

“What Is Truth?” Sermon Series

“Part 2: Scripture”

September 1, 2019 – SELC – Pastor Mark Perry

(Today we continue Part 2 of our “What Is Truth?” sermon series, helping us to discern where the truth lies, using the four criteria of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Today we focus on Scripture as the primary criteria for Christians in discerning Truth).

Philippians 4:6-7 is one of my very favorite bible verses. I memorized it from the Revised Standard Version translation:

“⁶Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

It has comforted, inspired and strengthened me through many anxious times:

- At age 17, helping me let go of being anxiety about not having enough time to answer all the questions or remember what I studied in high school final exams.
- At age 19, when laying in a back brace, a cast on my wrist and therapy boots on my feet, recovering after a construction accident where I fell almost 20 feet, and I was wondering whether I'd fully heal and be able to run again or even be active...
- Age 23, newly enrolled in seminary in Berkeley, and my newlywed wife, Linda, learned that her college advisor gave her incorrect information about her degree and that it would NOT directly transfer to California. What would we do to get by, since we were planning on her providing our primary income? How would we survive?...
- Age 32, when I took a Leave from Call after the abrupt forced end of my second pastorate and wondered what I would do to support my family that included a third brand new baby...
- Age 37, sitting overnight in the surgery waiting room with my mother as my dad went through bypass heart surgery...

In many other settings through the years and...

- this summer, at age 60, sitting at 3 am watching and praying over our oldest daughter, Jenna, in ICU in Maryland, wondering if she would be able to talk or even recover at all from a brain seizure... (thanks be to God her labs we just heard this week are completely normal and she just took a prestigious job as an Executive Director where she was working).

Through all these experiences and others coming to know deep down in my bones the TRUTH of how God can, indeed, diminish anxiety and worry and provide that “peace that passes all understanding.” Something no earthly wisdom or teaching can provide but which comes only out of divine revelation through holy scriptures.

It affirms for me the TRUTH of what our ELCA Congregational Constitution says about the Bible:

“Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and

sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world... and [they are] **the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.**" (*SELC Constitution, C2.02 & C2.03*)

Saying "AMEN!" along with Martin Luther, "Nothing helps more powerfully against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts than occupying oneself with God's Word, having conversations about it, and contemplating it." (*Large Catechism*)

The Bible reveals ultimate Truth with a capital "T" upon which we can base our lives and which opens up to us all eternity with God!

Then... there are passages like this one from 2 Kings 2:23-25:

"He (Elisha) went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, 'Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!' ²⁴When he turned round and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. ²⁵From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria."

Or any number of odd, confusing or mundane passages about genealogical "who begat whom," or dimensions of the temple or lists of laws.

Do we *really* believe that these kinds of passages fit into what 2 Timothy says that "All scripture is inspired by God"?

What do we do with those kinds of readings? How does all this help us to know what truth really is about?

Perhaps an analogy can help us. Imagine the bible is like a large office building. From the outside you can't tell what the size and number of the rooms are. Some people and some church traditions look at the bible like an office building where every room is the same size as every other room, with each room as important as any other room, all have the same function and purpose, no more, no less. Every passage of the bible holding the same authority and weight as every other one.

But that's not realistic to what an office building is really like. Look at a floor plan of office space and one can see that a conference room is usually much larger than a regular worker's office, the CEO's corner office is often much bigger and nicer than the cubicles that administrative assistants work in. Some are used more often than others and for more important purposes, than, say, a janitor's closet or paper supply closet.

It is helpful to consider the bible in a similar way. Some passages, like the rooms in this building, are going to have a more important purpose or meaning than others. We spend more time in some than others, and rightly so. We may very rarely if ever enter some other rooms.

Of course, the question then can be, how do we determine which "rooms" or passages are more critical or essential than others? How do we make the evaluation about which passages are *more* inspired than others?

Here's where are Lutheran teachings can help:

Martin Luther says ([Introduction to the Old Testament](#), 1545):

“... think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines, which can never be worked out, so that you may find the wisdom of God that He lays before you in such foolish and simple guise, in order that He may quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling-clothes and the mangers in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. ...**Simple and little are the swaddling-clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, that lies in them.**”

Pastor Dan Erlander adds further reflection on that thought in *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life*, (p. 13):

“At Bethlehem, Jesus the Christ was held in a manger, a feedbox for animals. Luther taught that the Bible is like that manger because the Scriptures hold Christ, the Living Word, God’s address to us.

The manger was ‘human.’ If it were made of wood, no doubt some boards were crooked and some nails were bent. Nevertheless, it held the divine WORD for the world. The Bible is likewise ‘human.’ Yet it is ‘divine’ because the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, holds the living Christ who, as the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, lives as God’s address to us.”

Just as the shepherds didn’t worship the *manger* when they came to Bethlehem but rather adored the Christ *child* in the manger, so we do not worship the *book* itself but rather the *treasure* it holds: Jesus the Christ.

This is affirmed in our Constitution where it says, as I quoted above: “...they record and announce God’s revelation **centering in Jesus Christ.**”

So one key part of this whole adventure of finding the truth through the Bible is to look at its poetry, narrative, history, sermons, stories, teachings with “Jesus glasses.” How do we read and evaluate the rest of the bible according to what God most fully reveals in the Living Word, Jesus Christ? Anything that points towards Him we take more seriously. Anything that leads us away from Him or is contrary to what Jesus teaches and reveals we want to question. We don’t just throw out a passage because we don’t like it. After all, the early Church still chose to keep such odd, strange or disturbing passages in the bible. However, we just don’t hold as much weight or value by them as others that align more with the Christ message.

To make these evaluations and determine how we weigh the worth of passages and concepts is indeed a challenging task. But we do not do it alone. We do it in community, in the context of a centuries-long tradition that, as 2 Timothy says, we “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it.” And that’s why we so need to be part of an on-going conversation with the bible with others, like in the bible studies we have here at SELC on Wednesdays, Sundays, with the Circles, Grace Groups, and others. (When Intern Pastor Paul preaches on “Tradition” in two weeks, we’ll hear more about that).

At our Wednesday bible study, one participant said words to the effect of, “It’s amazing after all these years of reading this passage I didn’t see the meaning that was pointed out today.” Yes, the bible can constantly reveal new insights to us because of our engaging in it together or because of how our life experiences give us new eyes to see and new ears to hear.

After all, it is not the *book* that gives us life. It is the Holy Spirit- Christ's spirit- coming to us through these words which gives life. John 1:14 says, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth." The main reason we read the bible and revere it is because these printed words, this published manuscript, this precious manger, introduce us to and help us to intimately know the More Precious One who is STILL living among us, full of grace and truth. The revelation of God didn't just end with the final verse of Revelation, the last book of the bible. We believe and rejoice that Christ's Presence can guide us into ongoing revelation. We believe that this amazing record of how ancient people experienced God can indeed help us to experience God today.

As Jesus says in his final words to his disciples in John 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

May we all become so immersed in these words, the study and contemplation of all of them, and, like Jacob with the angel, so wrestle with them until, at early dawn, we, too, will receive the blessing. The blessing of Christ, our Ultimate Truth, being more fully revealed in our lives and in our world. And by His light, see more clearly where all other divine light lies. Amen.