

**The Bible Project 2020
Facilitator Training
November 21, 2019 Magrey DeVega**

PART 1

Good evening, everyone, and thank you. Thank you doesn't even begin to capture my gratitude for the fact that you are here. You responded to one of the most formidable and ambitious asks we have made in our discipleship ministries. You have said yes to being a facilitator of one of our small groups for The Bible Project 2020, and there are many reasons that I am grateful for you.

You will play a key role in addressing one of the great adventures that we will be taking in recent memory. We will read the Bible, all 800,000 or so words, from cover to cover, from January to December next year.

I have a strong suspicion that not a single person in this room feels fully equipped to this task. You didn't say yes because you felt like you were an expert on the Bible, and that's not what we were looking for, anyway. You didn't say yes because you felt like you had nothing better to do with your time, because I know that's not true, either.

I assume you said yes because something within you wanted to be useful to God and to this church, and that something about leading a group of people in this journey intrigued you enough to say, in the words of Samuel, "Here I am, Lord."

And that is always the best reason for me to hear.

Now, I want to address a few expectations here. It is not my expectation that by the end of next year, everyone in your small group will be an expert on the Bible. We are not asking you to create biblical scholars.

It is not my expectation that everyone on this journey will wind up with zero doubts, and 100% clarity about the Bible. Because we are not trying to create people who can argue and defend their perspective on the Bible.

But it's also not my expectation that by the end of this year, people will walk away unimpacted by the Bible. My belief is that everyone who goes on this journey will be changed in some way. This is not just a book club. This is a journey through greatest books every written.

[GRAPHIC] The purpose of The Bible Project small group experience is that by the end of this journey, people will feel connected. Connected to God and connected to each other, because they have read these stories together.

You will have done your job if along the way people can say, "I see God in this story." "I see myself in this story." "I see us in this story."

So, your job is not to be a biblical scholar. It is not to be an expert. It is not to settle all doubts or discourage tough questions. Your job is to foster connections. To help people stay on track, to help create discussions, to encourage questions, to be open and honest with each other, and ultimately to create a safe, welcoming, and open environment for God to work.

The best metaphor I can come up with for this is from Vacation Bible School. We serve 400 kids every summer, and they break up into small groups. Throughout each morning, each

small group of about 10-12 kids goes on a journey, from station to station. They play games, then they go to story time, then snack time, then worship. And each small group is led by a crew leader. The crew leader's job is to be their tour guide, their primary source of care and connection, to keep the kids on track, to notice when one has a need, and to create an environment in which the kids can ask questions and talk to each other and to God.

So, welcome to a year-long, adult-sized VBS.

By the end of this year, here is what I can guarantee. Lives will be transformed. People will see God and the story of humanity in a new way. After 365 days of doing this, people will develop new muscle memory to be able to have a quiet time with God every day for the rest of their lives. They will discover new stories that will become their new favorites because they see themselves in it. They will discover new friendships in your group. They will see familiar stories in new ways because they will learn from each other.

They will learn to read the Bible without fear and frustration.

And the Spirit will work more times than you will be able to count. When someone says, I read a passage this week that was exactly what I needed to read because of what was happening in my life or in the world. That will be God working, and it will happen over and over and over again.

And because you said yes, you get to have a front row seat to all of it.

Now, later this evening, I will be back up here to offer you a few of my thoughts on some of the questions that you may get from your small group participants or even ask for yourself. Questions such as: **[GRAPHIC]**

What do we do when we get to the dry parts of the Bible?

What do we do when we get to the violent parts of the Bible?

What do we do when we get to the unsettling depictions of God?

How do we know what translation to read?

And other common questions. For now, let me remind us of something that you will hear from others tonight. We have lots of resources that we are creating to help you. Laity and staff have been working since last January to offer resources that will complement each other. The weekly podcast. The weekly sermons. My Midweek Message. The online Facebook group. The daily devotional. An event called Walk Thru the Bible that I will be offering throughout the year.

This is not just a Bible study. This is an all-out, full-court press, congregation-wide campaign where you and your small group will be surrounded and supported by the efforts of so many people. And you will get to custom tailor your experience at different times throughout the year, depending on what you're reading and what your group is needing.

But before I step aside for now, I'd like to refer you to a handout that contains the full reading schedule. It includes the tentative names for the worship series, so that you can see that our journey next year in worship will be broken down into essentially twelve different worship series. It will not be a 52-week worship series called The Bible Project. It will be twelve different worship series tailored toward the season of the year. You can also see the keyword for each Sunday and the main Bible characters and stories that we will be preaching from. You

will see that we will still observe Lent, Easter, Advent, and Christmas. And, you will see how quickly we will be moving through the stories.

By the end of January, we will have gone through Genesis and Exodus.

February we will go through Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

During Lent, we will look at character qualities that will point us toward Holy Week, the cross, and resurrection on Easter, all from the stories of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

Most of April is the Easter season, reading some of the amazing post-exile, rebuilding and reform stories of Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah. They will show us how to live out the resurrection.

We will take our time through the Psalms, where the readings are shorter, and a great way to enter the summer.

