

The Good Book

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, October 16, 2022

Psalm 119:97-104
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Next month, the weekend before Thanksgiving, Denver, Colorado, will host the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, the world's largest gathering of scholars interested in the study of religion. More than 10,000 people are expected to descend upon the Mile High City for four days of academic sessions, workshops, meetings, receptions, and tours. With over a thousand events planned, the Program Book looks like a phone book.

The American Academy of Religion, which is dedicated to furthering knowledge about religion and religious institutions of all kinds, has about 9,000 members who teach in some 900 colleges, universities, seminaries, and schools in North America and abroad. Founded in 1909, it has grown to be the world's largest association of academics who study or teach religion. The Society of Biblical Literature, founded in 1880, is the oldest and largest learned society devoted to the critical study of the Bible from a variety of academic disciplines. It has more than 8,000 members around the world.

Why have thousands of scholars devoted their entire careers to the study of the Bible? Well, it's an important book and has been for centuries. It is undoubtedly the world's best-selling book of all time. The Bible is both important and popular, because it is our primary source for knowing about God, Jesus, and the early church. We call it "holy." In other words, we set it apart from all other literature. We hold it in high esteem. For Christians it is a book above all other books. It is sacred scripture. It is special to

our faith community, because it is "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ." Without it, we would know next to nothing about Jesus, and I dare say the Church would never have survived.

Through the centuries, people have found that in reading the Bible, one can encounter God anew. The Bible points beyond itself to God. It is like a lens through which we are able to see God. As we bring our own unique life experiences to the Bible, we are given new insights as God speaks to us afresh through the scriptures.

We call it "The Good Book." But of course, it's not just one book. It's really a collection of books -- 66 in all, written over a period of more than a thousand years. Much of what we read in the Bible started out as oral tradition -- stories about God and God's people passed along by word of mouth from one person to another, from one generation to the next. Only later were these stories written down, and it took many more years for the various books of the Bible to be collected together into one large book.

The earliest writings in the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians refer to as the Old Testament) may go back as far as 1100 B.C. The latest writings date back to the second century B.C. The process of bringing the different books of the Old Testament together probably took about 500 years, from around 400 B.C. to the end of the first century A.D.

As for the New Testament, Paul's letters are the earliest writings, I Thessalonians being considered the oldest of his letters, dating back to around 50 A.D. The gospels came later as stories about Jesus, which had circulated by word of mouth for some four decades, finally began to be written down. It took another 300 years for early church leaders and councils to decide which of these first-century writings would be considered holy and treated with the same respect given to the Jewish scriptures. Eventually, a list of 27 books was accepted by most Christian churches as authoritative, the same 27 books we now call the New Testament.

So you see, the Bible is a human document, written by many people over many centuries. It was not written by God or dictated to human scribes from on high. Rather, it was inspired by God. Its writing was inspired by God, as is our reading and understanding of it today.

The first letter to Timothy tells us that "all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed."

The Bible is our guide for faithful Christian living. We consider its content to be powerful and of great importance in our lives. That's why the reading and interpretation of scripture is so central to our celebration of worship. Every Sunday we hear one or more passages read from the Bible, and we listen to a sermon based on those Bible passages.

The meaning of Scripture has to be interpreted. Why? Because the books of the Bible were originally written in a time and place very different from our own. They were written in the ancient languages of Hebrew and Greek and in very different historical and cultural contexts than those we live in today. So, we have to try to figure out the original meaning of a passage and then discern what meaning it might have for our lives in the 21st century.

How many times have you heard someone take a verse of Scripture out of its literary and historical context, such as "women should be silent in the churches," and the next words out of their mouth are: "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." That's when you'll see steam come out of my ears. I get even more riled up when the passage presumably being quoted isn't from the Bible at all. For example: "God helps those who help themselves." Nope! Not in the Bible!

In recent decades, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has put out guidelines for biblical interpretation, which include: **The Centrality of Jesus Christ** – Our interpretation of Scripture must be consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, where Christians find the central and primary revelation of God and God’s will. Then there is **The Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture** – Any particular Scripture passage must be interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture. Another guideline is **The Rule of Love** – Our interpretation of Scripture must be consistent with the fundamental expression of God’s will in the two-fold commandment to love God and to love neighbor. Our biblical interpretation is also to be based on **The Rule of Faith** – Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the larger Christian community’s understanding of Scripture, both in the past and in the present.

One Presbyterian pastor and author, Jack Haberer, summarized our approach to biblical interpretation this way: “Read the text, in its historical and literary contexts, within the broader biblical context, and look for appropriate points of application in order to live it in the here and now.”

The psalmist sings praises to God for the scriptures: "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. . . . How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

In some Jewish households, young children are actually given honey when the scriptures are read so that they will associate the scriptures with sweetness. And sweet they are – here and there. Of course, the scriptures aren’t all sweetness and light. Taken as a whole, the stories in the Bible encompass all of life – both the good and the bad. It doesn't sugar-coat the harsh realities of life. On the contrary, it tells about the real life struggles of people and their relationship to God. The Old Testament tells us how the people of ancient Israel experienced God, and the New Testament

tells us how first-century Christians experienced God. As we read about their lives, we gain insights into our own lives and our relationship with God.

Many Christians read and study the Bible on a daily basis. It's a good habit to get into. If you have a Bible at home that has been collecting dust, I encourage you to take it off the shelf, dust it off, and open it up. You may be surprised at what you find inside! As you read the Bible more regularly and become more familiar with it, you'll find that it is anything but boring. Indeed, the Bible has everything a soap opera or best-selling novel has: conflict, scandal, sex, violence, deceit, murder, betrayal. You name it, it's in there. And you can find all that in just the first book of the Bible -- Genesis!

If you'd like to study the Bible with others, the Presbyterian Women's Bible Study meets on the first Tuesday of each month at 10 and is open to all – both women and men. This year's theme is Sabbath. We also have a Spiritual Formation Group at St. Andrew that reads and discusses Bible passages from the lectionary on first and third Thursday mornings at 10 on Zoom.

The Bible is a good book. It's THE good book. And it's worth reading, because it offers us wisdom of the ages and truths that have stood the test of time. It has authority for us because it is the collection of writings that has defined the Christian community from generation to generation. We are people of the book. The Bible reminds us who we are and whose we are. It is the story of God and God's people. It is the church's story. It is our story. Thanks be to God. Amen.