

Fifth Sunday of Easter (May 22, 2011)

**Big Questions:
“Is the Bible True?”**

Text: [II Timothy 3:10-17](#)

by the [Rev. Dr. James A. Harnish](#)

It's May 22, and we are here. That only leaves two possibilities. It's possible that the “rapture” happened and we were “left behind.” In which case, I can't think of another bunch of sinners I'd rather hang out with.

It's also possible that the folks who made the predictions got it wrong, just like all the other sincere, faithful people who have set the date for the “end,” in spite of the fact that Jesus told us not to do that.

It's easy to be cynical or to make fun of this, but I feel genuine sadness for the people who believed it and even deeper sadness about the folks for whom this is just the kind of foolishness that makes them reject the Christian faith and the bible all together.

For our purpose today, however, it makes the point that *how* we read the Bible, the assumptions we bring to it and the methods we use to interpret it make a huge difference in how we apply it to our lives. What we bring to the Bible largely determines what we take from it.

That's not only true for folks who try to set the date for the judgment day. It's just as true as we search for biblical answers to some of the “Big Questions” we received from our congregation.

Is the book of Revelation symbolic or literal?
How do we reconcile the biblical position on homosexuality with acceptance of gay members?
If Jesus broke the rules, would he break them on gay marriage?
What's up with the parables?
Can I be a Christian but not believe in the virgin birth?
Is abortion ever okay?
How did the books of the bible get selected?

They are big questions; questions that cannot be answered with bumper-sticker-sized answers; questions about which equally faithful, bible-believing Christians often come to different conclusions.

You may either be delighted or disappointed to know that I'm not going to tackle all those questions in this sermon. Instead, I want to look at the questions behind those questions in order to build the framework in which we can find the answers.

Question #1: “Is the Bible true?” Yes. But the question behind the question is: *How* is the Bible true? What is it true about?

We’ve been conditioned by the Enlightenment, the Modern era and the scientific method to assume that the only things that are true are things that can be proven on the basis of scientific data and empirical evidence. For example, we know that the President was born in the United States on the basis of empirical data: two birth certificates, a newspaper announcement, and the witness of the people who were there. That’s one kind of truth.

But there are other kinds of truth. Those who have experienced Shakespeare’s “King Lear” know that you don’t need a birth certificate for a baby named Lear to know that what the play says is true. It’s true in ways that go far beyond the limitations of empirical evidence. It’s true to the deepest, most painful realities of the human life and soul.

The Bible contains both kinds of truth. It’s rooted in historically verifiable events, but its truth goes beyond anything that can be proven by the scientific method. It’s true in the way it claims to be true. It touches the deepest truth of your life and mine. It reveals the truth about who God is and what God intends for his creation.

Question #2: “Is the Bible inspired?” That is, after all, what we just read: **“All scripture is inspired.”** But what does that mean?

The Greek word means “God-breathed.” It’s reminiscent of the way Genesis says that the Spirit, literally, the “breath” or “wind” of God, breathed life into the human being and Adam became a living soul. That’s inspiration. It’s closer to the way we say that an artist or a musician was “inspired” when they created a work of art. When we see the painting or hear the music, we experience the same inspiration.

For most biblical scholars throughout most of Christian history, “inspired” does not mean that God dictated every word to passive secretaries who wrote it down just the way it appears in the King James translation with the words of Jesus in red-letter print.

Biblically it means that something happened. Real human beings in real time and space experienced the presence of God in a real and personal way. They told their story. That story was told and retold by the community of faith. Then, fairly recently, it was written down and passed on to us. When we read the story, we can experience the same Spirit of God, breathing life into the written word so that it becomes a living word in us.

Question #3: “Should we take the Bible “literally” or “figuratively?”

My answer is that we need to take it seriously. That means taking seriously the context in which it was written and the rich variety of literary forms in which it comes to us.

I often say that I read the Bible the way I read the Sunday edition of “The New York Times.”

Sometimes it reads like the front page account of an actual historical event.

Sometimes it's like reading the book reviews or arts section as it speaks through parable and poetry, story and song.

Sometimes it reads like the sports section when life feels like good and evil struggle to win a victory.

Sometimes Paul's letters are like reading the opinion pages; reading the prophets is like reading movies previews, filled with fantastic images and mind-blowing metaphors.

None of it reads like a scientific textbook on the origin of the universe.

When we take the Bible seriously in terms of the context in which it was written and the form in which it comes to us, we begin to discover what Paul meant when he said that scripture is **“useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be equipped for every good work.”** That's what the Bible is for.

Question #4: “How do we as Christians in the Methodist tradition read, interpret and apply scripture to our lives?” Right here at home, as a congregation that names being “open-minded” as a core value, what are the boundaries within which we read and interpret scripture?

John Wesley gave the early Methodists a way of interpreting scripture that has come to be known as “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” though he never used that term.

The bottom line is **scripture**. It's the foundation upon which everything else depends. One of the core values of this congregation is that we are “biblically-rooted.” We're convinced that we can be religious and we can be spiritual without the Bible, but we cannot be a living, breathing, growing, serving disciple of Jesus Christ without a life-long engagement with scripture.

There are three tools by which we interpret scripture and apply it to our lives. One is **tradition**. It's the gathered wisdom of the folks who have

gone before us. Did you notice the way Paul described it in our reading today?

As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.
(II Timothy 3:14)

That's tradition. We are accountable to the traditions of biblical study that have been passed down to us. The problem with the recent attempt to set the date for the coming of Christ is that there is nothing in the tradition of biblical scholarship to support the bizarre mathematical calculations upon the date was set.

We are accountable not only to the long tradition of biblical understanding, but we are also influenced by and accountable to the specific part of the tradition in which we stand. For example, all Christians practice baptism and communion. They are biblical. But how we practice them is determined by the specific part of the Christian tradition in which we stand. That's why our practice of the sacraments is slightly different than our Catholic brothers and sisters on one side and our Baptist brothers and sisters on the other. It's about tradition.

The second guideline is **reason**. In "Alice in Wonderland," the White Queen says that she can believe a dozen impossible things before breakfast. She wasn't a Methodist. We believe God expects us to use our brains and that the faith we experience in our hearts should make sense in our brains. That's what we mean by saying that we are "open-minded." We allow space for people to question, think and grow.

The third guideline is **experience**. Experience is what you get when you experience and experience. It means that no one else can take your bath for you. We read scripture through the ways we experience the presence of God in Jesus Christ.

Did you notice the way Paul described his personal experience in his words to Timothy?

You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. (II Timothy 3:10-11)

That's experience. As we share our own experience of the faith with each other, we learn and grow in our understanding of scripture.

Scripture, interpreted through tradition, reason and experience are the boundary lines within which Methodists interpret scripture and apply it their lives. It looks a little like fences around the barnyard. And that means that some of us are scattered all over the barnyard within those fences. Some of us hear scripture primarily through our tradition. Some depend more on reason. Sometimes we heard scripture most clearly through our experience. And that's why some of us read the same scripture but come to different conclusions while still being in the same Christian community together.

This brings us to Disciple Bible Study. It's the biblical core of our congregation and the primary setting in which we practice these disciplines. I've invited some folks who just completed their first year of Disciple Bible Study to share their experience with us.

Why did you decide to be in Disciple Bible Study this year?
What difference has it made in the way you understand the bible?
What difference is it making in your life?
What else would you like to share with us?

So, is the Bible true? You bet! The most important question is how it will become true for you.