

Inspired Word
Psalm 119:10-16 & 2 Tim. 3:10-17
Sunday
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When I was twenty years old, my next door neighbor got married and I fell in love with one of the groomsmen at the rehearsal dinner. I don't know what Richard said that night, but I know he was speaking about his Christian faith, and I knew I wanted to keep listening. And though we only played tennis the morning of the wedding, I knew I wanted to spend more time together. And though he was in med school at the University of Florida and I was in undergraduate school at the University of N. Carolina, we spanned the distance with letters, lots of them. Every time Richard wrote, I would pour over every word as if to consume it.

The scriptures have been called God's love letter to us, though they are not the love of letter of infatuation but the love letter of One who knows us well, our failures and our faithfulness. The scriptures aim to show us by stories, by teachings, and by poetry how much God desires a deep and abiding relationship with us. Because the Bible has been abused by some Christians and ignored by others, we find ourselves sometimes wondering how we really feel about Holy Scripture. Certain parts of it leave us mystified and quite frankly, uninspired and that's why we need to remember that the Bible is first and foremost, a witness to Christ the living Word.

Today as we give thanks for the gift of Holy Scripture, we seek to understand what kind of authority scripture is for us, and how it inspires us and helps us to know God's love. There is no more comprehensive example of the right kind of reverence for God's glory mediated through Holy Scripture than the 119th Psalm. You might be glad to hear we are not reading the entire 176 verses, where the writer takes all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and starts every line of each section with that particular letter in acrostic poem-style. Hear all the warm and loving words the psalmist uses to speak about God's commands and ponder with

me how we might recover such a reverence for the inspired word of God and a desire to live according to its truth.

Psalm 119:10-16

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¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. ¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you. ¹² Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes. ¹³ With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth. ¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches. ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. (NRS)

Singing: Listen to the word that God has spoken. Listen to the word that is close at hand. Listen to the voice that began creation. Listen even if you don't understand.

Are we listening to the word that God has spoken? Are we delighting in these sacred writings, these Holy words, these stories of the faith? Or are we so embarrassed by the way they've been abused through the years by some, that we are keeping our distance, afraid that some ancient language and concepts will take us down a path we cannot bear to go?

How do we sift through the culturally-laden language of the 1st and 2nd century and to understand the core kernel truths of Holy Scripture? By reading them in the company of God's people - past and present. By listening, even if we don't understand. By making sure we let Scripture read us - as we read it - by being open to the Holy Spirit who lives in us and helps us to hear what we need to hear, but testing that in the company of faithful others.

In the early days of my ministry, it seemed an important role for a Presbyterian minister in the Bible belt of the United States to help people recover from Bibliolatry, the worship of the Bible, and from Biblical bullying, where people came to church, having been pounded over the head and heart by well-meaning Pharisaical Christians. But now as approach thirty years of ministry, I am less concerned with Bibliolatry and Biblical bullying and more concerned with Biblical illiteracy and Christian distraction. Never has there been easier access to multiple translations

of the Bible, to commentary and proclamation about the texts, and to great children's Bible story books.

But life moves at such a pace that many people perceive themselves to be too busy to read or study the Bible. Tied to little motivation is little reverence.

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But having said that, I would like to say that I am encouraged that Peace has a Men's group and a Women's Group meeting weekly to study scripture together with a prayerful spirit of openness. Each of those groups has a dozen or more participants. In addition, Peace's ministry teams read a piece of scripture with prayerful attention at the beginning of every meeting, and Peace has at least half of its adult participants engaging some of the time in Sunday morning learning together, which is tethered to scripture, even if not a Bible study. On top of that, I'd like to thank you for staying with me, as I try to make every sermon hang close to the scripture, which means often sacrificing many of the anecdotes and stories which would entertain you on a Sunday but might not inspire and challenge you by God's word. So keep up the good work, friends. Every little moment of discipline makes a difference in shaping us toward the image of Christ.

Hear now Paul's encouragement to his protégé Timothy about keeping the sacred writings, being inspired by them, and by the life of those saints whose example of faith is our strength and vision.

2 Timothy 3:10-17

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹ my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³ But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for

correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (NRS)

Notice that Timothy is charged to observe Paul's teaching and conduct, goals, faith, character and suffering, as a witness to what God can do. Whether this letter was written by Paul or by a disciple of Paul, writing in his name, which was common, these words seem to come at a time of discouragement. Timothy is reminded that faithfulness often leads to persecution, but God can be trusted to rescue.

Timothy is challenged in difficult days to persist -- to continue in what he has learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom -- and that's plural "whom" - (taking us back to his mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice who are mentioned earlier)¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

The sacred writings surely refer to the Hebrew scriptures, because at this point, what we know as New Testament was not compiled. But the message is clear - we need scripture and we need the example of faithful others - the saints.

Scripture is inspired or God-breathed and thereby useful to us with the goal being our right living and our ability to share Gospel truths with others. Many caught up in Bibliolatry (worship of the Bible) utilize these verses to call for the inerrancy or infallibility of the Scripture, but we would always say insist on authority, because we believe scripture needs interpretation and an honest wrestling. But as I have studied this passage this week, it became clear to me that this passage is just as much about the witness and strength that comes through the saints of the church, the example of fellow strugglers in the faith, as it is about the sacred writings.

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we remember that it was the Reformers and the invention of the printing press that put the scriptures in the hands of the people. It was the Reformers who

insisted on the people's education so that they could read the scriptures for themselves. It is hard for us to imagine that in Europe in the 1500s only about one out of five people could read at all. The ability to read and understand empowers people in faith and in democracy and in just about every other way.

Sadly there are still about ten countries in the world where literacy still hovers at about 30 percent. In those countries, people are easily mis-led, abused, manipulated. The Reformers intent was to stop abuse of the people by the powerful. Their intent was not to divide the church, but to re-form the church according to the Word of God.

According to the last verse of our reading in the Letter to Timothy, the purpose of the God-breathed word is this: ¹⁷ *so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

So this God-breathed scripture helps us to see that we belong to God, who loves us with an everlasting love. When we are captured by this love, we naturally want to grow closer to God by pouring over God's words with devoted attention. We do not worship the words themselves. We worship the Triune God whom we come to know in the sacred word. Jesus Christ is the Living Word, capital W, the logos, is the Bread of life. I'd like to end with words from the book of James, "Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. (James 1:21)