

Our Life with the Bible – BMC’s Fall Worship Series Introductory Sermon

Good morning. As Barb noted in her welcome, today we begin a new worship series on the theme of “Our Life with the Bible.” I like this title because it orients us, not at the level of abstract ideas and doctrines, but at the level of our basic experience as Christians. We just *are* a people that spend time with or have a life with the Bible. Whether we are a people who practice daily bible reading or turn to the Bible in especially difficult times in life, or simply hear the words of scripture read to us at Church on Sundays, the Bible is for all of us a central part of our identity as Christians. In good times and in bad, we regularly gather around this ancient library of writings that have been passed down through history, collected, bound into a single “book” and called “Holy.” And oh it is a Holy collection – set apart for us to come to and listen for God’s Word for us.

As I thought about my own life with the Bible, I looked on my bookshelf and discovered what I suspect some of you may also discover if you look around your house, namely, the presence of multiple Bibles there! One bible on my bookshelf stood out to me, and that was this Bible, my Youth Walk devotional bible, given to me by my sister Tiphonie in 1996, the year I became a teenager. As I flipped through it, I found myself having a couple of different reactions. First, I found myself a bit taken aback by some of what I would now see as theologically problematic “study aids” on what were deemed “Hot Topics” in 1996 – oh have times changed since 1996. I also found myself reflecting, however, on how significant this Bible was for me in my Teen years. I was reminded of this by all the underlining I had done in it – many of the underlined verses remain significant to me today. I wonder, how many of you have Bibles at

home that have a special significance to you, that paint a picture of a stage of your own faith journey? Maybe this is something that can be discussed a bit in worship response time.

Now, while it is true that we are a people who “do life together with the Bible,” we must also say that as we gather around this collection of sacred writings, our experiences with it are quite diverse. It is a collection that all at once has inspired hope in difficult times, confused and caused us to scratch our heads, offended and caused us to want to look away, and through all of these experiences, shaped our identity over the years. During the course of this series, I look forward to exploring together the full range of our experiences with scripture, including hearing from several members of the congregation as they share stories of their “life with the Bible” and how particular sacred writings have shaped them. This morning, however, in this introduction to the series, I thought it would be helpful to reflect a bit more on the Bible itself and on why Christians through the ages have valued it so much that they and we today would gather around it regularly and listen to the words it contains.

In our scripture reading from 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul gives us one answer of why Christ-followers through the ages have valued the words contained in the Bible:

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.

For the rest of my sermon this morning, I want to briefly reflect on these words and especially the word “inspired” in this verse, as I think it can help us frame our life with the Bible in the broad context of our beautiful and complicated lives. But first, as an aside, I want to make a quick comment regarding two words Paul uses in 2 Timothy 3:16, namely “All Scripture.” What is being referred to in this context as “all scripture” and how does it relate to what we now today call “the Bible.” Most bible scholars would agree that anytime the words “all Scripture” or just

“Scripture” are referred to in the New Testament, such as when Jesus or Paul refer to “Scripture being fulfilled,” it refers not to the Bible as we know it today, a book with covers whose contents include the writings of both the Old and the New Testament in the order we find them. Rather, the sacred writings referred to in 2 Timothy and in other New Testament texts would have been a reference to the many well-known stories and collected texts from the Hebrew Bible, what we Christians call the Old Testament. So, in the context of 2 Timothy at least, it is the sacred writings that are found in the Hebrew bible that are inspired by God and useful for teaching and training in righteousness. Of course, as the Gospels and Letters of Paul and other New Testament writings were eventually circulated and copied regularly and used in Christian communities, early Christians would later describe those writings too as also “inspired” and useful for all the reasons listed in 2 Timothy – and indeed as a kind of normative commentary on the Old Testament. The process of collecting the writings of the New Testament took quite some time, though, and included a fair bit of sifting through other writings circulating at the time in order to separate what would be determined as the wheat from the chaff.

Now, it doesn’t take much more than a cursory glance over the contents of the Old Testament, not to mention the New, to see that this is no ordinary collection of writings and no easy-to-read “training manual” for righteousness! Given the fact that the Old Testament contains a diverse range of culturally unique material passed down over thousands of years, it is no easy task not only to translate from the original language of the writers into our own language, but even more difficult, to translate the personal and social importance of the material as it was written then, to the personal and social importance of the material as it is received now! To give you a sense of the scope of the challenge, listen to a brief (but incomplete) list of some of the different writings included in the Old Testament: Two stories telling about cosmic and creaturely

beginnings, including forbidden fruit, talking serpents, and flaming swords; stories of giants and strange angelic creatures, global floods and a life-saving ark, long pilgrim journeys across the near East, an enslaved people under foreign powers and their stammering hero, of a daring escape through a parted sea, of desert wanderings featuring bread from heaven and water from a rock, long lists of elaborate genealogies, commandments written on stone tablets, laws dictating food and purity laws and temple rituals, laws about clothing and farming, stories about chosen kings and rising kingdoms, bloody battles, greedy kings, royal intrigue and political betrayals, massive building projects, failing kings and falling kingdoms; not to mention hundreds of songs (including a racy love song), wise sayings, philosophical musings about life's meaninglessness, Prophetic protests against idolatry and injustice, a tale of a large sea creature who swallows a stubborn prophet, a story of a young Jewish heroine who becomes the Queen of Persia, a tale of a mother and her foreign daughter-in-law who stay faithful to each other through tragedy and find a new beginning with the help of a wealthy land-owner, and I could go on and on all day, but you would all begin filing out of here if I did, so I'll stop. What a totally unique collection of writings this is! Do we find it remarkable, then, to hear that these stories are "God-inspired?"

Let's turn to consider this word "inspired" together, for it has been a source of some controversy over the years. The word used by Paul in 2 Tim. 3:16 means something literally like "Godbreathed." Now what exactly does that mean? In his book with that title, *Godbreathed: What It Really Means for the Bible to Be Divinely Inspired*, author Zack Hunt points out that scripture itself talks of something else being breathed into existence by God, namely *us*! God's Spirit has breathed life into us, human beings made of the dust, has spoken blessing and peace into our lives, and has begun to shape us into a Holy people. Scripture, too, is made of the stuff of the earth; it too is a creature of God, you might say, and it too is a creature made Holy

precisely as God's Spirit has infused God's wisdom and life and Word into it to make it Holy as God continues to do until this day.

In the last couple hundred years, some have taken the word "inspired" to mean something quite different than the sense I've just given of Scripture being made Holy by God's life-giving Spirit. Sometimes this word has been combined with other words, like "infallible" for example, to suggest that there really was very little human influence or impact on the scriptures, that they must have been dictated perfectly, almost word-for-word, from God into the ear of the authors; or even more extreme, that the Bible is somehow divine itself. Most of the reason doctrines like this propagate, I think, are because of our human anxiety, especially in the modern world, over whether the Bible can be seen as reliable in the face of scientific advancements or in light of our exposure to an extremely diverse world of cultural and religious pluralism.¹ The irony, of course, is that in our scripture reading for today, Paul doesn't mention anything about the Scripture's reliability on the basis of its scientific credibility or by comparing it to other religious texts, and why should he? Paul simply *assumes as a given* the practical, experiential fact that the stories and laws and wisdom of Scripture have been, through ages past and into the present, useful, and valuable (*óphelimos*) for communities as they have sought to be taught, reproved, corrected, and trained in righteousness by the God who has called them. The problem with doctrines of Biblical Infallibility is that they become too focused on defending ideas *about* the Bible, and less about the work of being *shaped by the Spirit of God through the compelling, complicated, troubling, and powerful stories of the Bible approached in the context of worship, study, and prayer*. When dogma is our starting point, we quench the Spirit's transformative potential to speak to us through Scripture. After all, God didn't just breathe these words into existence through scores of

¹ Or, even more common, doctrines like this become useful as a way of simply "proving" the rightness of our perspective so that we can avoid the hard work of listening to those we disagree with.

faithful people through the ages to now depart from this world, leaving us ideas and doctrines that stand in substitute of the Spirit. Rather, just as God's inspiration helped produce these words through the regular and often complicated lives of human beings like us, so too does God's Spirit now use these words to teach and transform us as we open our ears to hear God speak.

To say all of this doesn't resolve, of course, the many tensions that come from a discussion of how the church should *use* and *interpret* the Bible, or how to rightly appreciate its sacred value and its use for teaching, reproof, correcting, and training us in righteousness. After all, the Bible can be and in fact is used for any number of purposes throughout our world, many that are not, I think we would agree, always very good. Beyond being a resource for greeting the world with God's blessing reaching to the heights and depths through Christ's love, the Bible has been, and continues to be used to spread hate, justify exceptionalism, wars, and genocide, and prop up systems of oppression in our world.² As Christians, we need to be honest with ourselves here and say simply and clearly that there are many texts in the Bible that, if adopted as they are 'presented on the page,'³ lend themselves to such uses – stories of violence and exclusionary politics that, read without discernment and right judgment and without being judged against the standard of God's love as fully embodied in Christ's life, are hardly useful for teaching and correcting and training in righteousness. On this note, the fourth century bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, once laid down a rule for scripture reading and interpretation that I cannot recommend enough: if a passage of scripture cannot be plainly read in such a way as to lead you to "loving God and one's neighbor..." then you best interpret that passage in a more figurative

² Crucially, this is *not* because the Old Testament is brutal, violent, and backward while the New Testament shows the "real" or "actual" God revealed in Jesus Christ. This approach to interpretation is older than the Bible. Its main proponent, Marcion, thought to just cut out whole swaths of the OT and NT to find the "real" God.

³ I don't actually think there's such a thing as "presented on the page," because there is always someone reading the page.

way.⁴ This doesn't immediately solve all of our scripture-reading-dilemmas, but I think it is a pretty good start and one that can open up conversation rather than shut it down. There simply is no way of avoiding the work of wrestling with scripture as Jacob wrestled the angel – if we are going to want the blessing, we are going to have to put in the work. And so, perhaps that's as good a place as any to launch us into this worship series on "Our Life with the Bible," this "inspired," "Godbreathed" collection of writings that have shaped and continue to shape our lives as followers of Jesus. As readers of the Bible, we are united with the myriads of Christians through the ages who have sought the powerful, transformative, and living Word of God in the words of the Bible. May God honor our seeking and "bless our reading," that we may find what we need to be a people trained in righteousness, fulfilling God's Word by loving God and neighbor. AMEN

⁴ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, Book III, 10, 14.