

“The Word among Words: The Text among Texts”  
(Scripture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century)  
Deuteronomy 6:4-9/Luke 6:1-11/II Timothy 3:10-17  
FPC/August 7, 2011  
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I. Text

The topic today is “the Bible, Christians, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” The final reading will be the Paul’s words to a young pastor named Timothy. **Read II Timothy 3:10-17.**

II. Introduction

We were heading to Cleveland. It was years ago now, and I had two tickets to two first round NCAA basketball tournament games. I had my daughter Katanya with me, and directions to the Cleveland State arena. I didn’t know where we were going, so I did a map quest on the computer, printed the directions, and off we went.

When we got close to Cleveland on I-80 I got the directions out. I expected the arena to be downtown, but the directions had us going west of town. I was surprised, but I followed the directions. We exited off I-80, and drove by some convenience stores and little plazas. I was surprised, but I followed the directions. We turned right, went straight, turn right again, and then left.....we were driving through a residential area. Certainly this couldn’t be right, but I followed the directions (becoming more curious about where we were really going). Finally, we came to the last direction. We turned left. And right where the Cleveland State arena was suppose to be.....there was a big, grassy field. No arena.....no basketball.....not even a little court with a basketball hoop.....just green space.

So, I decided to go “old school.” I went back the convenience store, bought a map, and, yes, asked for directions. And, as I suspected, we drove back to downtown Cleveland.....found the arena and enjoyed the games. How we got those crazy directions, I don’t know. I think it was one of those computer, digital world “hiccups” that happen.

But what that also did was make me wonder about what’s trustworthy. My wife Jeanne has a Garmen she uses, and when we travel she navigates with directions from her I-Pad. They work fine. But I also have maps.....maps of Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Pennsylvania, Ohio.....an atlas of the United States.....and the recent addition of a magnifying glass to read increasingly small print. The female voice of the Garmen is fine, as are directions on an I-Pad. They’ve worked great. But if I get in a tight spot, I also want to have maps handy. I just feel good about trusting them.

What is the place of the Bible in the 21<sup>st</sup> C? Can we really trust it as a source of revelation about God, and instruction in how to live as followers of Jesus Christ in our world? Reading and understanding the Bible is hard work. Is it worth it? Can it be trusted as something more than ancient myths, poems and stories? Or will it lead us to an empty, grassy field.....irrelevant to where we want to go in the 21<sup>st</sup> C?

There is much that could be said. What I want to briefly do this morning is address three questions:

- 1-Can we trust the stories in the Bible about Jesus?
- 2-What does it mean to say that the Bible is inspired?
- 3-How can we interpret the Bible?

### III. Theological Discussion on the Bible

So to help us hear these three important questions clearly, I've asked our worship assistant to set up a type of "question/answer" format with me.

**#1-In the last few years we've heard more about other stories about Jesus called the Gnostic gospels. And Dan Brown's bestselling book, The Da Vinci Code, says that the stories about Jesus and the gospels in the Bible are all about the politics of the early church. Can we really trust the amazing stories about Jesus that are in the Bible?**

We read in Deuteronomy 6; "keep the words," "recite them to your children," "talk about them when you are home and away," "do them and think about them," "put them in the mezzuzah of your house." The Hebrews were to be people of the book. It was to define their life, and make them different than people who believed in other gods. It was also something handed on to the Christian Church. We too are people of the book. But can we trust the book? Can we trust the witness to Jesus Christ?

In Dan Brown's bestselling book The Da Vinci Code serious doubts are raised about the reliability of the Bible's witness to Jesus. In short, Brown tells of other early stories about Jesus called "the Gnostic gospels" which are not part of the Bible, and that the story of Jesus in the Bible is shaped by the politics of the church and 4<sup>th</sup> C Emperor Constantine. In truth, The Da Vinci Code is a fun story, but it is also a fictitious rewrite of church history so to support the plot line of Brown's book. Much of what he says is simply not true.

The simple truth about the Bible's witness to Jesus is this:

1-In the Middle Eastern culture oral tradition matters. Stories are to be told and passed on exactly as they are heard. There is no room for changing the smallest

details. Anyone who tells a story and changes a detail is publically reprimanded. The early oral traditions about Jesus are part of this exacting oral tradition.

2-Paul's letters in the New Testament were written 15-25 years after the death of Jesus, and are grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospels in the New Testament were written 35-60 years after the death of Jesus. This means that the Biblical accounts of Jesus' life were circulating within the lifetime of hundreds and hundreds of people who had been present at the events of his life and ministry. The struggling early Church in Jerusalem could have never gotten started had there been conflicts over the stories about Jesus.

3-People who study the testimonies of witnesses have said consistently over the years that the story of the gospels "rings true." There is agreement in the major witness and events, and some deviation and some conflicting accounts in small things, showing that a later editor didn't smooth things out to create 100% agreement. We are hearing the real stories about Jesus from the 1<sup>st</sup> C.

4-All the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written in the 1<sup>st</sup> C, and were then gathered and circulated together throughout the church by the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C. The earliest Gnostic gospel, the Gospel of Thomas, has a date of late 2<sup>nd</sup> C. The gospels are much closer to the life of Jesus, and "paddle against the current" of Greek-Roman culture. The Gnostic gospels are more than 100 year later, and reflect the popular cultural movement of Gnosticism.

