know how that goes for you.)

Anybody want to advise slaves to obey their masters without complaint as we read in Titus 2:9?

We Presbyterians do not believe in inerrancy. Yet we take the Bible seriously, so seriously that we've developed criteria for interpreting scripture. <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/presbyterian-understanding-and-use-holy-scripture/>

Here are just nine of the criteria for how biblical texts are interpreted and rightly used. 1. "The purpose of Scripture has to do with questions about the ultimate origin, meaning, and goal of human life in relation to God . .

. . Scripture is not authoritative for any and everything, in any and every question." In other words, the Bible is not a science text book. 2. "In matters of faith, life, and salvation, Scripture takes precedence over all

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other authorities. However, the precedence of Scripture does not call for the disregard of other authorities.” As other Christian traditions suggest, we look at Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. 3. “The Centrality of Jesus Christ.” Correct interpretations must be consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus. 4. “The Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture.” We interpret Scripture within the context of the whole Bible, not isolated snippets here and there. 5. “The Rule of Love.” Right interpretation of the Bible seeks to increase love of God and of all people, no exceptions. 6. “The Rule of Faith.” We interpret with the help of the larger Church’s past and present understanding of the Bible. 7. “The Fallibility of All Interpretation.” “Every reading, confession, and theology that refers to Scripture is subject to testing by further and more faithful searching of the Scripture to see if it is genuinely in accord with the Bible’s witness.” 8. “The Relation of Word and Spirit.” “After we have done the best we can with all the means at our disposal, we depend upon God’s Spirit to enable us rightly to hear and believe and obey.” And 9, all these criteria work together; none can be tossed aside.

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We believe the Bible was *inspired* by God, not written by God. In other words, God moved the biblical writers to write, and what they wrote are human words. As the Presbyterian Confession of 1967 puts it, "The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of [human beings], conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written."

So though the Bible is a book of *human* words they become *holy* words when they are understood through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our Directory for Worship says, "The Church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit."

The key is that through the power of the Holy Spirit these old words of the Bible still become living words, God's word. And most important they point to the Living Word, Jesus Christ. "And the Word became *flesh* and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

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The Bible is interpreted through the lens of Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. That's a challenge, because despite what people will tell you, Jesus is not someone who can be neatly labeled. Remember he said, "until heaven and earth pass away not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law . . ." So Jesus wasn't a wild-eyed radical telling people to break *all* the rules. At the same time he *did* break the Sabbath rules and said, "The Sabbath was made for humanity." So Jesus wasn't a traditionalist either. And the risen Christ refuses to be confined to safe, comfortable categories. Instead, we love and grapple with Christ every day as our faith changes and grows. And at least part of loving and grappling with Jesus Christ comes through reading the Bible. Let me suggest a few ways to read the Bible more profitably.

First, read the Bible in large chunks. Devotional guides such as "These Days" and "The Upper Room" are nice. But you don't get the flow of a passage by just reading one or two verses. Scripture is best understood when read in much larger sections. Try at least a chapter at a time and with the letters in the New Testament try reading a letter at a time. As we

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did as a congregation a few years ago, try reading through the entire Bible in a year. (Let me know if I can help you with this.)

Second, read the Bible using a reliable translation. The King James Version is lovely, but it's not accurate for study. I recommend the New Revised Standard Version that we use in the pulpit and pews. The New Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version is especially helpful for personal study because it includes scholarly notes that clarify what we read.

Third, read the Bible with a good commentary. I really like *The Westminster Bible Companion Series* edited by Patrick Miller and David Bartlett. It's scholarly and written especially for laypeople. And I recommend a one volume commentary—the *HarperCollins Bible Commentary* edited by James L. Mays and its helpful companion volume, the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* edited by Paul Achtemeier. I can recommend a few other commentaries if you're interested.

A fourth way to read the Bible fruitfully is to read it with a Sunday school class or with a small group. Sunday school and small groups are

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important because proper understanding of the Bible is not simply a private experience. It's an act of the whole church and an act in which we call upon the church's scholars to help us with understanding.

Finally, and most important, we read the Bible profitably when we read it *prayerfully*. When we read the Bible prayerfully amazing things happen. We encounter ourselves in the pages. We find sinful people, prone to pride and stupidity, but also people created in the image of God, called to be a partner in God's work, capable of sacrifice and love, forgiven and made whole.

And more important, we encounter God in the pages. We meet God (or better God meets us)--majestic and wonderful, holy, terrifying, and judging, but finally merciful, forgiving, and loving.

In the Bible, at the very least we find wisdom and hope. At best we find life. Join me in a New Year's resolution to read the Bible more this year. You'll be amazed at what you find. And you'll be amazed at how *you* are found through the Word made flesh. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal