

“BACK TO SCHOOL: III - BIBLE 101”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Psalm 1

Christian Education Sunday

Luke 4:16-21

Today, as you all know is Christian Education Sunday in our church. I love this day in our church year. I look forward to it ever year, not just because we get to recognize and dedicate our Christian Education teachers and leaders, but more because it's the day we give Bibles to our second graders. It's such a special day for them. I watch them as they get their Bibles, and take them back to their seats. I watch them look at their names engraved on the cover in gold, and then as they carefully open them up and hear that wonderful crinkling sound that new books make when they're first opened. I see them flipping through and looking at the pictures, and then watch as their parents help them find the readings for the morning so they can follow along.

And as I watch them, I pray that the book that is so special to them today will stay that way for the rest of their lives - and that they will never lose that particular Bible. I still have mine. I've shown it to you before. It's pretty beat up - with tape down its side, and the colors on the binding faded. But it still has that wonderful page that reads - presented to Karen Bunnell by the Elkton Methodist Church School on August 30, 1964 - written in Virginia Biles' handwriting! My first Bible!

These children today will have the opportunity to turn to their Bible everyday to learn, and receive encouragement, inspiration, and direction for their lives. But sadly, they also will have the choice not to do that - to let it sit on their desk or somewhere else in their house, and treat it like an ornament, admired but never touched. Sadly, many have made that choice, and let that happen.

I read this week a story about a pastor who was new to a church, and was called on one day to teach the boys' Sunday School class, because their teacher was sick. He was excited to get to know the boys, and he decided he would find out what they knew, sort of as a starting point for their discussion. So he asked them, "who knocked down the walls of Jericho?" Immediately the boys started in, "it wasn't me. I didn't do it. Don't look at me."

Well, disturbed by their lack of knowledge of the Biblical story, the pastor, at the next Board of Deacons' meeting, brought it up. He lamented to the church leaders, "Not one of those boys knew who knocked down the walls of Jericho." The group was silent until one of the veteran deacons spoke up. "Preacher, this

appears to be bothering you a lot. But I've known these boys since they were born and they're good boys, If they said they didn't do it, I believe them. Let's just take some money out of the repair and maintenance fund, fix the walls, and let it go at that."

(Sermonillustrations.com)

That would be funny, if it weren't so sad. Contrast that with what happened to another new preacher. He went out to make some visits in his new parish one day, and knocked on the door of a member of the church. It was obvious someone was at home - the car was in the driveway, he could hear the noise from the television, but despite his repeated knocking, no one came to answer the door. So finally, he took out one of his business cards, wrote Revelation 3:20 on the back of it and stuck it in the door.

The next Sunday, when the offering was processed, his business card was found in it, and was returned to him. Added to what he had written, was now written: Genesis 3:10. Reaching for his Bible to check the citation, he cracked up when he read what it said.

His message had been Rev. 3:20 - which reads: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

Their's - from Genesis - "I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid for I was naked."

Now, there's somebody that reads and knows their Bible!!

Well, at any rate, I thought it would be helpful on this special day in our church when we present Bibles to our children, that we go "back to school" and spend some time in Bible 101.

Let me tell you some facts about the Bible. Did you know that it is the best selling book of all times? It has been translated into 1200 languages. It contains 66 books, over 31,000 verses, and over 750,000 words! It was written by a number of people over a period of 1400 years.

If you have one with you, or near you, I invite you to pick it up and flip through it as I'm talking. Some of what I will say you'll already know, but maybe some of it will be new as well.

The Bible has two major sections - the first part being the Hebrew Scriptures, or what has historically been called the Old Testament, and then the second part is the New Testament.

The Old Testament begins with the Book of Genesis and goes all the way

through to Malachi, and the New Testament starts with Matthew and ends with the Book of Revelation. The dividing line between the Old and New Testaments is the birth of Jesus. The Old Testament contains the Pentateuch, which is a fancy name for the first five books of the Bible - the books of Moses - which start with creation and work through the giving of the law, and the history of the chosen people. There are also writings in the Old Testament - including ones we cherish like the Psalms and Proverbs, and books of the prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah and others.

Then in the New Testament are found the Gospels, and then the epistles or letters written by various people. The epistles and letters were written to the early church and beyond and are filled with wonderful words of guidance and direction on how we are to live as faithful Christians.

Let's spend a few moments with the Gospels, which I daresay are, along with the Psalms, the most read parts of the Bible. There are four Gospels - written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. All of them tell the story of Jesus - but all of them tell it in a different way. You can compare them side by side, and you'll see some of the same stories, but told differently.

Why? Because each one wrote his gospel for a different reason. Let me explain. Mark was the first Gospel written, and it was written at a time when the church was absolutely sure that Christ would return at any moment. So Mark's Gospel has a sense of urgency about it. He doesn't mince words. He gets right to his point. So urgent is he to make sure people are ready for Christ, and that they know just who He is, and what that means for them, he totally skips over the birth of Christ. Those details don't matter in what he wants the people to know. He goes right to the baptism of Jesus, and lets his readers know that what matters is what Jesus means, who He is, and what He did here on earth.

Matthew's take is different, because he writes later, and he writes his gospel specifically to Jewish Christians. So his gospel starts out with the genealogy of Jesus, to make clear his Jewish lineage.

Luke is a historian, so his gospel has a different feel still. He writes to Gentile Christians, and his gospel is rich with stories about the lost being found - the lost coin, the prodigal son, and so on - letting his readers know that even the lost - the outsider - the Gentiles - are loved by God.