5-Lastly, Dan Brown asserts that in the 4<sup>th</sup> C Emperor Constantine declared the divinity of Jesus, and suppressed all evidence to the contrary, so to advance this political interests. The truth is that the divinity of Jesus had been part of the witness of the church from the beginning. Rather Constantine tried to use the growing church to unify his diverse empire.

Christians are people of the book. And in the end, reason can only take us so far. The Bible requires belief. It is not irrational, but it does require belief. And there is plenty of room for questions, doubt and mystery. The Da Vinci Code is not a threat to the reliability of the Bible's witness. The Bible is an invitation.....an invitation to explore its revelations about God, Jesus Christ, and a way of life.....an invitation to see what you discover and experience.

**#2-How is the Bible different than any other book? How is it different than a novel to read, or a text book to study? Sometimes I'll hear people say the Bible is God's word. What does that mean?**

In II Timothy 3:16 we hear Paul say that “all scripture is inspired by God.” The Greek word “inspired” can also be translated “God breathed.” The same idea is shared in the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. In these stories God’s word or breath is creative and gives life. To say that scripture is “God breathed” is to speak of God’s activity to create and give life....God is active in the words of scripture to create and give life. It’s a little bit like the piano that sits in our living room. I could study it and learn about it.....but when my stepson Tristan plays it I have a different experience....it comes alive. Or inspiration is a little bit like Niagara Falls; I can read about it and see pictures, but it’s a different experience when I see the water, hear the roar and feel the mist....it comes alive. Inspiration is like that.

Inspiration is the belief that God is active in the writing, translation and editing processes of scripture throughout history, and now is active in the reading, hearing and understanding of scripture. Inspiration is both a work of people, and a work of God. I experience that in all the work of translating scripture, reading and working on a sermon, trusting God is at work also in the process. And I trust that God is active in the writing and preaching of an imperfect sermon, so that that word of God is heard, understood and believed....that we experience God in the faithful preaching of scripture. Perhaps you experience that too in how you prepare to read scripture, or hear a sermon. A story is told of 16<sup>th</sup> C reformer Martin Luther. It seems Luther was wondering about inspiration, so planned to read a scripture in worship on a Sunday morning, and then wait for God to give him the inspired words. So on Sunday morning he stood up, read a text from the Bible, and waited on God....and waited and waited. Finally, Luther heard God’s word, “Luther, you did not prepare.” It was the last time Luther did that. Inspiration is both the work of people, and the work of God.

**#3-Interpreting the Bible is hard. It’s often in language that is hard to understand, telling about a very different culture, from a long time ago. And it seems that some people can take verses from the Bible, or parts of verses, and twist them to say whatever supports their view. How can we interpret the Bible?**

In Luke 6 we see Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees. It is really a conflict over the interpretation of scripture. The topic is proper observance of the Sabbath. The Pharisees have a very conservative, legalistic interpretation. They are serious about scripture, but it’s about all the things you can’t do. It’s small, and limits life. Jesus is also serious about scripture, but he interprets scripture within the greater context of grace and love. Jesus’ interpretation is much larger, and celebrates faith and life. The problem isn’t the Bible. The problem is interpretation.

Years ago there was a video games called “Bible Belters.” In the game you moved a Christian around the screen swinging a Bible, and you got points for every non-Christian you hit with the Bible. Fortunately the game quickly disappeared.

Unfortunately the game is still played by some Christians in real life. Verses or parts of verses are taken out of context and quoted, as if the Bible is a type of Wikipedia or phone book. The Bible is used as a weapon to threaten, intimidate and prove why I am right and you are wrong. People are “smacked” with scripture. It’s what the Pharisees were doing. It still happens today. But Jesus unplugs the game.

So how do we interpret scripture in ways like Jesus...ways that take scripture seriously, but are within the contexts of grace and love.....ways that celebrate faith and life? Our Presbyterian theological tradition is very helpful:

1-We use scripture to interpret scripture; what does the Bible say about it in other places?

2-We use reason; does the interpretation make sense?

3-We look at our theological tradition; how does the scripture and interpretation fit in our 2000 year theological tradition?

4-We look at the text through the most significant context; does this interpretation increase love for God and neighbor?

When we are at our best, and not playing “Bible Belters,” we interpret the Bible in ways that celebrate grace, give life, and create beauty. We interpret the Bible, and go to places in need and share the gospel in word and deed. We interpret the Bible, and built schools and hospitals and homes. We interpret the Bible, and give to those in need. We cross racial, class and ethnic barriers, and stand up for the civil rights of all people. We interpret the Bible, and produce beautiful works of art; Bach’s “Mass in B-Minor,” Handel’s “Messiah,” Van Gogh’s “Starry Night,” European Cathedrals and stained glass, and a Shaker wood chair. We interpret the Bible, and become good stewards of creation. We interpret the Bible, and do good work as teachers, farmers, steel workers, nurses and doctors, mechanics, home makers, secretaries, business owners and cooks, all with a special sense of purpose, love and joy. Why? Because our reading and interpretation of scripture equips us for good works in God’s world. Sure we are not perfect. But we are at times wonderful.

#### IV. Conclusion

So does the Bible matter for followers of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> C? Is it trustworthy? Is it God’s word? Can we interpret it?

**“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God maybe proficient, equipped for every good work.” -Timothy 3:16-17**