

Inspiration

Deuteronomy 6:4-9Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

2 Timothy 3:14-17But 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.

Matthew 7:11-12If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! ¹² "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Inspiration

The past two weeks we've considered the sort of documents that make up the Bible and how the contents of the Bible were collected into an accepted official list over time. Today we'll spend a bit of time considering how to approach the Bible. The Bible was written over a period of at least 1000 years by people who lived in the late Bronze Age up through the time of the Roman Empire. Their cultures were very different from our society today. Add to that the different literary forms such as poetry, stories, sermons, law, visions, and sound bites of wisdom, and we realize that the Bible is a complex book.

It's tempting to approach this complex book too simply. I saw a video clip on a Christian comedy website that illustrates how our approach can be too simple. A ventriloquist was talking with his little friend. His friend said that he had condensed the Bible to a single twitter message. "You can't do that!" "It's done." "A twitter message, a tweet, is limited to 144 letters. How did you condense the Ten Commandments to fit in a tweet?" "Don't!"

Isn't that how we tend to think of the Ten Commandments sometimes? But in its simplicity, that approach leaves out all of the positive aspects – things like honoring your parents, taking a day of rest every week, and keeping things in perspective so that you are only worshipping and beholden to one God.

We read in Second Timothy that "all scripture is inspired by God." Here again, a simple approach can be insufficient. We can make the assumption that being inspired by God means that all of the Bible, every word even, was whispered into the ear of each of the writers. More than that we can assume that every word is true, true in the sense that it is factual. Actually, even though some people say that, they really don't believe it. In Isaiah 55:12 it says, "the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." Mountains don't sing and trees don't grow hands and start clapping. We understand that this is poetic language, it's figurative speech, it's metaphorical writing.

Another simple approach is to treat the Bible like it's an answer book – and a magical one at that. Have you ever been bothered by some issue and set the Bible on its spine and let it fall open on its own? And then did you shut your eyes and stab your finger blindly on the page, assuming that it would point to God's instructions or consolation? I confess I did this a time or two in my younger years. What do you do if your finger lands on **Psalms 137:9** "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" And if your finger should land on a spot in the book of Job,

there's a very good chance that you would get some of the bad advice that Job's friends gave him. It's very risky to blindly take scripture out of context!

The Bible isn't a science textbook. If someone had written that the earth spins on its axis and that causes night and day, they would have been declared delusional. If they said that God had told them so, then they would have been declared a heretic and possibly killed. Copernicus wrote that the earth revolved around the sun. Both Catholic and Protestant scholars declared that he was wrong because in the book of Joshua it says that Joshua told the sun to stand still, not the earth. Besides that, any fool can see the sun move across the sky, so it's obvious that the earth is still and the sun moves. The biblical writers lived long before the scientific method came to be, before science was even a concept, and it would have made no sense to describe the world in a scientific way back then. In fact, it would have caused the biblical writers to be ignored – or worse.

Twig and I were talking a few weeks ago and he told me how much he enjoyed focusing on the details in the Bible. I asked him to go take a close look at the story of Noah and let me know what he found. A few days later I saw Twig and he told me that he found two stories about Noah and the flood. Twig is right! He noticed that sometimes the details disagree with each other. In this morning's bulletin is a white insert with our closing hymn on one side and verses from the story of the flood on the other side. Take a look at that with me, if you will.

We see that in Genesis chapter six, verses nineteen and twenty, Noah is told to gather up a male and female pair of every kind of animal to go into the ark. Just to the right, we notice that chapter seven, verses two and three, say gather up one pair of the unclean animals and seven pairs of the animals that can be eaten, the clean animals. In 7:11 & 13, it says that on the day that the rains began, Noah and his family entered the ark. But in 7:7 & 10, we're told that Noah and his family went into the ark and seven days later the flood began. As we continue to read the account we can see that by one account, the flood lasted a year, but in other places we're led to understand that it lasted less than three months. In chapter nine, verse three, it sounds like people have been vegetarians up until the end of the flood and then God tells Noah and his family that they can eat all of the animals, as well. But in chapter eight, verse twenty, Noah built an altar and offered only clean animals and clean birds, animals and birds that were okay to eat.

Not only are there conflicting and confusing details, but there's another issue. The flood occurred centuries before the exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, but it wasn't until they escaped and went to Mount Sinai that there were any dietary laws about what could and could not be eaten. There was no clean and unclean until centuries after the flood.

So what is going on here? I most certainly would NOT want to claim that God told the writer a confused story with details that conflicted, as if God couldn't remember what happened! A close look at the passage in the original Hebrew reveals that there are two different names used for God in the flood story. Sometimes the word is *elohim*, which simply means God. In other places the word is YHWH, the holy name of God, the name too holy to be said aloud. Using that and the clues that we've talked about, scholars have teased apart two accounts of the flood that were interleaved and intertwined at some point. It isn't that God couldn't remember what happened, but that people remembered the flood in two ways. The purpose of the flood story isn't to be a historical account, but a theological account. It doesn't matter one iota whether it rained the day that Noah and his family entered the ark or seven days later. It doesn't make any difference if the flood lasted almost three months or a little over a year. But it is very significant that God so loved the creation that he rescued a righteous but very imperfect Noah and the wonderful diversity of animal life. It's a theological story about God's love and protection.

"The Bible tells Christians how our spiritual ancestors . . . saw things. The Bible includes their experiences of God, their stories about God, their understandings of life with God, and how we should live. It includes their wisdom, insight, and convictions. It also includes their limitations, blind spots, and misapprehensions."¹ The primary value of the Bible isn't as a science textbook, a

simple list of rules and regulations, or as a history book. No, the real value of the Bible is that it is about God. It's about how our ancestors came to know God, about their relationship with God, and about how their understanding about God developed over time. Much of it is a collection of stories that transmit important truths, divine truths. One of those truths is that God isn't out to get you – God is pursuing you to love you, and be loved by you!

Returning to our text in Second Timothy, we read, “All scripture is inspired by God.” “Inspired by God.” God's purpose, will, and presence have been breathed into and through these books. In them God is revealed to us. God didn't hand us the words, but spoke – and still speaks – in and through the writings that have been carefully treasured and preserved through the ages. The Bible is a vehicle, a means, by which the spirit of God continues to speak to us today. God didn't speak the words themselves, but spoke to our ancestors - and continues to speak to us today – in and through the text of the Bible.

The text in Second Timothy continues, saying that scripture is useful, useful for training in righteousness. This text makes no claim that scripture is a science or history textbook, nor does it define a canon of what constitutes scripture. The statement says scripture is useful for training in righteousness. Sometimes we tend to think that righteousness is about things like cussing, drinking, chewing tobacco, or limiting sex to a narrowly prescribed context. Righteousness isn't so much about the details of morality as it is about relationship with God. Relationship. When we really understand how much God loves us, and when we are motivated by our love of God, then a lot of our life falls into place. When we realize that God loves us immensely, and that God loves our neighbor next door just as much as us, and our neighbor far away, and the neighbors we don't like, all to the same degree that we are loved, then we begin to see the worth of every person and we can begin to love our neighbor as ourselves. Note where this passage points us. Training in righteousness equips us for every good work. The focus finally falls, not on our belief or our piety, even though they are important, but on equipping us for good works. Good works is an expression that is very much about how we treat other people. In scripture we find God, learn of God, and are trained so that we, like Christ, can go out and be servants of God, teaching, healing, feeding, and relieving suffering, performing indiscriminate good works for friend and stranger alike. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Open your Bible and find the treasure in it.
Be guided into relationship with God.
Get trained in righteousness.
Be equipped to do good works!

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian* (New York, Harper One, 2011) p 58