

St. Francis Episcopal Church: The 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Text: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson

I was raised in the United Methodist Church. But as a child I would sometimes go to a special program or vacation Bible school at my grandparents' independent fundamentalist Church. There I learned a song (which I won't sing for you) that perhaps some of you learned as children as well:

The B*I*B*L*E
Yes, that's the book for me.
I stand alone on the Word of God,
The B*I*B*L*E

I stand alone on the Word of God. It seemed obvious in that church, even if not directly stated, that this was a double-entendre: not just the "Bible alone" as the sole authority—but also a very real sense that as a believer I was standing alone, the last one left to defend the truth about Jesus in a hostile world.

Today we heard that "*all scripture is inspired by God...*" (2 Timothy 3:16) Note that it doesn't say that all scripture is *literally* true. Nor does it say that "scripture alone" settles every matter as the sole authority for Christians.

We are, as Episcopalians, pretty inclusive (and by nature we are willing to acknowledge a breadth of interpretations of Scripture). On the one extreme it's clear we are not Biblical literalists; yet on the other end of the spectrum we are equally clear that the Bible means more to us than the *Bhagavad Gita*. But when it comes to that broad middle, we are sometimes reluctant to claim what it is we *do* believe about Scripture—or maybe we just aren't sure how to do that in a faithful way. More than a few people have noted in the continuing debates in the Episcopal Church that human sexuality is only the "presenting issue" and that underneath all of that, the real debate is about how we read Scripture.*

I continue to believe that Karl Barth got it right when he reminded us that the *Word of God* is not the collection of texts of the Bible—not the words on a piece of paper—but Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh. The Bible points beyond itself to that person, our crucified and risen Lord. We worship Jesus Christ; not the Bible. We were baptized into Jesus Christ, not the B*I*B*L*E.

The Bible *is* authoritative for us as Episcopalians. Along with tradition and reason it points us to Jesus our Savior, the One who calls us to be his disciples. But it needs to be read and learned and marked and inwardly digested before that happens. The Bible isn't something from which we can pull one-liners, out of context, and then say: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

And so we come to the Bible prayerfully, openly, and above all else *with others*. We come to the Bible *in community*. I think that if I had to say one thing about the Bible it would be this: that along with the Sacraments it forms and shapes a people after God's own heart, an Easter people who (as today's gospel reading from Luke puts it) "are praying constantly and not losing heart."

What then does it mean for us to say that “*all scripture is inspired by God*”? The Greek word used here is *theo-pneustos*: “God-breathed.” In the Gentile culture in which this text was written, that word could be used to describe what happened at the Delphic oracles, where messages were given by the gods. In other words it is not an exclusively Christian or Jewish word. Nevertheless, for those early hearers of this verse raised in the Jewish tradition, you couldn’t hear this word without thinking back to Genesis 2: about how God had made the mud-creature, the *adam*, from Mother Earth and then *breathed* life into that creature to make it live. I think that is how Scripture is inspired: even here, now, as we gather together at the Table God is breathing life into these ancient texts, and by Word and Sacrament the Body of Christ is formed and reformed.

This fall we’ve been reading from both letters to Timothy: in September from 1 Timothy and in October from 2 Timothy. These two epistles (along with Titus) are sometimes called “the Pastoral epistles.” They are not written *by* Timothy but addressed *to* him, from an old, wise pastor named Paul who is nearing the end of his life. Scholars have long debated whether Paul himself actually wrote these epistles or if they were penned by one of Paul’s disciples trying to apply Pauline thought to a new context. But whoever wrote it we believe that these words, too, are inspired by God.

These epistles, taken as a whole, are seen as a depository for the traditions of the early decades of the church’s life—a “sound teaching” that can be handed on to the next generation of Christians. In the verses we heard today, the writer is encouraging Timothy to continue to grow in faith, “to continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.”

The manuscripts that we have are mixed in terms of that “*whom*.” Some are masculine-singular in Greek, which seems to point to St. Paul as Timothy’s teacher. In other words, apostolic faith is being passed along from Paul to Timothy; that is how and why it can be trusted. But other early manuscripts are plural. What might that mean?

You may recall the reading two weeks ago where we heard some lovely reminiscences about how Timothy’s faith first lived in his grandmother, Lois, and then in his mother, Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). Those who argue that these are the correct manuscripts argue that this “*whom*” refers back and reminds Timothy that faith is learned in community—not just one-on-one—and that Lois and Eunice are as important to Timothy’s journey of faith as Paul was.

Now I want to linger on this point for a few minutes because I think it illustrates how exactly Scripture may be “inspired” and how it is not. We have no original manuscripts for any Biblical book. Let me say that again. We don’t have that epistle stored somewhere in the Vatican archives that Paul (or his disciple) wrote to Timothy. There is no “autographed copy.” What we have are various texts that come from different times and places and they are not all the same. Usually the differences are pretty minor; but sometimes there are whole words and sentences and sections missing. While they were carefully written out by scribes and produced one-by-one, these scribes were only human. Apparently God-breathed doesn’t mean human stop being human. The reason I encourage people in Bible studies to get a good Bible with critical notes is that it helps us become more aware and less frightened about all of this. Just because we want “the right answer” doesn’t mean one is accessible to us.