July and August will be the major and minor prophets, when we will make connections between the words of the prophets then and our call to justice, social reform, and caring for the needy today.

Come Labor Day, we will feel a shot in the arm as we get to Jesus, and the familiar stories of the gospels that will carry us through September and October. And we will round out the year with Paul, linking some of his most famous passages with the Advent qualities of joy, peace, hope and love.

Christmas will be based on the Christmas story, not on Revelation. And we will have one final sermon, on Revelation, before we close out the year.

So, that gives you a general overview of where we are going.

I'm sure you have questions, and I will be back up again shortly to offer a few other thoughts and will leave time for questions.

PART II

For the next fifteen minutes or so, I want to preemptively answer some of the questions that you are sure to be asked and perhaps wonder yourself and give you a few bullet point responses to them.

THE DRY PARTS

One of them is sure to be, “What do we do when go through the really dry, repetitive, and seemingly mind-numbing parts of the Bible?” I’m thinking in particular about February, when we will go through Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and July and August, when we go through the major and minor prophets.

First, the laws.

The most recurring question you all are to ask during this section will likely be, “Why is there so much mind-numbing detail to these laws?”

As an example, I’ll just pull a random sample from Leviticus. This is from 22:21-24:

21 When anyone offers a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, in fulfillment of a vow or as a freewill offering, from the herd or from the flock, to be acceptable it must be perfect; there shall be no blemish in it. 22 Anything blind, or injured, or maimed, or having a discharge or an itch or scabs—these you shall not offer to the Lord or put any of them on the altar as offerings by fire to the Lord. 23 An ox or a lamb that has a limb too long or too short you may present for a freewill offering; but it will not be accepted for a vow. 24 Any animal that has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut, you shall not offer to the Lord; such you shall not do within your land, 25 nor shall you accept any such animals from a foreigner to offer as food to your God; since they are mutilated, with a blemish in them, they shall not be accepted in your behalf.

Now, is there anything in there that will transform a person’s life forever? Probably not. But is it possible that this passage will generate discussion?

Absolutely. In fact, a few things to ask the group to consider might be: [GRAPHIC]

Why do you think these laws were important to the Israelite people? What did this teach them about obedience to God and respect for each other?

What connections can we make between these laws and how the New Testament understands Jesus?

What laws seem irrelevant to us today, and what laws might seem valuable to us?

The bottom line is that some will find and insight in some passages, and others may not. It may be that most in your group decide that it’s not worth discussing. But here is a principle that I would like for you to keep in mind as you go through the texts in February: [GRAPHIC]

God wants to be in a relationship with us. And God wants us to be in relationship with each other.

God wants to be known. God does not wish to be absent or distant from us, and God does not want us to treat each other disrespect. So God continually gives humanity pathways to be in connection with God and others. And the pathways are always specific to that time, and that culture, and that worldview. The ways God asked the ancient Hebrews to be in connection

with God and others will seem very different from our outlook today, but we can look at it objectively and appreciate how God always graciously given human beings a way to be in a relationship with God and others.

The other section is the prophets. Isaiah through Malachi will seem very dry, especially during the summer, and there will names of nations and people and kings that will seem unpronounceable and irrelevant. Passages like these do not have to be mysteries to be solved. Sometimes, the best answer can simply be this: **[GRAPHIC]**

“I don’t understand what this passage means, and I don’t have to. But I can appreciate how my spiritual ancestors found this meaningful. If God were calling me to this kind of obedience and concern for social issues, what words might God be using instead?”

The overall theme during these dry parts, again, can be “God wants to be known, wants to be in a relationship with us, and for us to be in a relationship with others.” That’s what the word *covenant* means, after all, and that’s one of the Bible’s most important themes.

THE VIOLENT PARTS

The second area where your group may struggle will be in the parts that are violent. I’ve been following the same reading plan this year that we will be doing in 2020 so that I could be prepared to lead us in this, and I’ve been reading it with a small group of Florida clergy who are my covenant support group. And we were reading Kings and Chronicles during the time when the series “Game of Thrones” was coming to an end.

Many days, one of us would write to the others, “Today’s reading makes an episodes of Game of Thrones look like an episode of Barney or Teletubbies.”

One of the things that I will continue to reinforce next year is this key theme of understanding the Old Testament in light of Jesus: **[GRAPHIC]**

1. Violence was a common way to show obedience to God in the ancient world.
2. Jesus’s death on the cross exposed the sin of violence and introduced new ways for us to be obedient today.
3. How can we be just as obedient as the ancient Israelites, except using the ways of obedience that God has given us today?

No, God will not call us to demonstrate obedience by slaughtering hundreds of false prophets, just like Elijah was called to do in 2 Kings. But God does call us to obedience using the means that Jesus has shown us. Will we be just as faithful?

THE UNSETTLING PARTS

Here is the other continuous pothole that your group is sure to run into throughout the year. What do we do about the passages in the Bible where God does things that don’t mesh with our understanding of God?

What about when God wants to destroy the world with a flood?