And finally, John's gospel is totally, totally different from the others. John's gospel, unlike the others which were about Jesus' life and ministry, is more of a theological statement on who Jesus is. That's why he starts out at the very beginning with these words: In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," and continues to talk about Jesus as the

light of the world, the bread of life, the way.

The four gospels are all different, yet all wonderful. Put them all together, and you get a wonderful, full picture of our Lord and Savior, and then read on in the New Testament, and you get guidance and direction for how to live in the light of His love and sacrifice.

This Bible is an amazing and wonderful gift from God that, to quote an official United Methodist statement, “contains all things necessary and sufficient unto salvation” (UM Articles of Religion) and “is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice.” (UM Confession of Faith)

So you would think, would you not, that there would be nothing controversial about the Bible? Well, sadly, you would think wrong. Because since the word was put down on page, there has been enormous struggle over it as well.

There have been arguments about how the original languages were translated, there have been arguments over which books should be included (did you know that the Roman Catholic version of the Bible contains some additional books not included in our's)?

There's been a boatload of arguments about how the Bible should be read and interpreted, and those battles are alive and raging today. Some believe that every single word of the Bible is absolutely, positively true, and should be followed to the letter of the law, while others believe that the Bible needs to be read with an eye to the context in which and for which the words were written.

And very sadly, the Bible has been used as a weapon at times, and has been used to support some pretty ugly things - like slavery, and domestic violence. But rather than dwell on that, let's turn to what we United Methodists believe about the Bible.

We believe that, in the words of preacher Adam Hamilton, the Bible is a human and divine document - a document written by humans who were inspired by God. We believe that the Bible is one of the most powerful ways that God speaks to us. It is the great story of God, God's actions and God's love.

Hamilton actually has a wonderful way of showing just what the Bible means to us. He compares it to Holy Communion, in this way. He said that bread is made, and juice is made, and that “we can analyze the ingredients that go into the bread and into the wine. And we can describe the production process that formed them. We know who pours the wine and bakes the bread for Holy Communion. All this is done by human hands.”

“But something happens to this bread and wine as people come forward to receive it during Holy Communion. The Holy Spirit uses the bread and wine as an instrument by which grace is imparted. People come to the Lord’s table as an expression of their faith. They come seeking to meet Christ in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. This meal becomes holy, as they receive it. As they eat it they receive, in tangible form, the grace of God.”

He continues: “I see the Bible in much the same way. It is a kind of Eucharist, written by human beings, shaped by their historical context, their limitations, and their agendas, yet used by God, despite its imperfections, in a sacramental way. Through the Bible, God imparts grace, and wisdom, truth and hope. As we approach it, listening carefully for God to speak, this book teaches, and reproves, corrects, and trains us so that we are ready to do God’s work. (Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, p. 68 & 69)

I love that. How he says that this book is written by humans, inspired by God, and it becomes the Word for us when we listen to it. It is a wonderful Word - and it is our story. Read the Bible from cover to cover and you will see the thread of God’s love running through it - from beginning to end - from Creation to Covenant to Christ to the Church to the Coming Kingdom. It is all about God and God’s love.

It is a powerful book, it has the power to change your life.

So as I finish this morning, I want to invite you to make a renewed commitment to reading the Bible. Find whatever translation works best for you. You know, there are tons of different translations of the Bible. We use the New Revised Standard Version here in worship, but there are so many others - the King James Version, the New International Version, the Contemporary English Version - I could go on and on. There are also some wonderful paraphrases, which are not word for word translations - one called *The Message* is particularly good.

I say, find a translation that works best for you, because you need to find one that is in a language that you understand. If “thee’s” and “thou’s” are off-putting, well then the King James Version is not for you. If you want things broken down into modern day language, *The Message* might just be right up your alley.

Let me just give you a brief illustration of what I mean:

Here’s John 3:16 in three different versions:

First, King James: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Secondly, New Revised Standard - For God so loved the world that He gave His only son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life.

And finally, from *The Message* - This is how much God loved the world: He gave His Son, his one and only son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.

See what I mean? Find the one with which you're most comfortable, because you're more likely to stick with Bible reading consistently if you do.

So please, renew your commitment to read your Bible. Read it, pray over it, write down your thoughts about what you read in a journal, read it along with a daily devotional like the Upper Room, study it with a friend or family member, or join a Bible study. And yes, wrestle with it. Question what you don't understand, look for answers, figure out what it means for you.

Reading the Bible will not always be easy. There are some disturbing things in here. But let me give you a clue how to deal with them - look at them through the lens of Jesus. Let me explain by way of a Biblical passage. In the Gospels, we read about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. When the bystanders were so ready to stone her for her sin, Jesus speaks up, and says, "You heard that it was said . . ." and then he quotes Old Testament scripture that says someone should be stoned for adultery, but then he adds, "but I say, 'let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone.'" And he turns to the woman and, in the face of her confession, forgives her and sets her free to begin anew.

That's what I mean by looking at things through the lens of Jesus. What would Jesus do? What does this word from the Word, whatever it is, really mean in the light of Jesus?

Well, I could go on and on - there is so much to say about this wonderful book. Let me just finish with two brief quotes. The first is from the famous theologian Karl Barth - who said that this book contains the words of God, but when we listen to it, really listen, it becomes **the Word** for our lives.

And the other comes from a man named Gipsy Smith. A man came up to him one day and said that he had received no inspiration from the Bible although he had gone through it several times. Smith replied, "Let it go through you once, then you will tell a different story!" (Sermonillustrations.com)

My friends, that is my invitation to you today. Go through the Bible, read it regularly, and then let it go through you. It will change your life!

Amen.