So was the writer of this epistle Paul or a student of Paul’s? We will never know for sure, at least on this side of paradise. Did the writer mean to suggest that Timothy’s faith came from Paul

alone, or from Paul, Lois, Eunice and maybe others? We cannot know with absolute certainty. Always the challenge of Biblical interpretation is a *contested* matter.

And the main thing that I am trying to say to you today is that this is actually good news. That way back to the rabbis who debated the meaning of Scripture before Jesus, and during those first centuries of the Church's life and right up to the present day, this is what Scripture is for: to form a community around these ancient texts. I think it is not only good news, it is *very* good news. And that it is only in our anxiety and fears that we yearn for settledness and security.

There are versions of this on both the left and the right, by the way. It doesn't much matter whether it is the "Jesus Seminar" on the left or the fundamentalists on the right—each extreme has a tendency toward wanting final answers and certitude. One puts all its faith in a literalistic interpretation of the text while the other side believes that higher criticism will lead us to discover "what really happened." But I am saying that both are forms of idolatry. In a complex world, what if the best response to a good question is a better question, not a simplistic answer? And what if the Bible isn't intended to "settle" arguments but to invite us into a holy conversation? You might even say, into a *holy* argument. What if it is meant to be disputatious?

Jews in my experience have historically celebrated this more than Christians have but at our best Episcopalian Christianity has also celebrated this as well. The authority issue is not settled just because we say that God speaks through scripture, tradition, and reason. We still have to sift through all of that—we still need to pray and discern—and since *my* life-experiences and *your* life-experiences are not identical we will *always* hear and see texts differently.

Just as we could all listen to a song off of Bruce Springsteen's new album and hear it differently, or go to see a film together and see it differently, so also with Scripture. It makes a difference when you hear the story of the Prodigal Son whether you see yourself as the older brother, overburdened with responsibilities, or lost like the younger brother, or trying to faithfully love two kids who are so different, like the father in that story. The goal isn't to get to one single meaning of that powerful story that is ever-new; it's to keep exploring it for new layers of meaning. It's to celebrate the fact that Biblical interpretation is more like reading poetry than going on an archeological dig.

It's worth noting that we don't get the "definitive biography of Jesus" with one doctrine of the atonement, one doctrine clear about the meaning of the Incarnation from the Bible. We get four gospels, four witnesses, four portraits of the One we call "the Christ" seen in slightly different ways, from different angles. Why is that? Which of those four portraits is true? Is it Mark's "rebel" or John's "mystic in union with the Father?" Well if *all* Scripture is inspired—if God breathes through *all* four gospels, then a faithful reading of the Scriptures needs to deal with that pluralism and diversity of perspectives. We don't put it all into a blender and homogenize in search of the historical Jesus, but rather allow each speak the truth that they bring to the table.

And so God-breathed words are endlessly new. I don't think "inspiration" is simply a matter of the ancient text itself; God is in the whole process, but especially in the conversation that ensues when two or three gather around a text and Christ is present, and community is formed. I want to insist that to faithfully read Holy Scripture we need each other.

Sometimes in Bible studies I find people turning to me with their questions, in search of the “right” answer. I am constantly trying, with God’s help, to give that work back to the group—to discover what others see that maybe I do not see. Of course I have some skills developed by theological training and some knowledge of Biblical languages. But that doesn’t lead to a monopoly on the truth of what any text is saying. Each of us has both insights and blinders, and I think the great challenge for the Church is to let Scripture form a community that can not only live with, but one that celebrates ambiguity and paradox.

I think Scripture invites us into a holy mess—into a community of faith that is meant to be contentious, and that in that mess we are called into a loving relationship with God and with one another. I think the beauty of the Episcopal Church (going back to the English Reformation and before that, to the roots of Celtic Christianity and before that to the church fathers) is that, at least on our best days, we embrace that mess. I want to teach our kids a new song but I’ll need your help. I’ve only got a first draft and I know it isn’t catchy yet. But maybe we can edit it together. It needs music and a poetic editor but the theology of it at least goes something like this:

The B*I*B*L*E...yes, that is the book for *us*.
We stand together, servants of the Word-made-flesh, Jesus.
We are seekers of truth, committed to reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting
Holy Scripture until,
by the grace of God we become the people of God—
until we become witnesses of the stories that have become our own.

* The catechism of our church says this:

- Q. Why do we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God?
A. We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible.
- Q. How do we understand the meaning of the Bible?
A. We understand the meaning of the Bible by the help of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the Scriptures.

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