

**A Sermon preached at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Tacoma WA**  
by The Reverend Martin Yabroff

**Proper 24, Year C-2010**

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Lessons: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

A preacher once startled his congregation by asking: "How many of you would like to receive a personal message from God to guide you in dealing with your problems and to help you make sense out of life?" After some hesitation, nearly every hand was raised. "Very well", said the pastor. "I'll tell you where you can find such a message." That pastor was neither a fanatic nor a fundamentalist. He reached into the pulpit and held up a Bible. "You may have to read this book fairly extensively before you encounter the message that is addressed especially to you." He said. "But I can guarantee that if you read it faithfully, God will speak to you through it, just as genuinely and personally as if God had sent you a telegram (or an e-mail)". (Louis Cassels, *A Christian Primer*, p. 37)

I believe that this is true. But the Scriptures are so often misunderstood and mis-read, under the banners of fundamentalism and literalism; and verses are mis-used as 'spiritual hand grenades' to lob at those you disagree with. (Remember when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, Satan argued by quoting Scripture.)

Today in our Epistle reading (2 Timothy 3:16-17) Paul writes that "*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.*" So let us consider the Bible and what to do with it.

The Episcopal Church is a Bible-church: united yes by Eucharistic community, but also by sharing in the Story of the People of God. Our liturgy is thoroughly biblical in words and images. 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican theologians were clear that while we look to Scripture, Tradition and Reason as sources of authority, the Bible is the primary authority for faith and doctrine. Every bishop, priest and deacon at ordination publicly signs a statement declaring that he or she believes the Holy Scriptures to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary for salvation. And if all that wasn't enough, every Sunday we hear four portions of the Bible – more than most Baptist churches in formal reading. (And from a lectionary to ensure we consider the whole Canon.)

At the same time, we do not - as Christians and Episcopalians - worship the Bible. The Bible is not God. The focus of our faith, the center of life is God, and what is most important is being in relationship with God through the expression of God's love in Jesus Christ. That is what is most important.

Now we can experience God in all sorts of ways, and learn and grow in all sorts of ways. But the primary and most direct teacher and guide we have is the Bible. How? – listen to the words of our Episcopal catechism, in the back of the prayerbook: **We call the Bible the Word of God because God inspired its human authors and because**

**God speaks to us through the Bible.** We don't read the Bible for the sake of the Bible but in order to know God better. John's Gospel says this: (20:30-31) *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Or, as some of you know, there is a Zen saying: when you have a finger pointing at the moon, don't stare at the finger.

How then shall we read and understand the Bible as the Word of God? Here are five quick guides which are necessary to hear and experience God through the Bible.

**First, read it personally.** Consider what is experienced in the stories and testimonies, and how they illuminate our own lives and experience of God and faith. The Biblical stories express trust and doubt, struggle and hope – they can help us to hear God speaking in our own experiences and to our nation and world.

**Second, read it critically.** We must use our God-given minds. Don't take verses out of context but compare the witness of one part of the Bible with another, and the setting in which God speaks to the particular author.

The Bible consists of 66 books, a variety of genres: history, poetry, letters, stories – all sorts of ways God inspired the human authors and ways they wrote out of their experiences. The Bible is therefore not a simple legal constitution, where each verse and chapter is clearly binding in itself alone. It is more like a cultural library, which we engage to understand the culture and experience of the people who produced it and so are enriched ourselves.

**Third, read it humbly.** The authority of the Scriptures is the authority of God. We read and engage the Bible to hear and consider God's authority beyond our own experience. Just like we must not take verses out of context, so also we must not make our own experience and personal perspectives our ultimate authority. We listen for and seek God, a higher power, as we engage the stories of faith which form and found our community.

**Fourth, read it persistently.** Today we hear Jesus' story of a woman seeking justice from an uncaring judge. She didn't make her request and then go away and expect results. She kept asking, seeking, until justice was done. So also, we need to read, mark, learn, explore the Biblical stories and witness, to let them inform our living and seeing, and be formed by them. Then we shall begin to experience God as those authors did.

Today we live in a culture and world that does not know the Bible. We need to know it ourselves, and encourage others, for it is our primary guide to know God, to grow spiritually, and that is a great hunger today.

Jeremiah speaks in our first lesson of the Word, the Law, not just being an abstraction, information, but getting on our hearts, in our lives.

**Fifth and finally, read it in community.** Check your reading with that of others. Consider the teachings of the Church, the Tradition, so that each of us may understand

better, beyond our own blind spots, sharing our insights with those around us. (In this, remember the Indian parable of the blind men all feeling different parts of an elephant. Together in community, as the Church, we shall come to know God who is beyond any one's own understanding.

Finally, a few notes on reading the Bible. (If you need one, see me.) If you haven't read much, start with the Gospels, what does Jesus care about? In the Epistles, what are Paul's concerns and how do they relate to ours today? What was the relationship of God and God's people in the Old Testament? How are the Psalms rather frank and revealing expressions of our own inner lives and emotions?

As you read, don't get hung up on details – you can go back for those. Rather, consider what stirs in you, what is the Spirit saying to you? Let it go from your head to your heart.

The Collect appointed for the second to last Sunday of the Church year is one of my favorites, and we tend to miss it because of Thanksgiving or Stewardship. Please turn with me to page 236 in the (red) Book of Common Prayer:

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*