What about when God wants to do a sneak attack on Moses and kill him, right after God calls him?

What about when God demands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac?

What about when God orders the killing of people?

What about when God issues orders that not only make no sense to us, but paint a picture of God that we don't want anything to do with?

You are sure to get these questions, and to ask them yourself.

This is another one of those themes that I will be addressing frequently throughout the first half of next year, both in my Midweek Messages, my sermons, and the online Facebook community.

We need to remember that the story of human civilization is tens of thousands of years old. The stories of the Bible involve humans that were here upwards of 4,000 years ago.

Now, throughout history, this principle is still the same: God wants to be known by humans. God wants to be in a relationship with us. What that means is that God will use the language, imagery, and worldview that resonates with human beings at that particular time in order to connect with them.

The ancient worldview understood gods to act capriciously, which means free to act in a surprising way, with sudden shifts of mood and action. That was the language and the worldview at the time. So, God was revealed to them in those ways.

So as humans have changed in their consciousness over time, that means that our views of God are also allowed to change over time. It is not that God changes. God always wants to be known by us and in a relationship with us. What changes is the way we view God. And that change is not only permissible, it is natural.

Think about any relationship you have had with a person for a long period of time. Perhaps a spouse or a partner. Think about how your relationship with that person now is different from the way it was at the very beginning. Particularly in a courtship situation. At the beginning, you viewed that person in ways that were meaningful to you at the time. The thrill of dating, the anxiety of maybe breaking up, the questions of whether or not this person was "the one."

Now, years later, you see each other in different ways. Maybe more mature, nuanced ways that use a different love language or imagery that is more fitting for where your relationship is. Did either of you change? Perhaps in some ways, but you are still both essentially who you have always been. But has your relationship changed? Has the way you relate to each other changed? Absolutely.

The Old Testament records the ways humans related to God at the early stages of our courtship. We used language and imagery that were meaningful to us at the time, but now we see God differently because our relationship with God is allowed to change over time.

So, when we see troubling passages about God, it is permissible for us to say: **[GRAPHIC]**

"We don't see God in that way anymore. And that's both permissible and natural. It's important to understand our origins as human beings. So how do we view God now? Especially in light of Jesus and in light of our worldview today?"

This is a really important point, and I will underscore this often next year. Because otherwise, reading the Old Testament by yourself and not having these kinds of insights along the way can lead a person to atheism and agnosticism. People have said, "If this kind of God is at the center of the Judeo-Christian faith, then I want nothing to do with it." Instead, we want to

say, “This is evidence of how God wants to be known by us so much that God will relate to us in terms that we can understand at the time. So the way we viewed God back then does not have to be the way we view God today.”

I want to leave time for questions, so I just want to offer some very quick responses to a few other anticipated questions.

First, what Bible translation is best? The answer is, there is no best translation. Every act of translation is an educated guess on how the words and ideas of the ancient texts can be meaningful for us today.

In your packet is a handout that shows some brief synopses of many different translations.

Most of the translations are attempts to capture the most modern way to find either a one-to-one English equivalent of the word or a way to capture the idea or meaning of the word. And sometimes those translations evolve over time. The NRSV is an enhancement of the RSV which is a translation from the Latin which is a translation from the Greek and Hebrew.

Other translations, like the NIV and the Common English Bible, go straight from the Greek and Hebrew.

Which is better? Actually, multiple translations are better. The reading plan we are following comes from the NRSV Daily Bible, but that is not the required Bible or the required translation. You yourself might find meaning in reading a different translation depending on the passage you are reading. I myself found great meaning in reading Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* during parts of Kings and Chronicles. I also found meaning in listening to audiobook versions of the Bible when it came to Genesis and to the Psalms, since it helped me experience the stories orally, in a way they were originally circulated.

The bottom line is, multiple translations are best.

Finally, I want to remind us that the power of the Scriptures is found in allowing the Bible to speak to us in its own terms. This is at the heart of what it means to read the Bible through a Wesleyan, United Methodist perspective. We don’t need to take all of the Bible literally, but we have to take all of the Bible seriously.

As Jim Harnish often said, we read the Bible like we do the Sunday newspaper. Just like we interpret the front page differently from the op-ed, the sports section, and the comics, we recognize that the Bible is chock full of different genres of writing: from poetry, to op-eds (the prophets), to diaries, to law books, and yes, to history. Determining what genre is what means using the great tools of experience, and reason, and tradition to allow the Bible to speak to us with its own voice. That’s part of the fun, and that’s part of the challenge.

But that’s why this is so important. In a time when our denomination is divided over scriptural interpretations about homosexuality, in a time when our political discourse is soaked in references to the Bible to support human political agendas, in a time when people are turning away from the faith because they see how Christians use the Bible as a hammer instead of as an invitation to the love of God, we need to not only know our Bible, but know how to let it breathe and speak and change our lives.

Imagine how much stronger we will be as a church by the end of next year. How much stronger our faith will be, and how much more loving and faithful our witness will be to non-believers. All because we allowed the Spirit to speak to us through the Bible.

And we get to do this together.