



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE TWENTY-FIFTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

NOVEMBER 19, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...

Those wise words from the appointed collect for this Sunday are instructive, worthy of elaboration, and just too important to pass over. Because Scripture is essential to our understanding of God and our relationship with God. It is integral to our worship. And along with tradition and reason one of the co-equal sources of authority in the Episcopal Church.

Those of us who are ordained must solemnly declare that that we believe “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation...”¹ By calling them Word of God, we mean that the Old and New Testaments and some of the apocryphal readings were written “under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”²

Not only in the words and literary devices and techniques used by the human authors, but also in the editing, redaction, translation, and compilation of texts. Even in the determination of which writings should be included and the order in which they appear, the Bible is the product of human skills and talents inspired by God in the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is no stretch to call it “the Word of God.”

We might note that the Episcopal Church authorizes the use of no fewer than a dozen different translations of the Bible, ranging from the King James Version to the New Revised Standard Version, which we typically use in our liturgies. (Canon II.2.1)

The Bible also lies at the root of much of the cultural, ideological, and theological upheaval that surrounds us today. Hundreds of parishioners left this building several decades back based on differences in how one interprets the Bible on several matters relating to sexuality and gender. The United Methodist Church this year has seen the same exodus of affiliated churches based on the same differences. And we readily may point to the same differences at the core of current ideological and political conflicts.

¹ See, e.g., *The Ordination of a Priest*, *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979) at 526.

² <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/what-we-believe/bible/>

Even the major faiths cannot agree on what books belong in the Bible, much less what role Scripture should play in their quest for authority and divine guidance. Our fundamentalist sisters and brothers look strictly to the text, with precious little regard for context or interpretation.

Our Roman Catholic friends and neighbors consider tradition paramount: how the Church interprets the text is the true expression of God's revelation.

In our Anglican tradition, we place tradition and reason in equipoise with Scripture. And the church's role is not to dictate, but to educate. The canons of the Church state that:

It shall be the duty of the Rector or Priest-in-Charge to ensure all persons in their charge receive Instruction in the Holy Scriptures...

The text of Scripture alone can be inspiring and edifying, but an informed reading and interpretation of Scripture only adds perspective and expands the breadth and depth of our understanding of God's word to us. Jo and I strive to be gentle and helpful guides, avoiding authoritarian instruction that limits the range of our God-given reason and intellect. In our experience as teachers and learners, the conclusions and understandings we come to on our own, based on informed and capable instruction, are the ones that survive, and also the ones that enable us to articulate our faith authentically and effectively, a vital gift in this age of skepticism and distrust of organized religion.

We can define anything, including the Bible, in two distinct ways. We can define it by what it is. Or we can define it by what it is not. Let's start there with the Bible. The Bible is neither a history book nor a rule book nor a science book. It is a theological reflection on historical events. We can quibble about the factual historical accuracy of the stories in Scripture, but that only distracts us from the truth they express. For example, the various versions of the Gospel may differ in detail in their retelling of the life of Christ. But they all reflect an unassailable understanding that Jesus was, indeed, divine, that he was the long-awaited Messiah of the Hebrew Bible.

And any report of events thousands of years ago can only describe them in terms of the scientific knowledge at the time it was written. Imagine Jesus speaking to his first century audience about nuclear fission, quantum mechanics, artificial intelligence, and the big bang. Actually, imagine Jesus talking to most of us about nuclear fission, quantum mechanics, artificial intelligence, and the big bang. But how could the creation story, for example,

been understood if the earth had been described as round rather than flat under a dome?

Recall, too, that the commandments and rules and prophetic voices of the Bible all addressed particular times, cultures, and circumstances. For example, when the Israelites were freed from subjugation and slavery in Egypt, they had never had much need for their own rules. The Egyptians made all the rules. But free in the desert, they needed codes of conduct. And God obliged, with not only 10, but 613 commandments to govern everything not only from their relationships with God and with each other, but also their diets and worship. If we applied those rules today, we would be living lives without Oysters Rockefeller, Shrimp Po-boys, and bacon. And we would be slaughtering a lamb or calf on the altar this morning.

Even such basic commandments as “Thou Shalt Not Kill” have been interpreted differently in different times. Originally, it meant not to kill anyone of your own people. Otherwise, how could the Israelites have conquered the peoples who inhabited the promised land and seen it as God’s will and something to celebrate? Today, of course, we grapple with the morality of killing in war, as well as issues surrounding abortion and euthanasia and the conquest of Native Americans in our very land.

But if we only misunderstand and misuse the Bible as a rule book, history book, or science book, what then is the Bible?

Hollywood may have nailed it as “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” Because the Bible offers a narrative of humanity’s understanding of God throughout history. It also says so much about us as God’s creatures, even as the trophies of God’s creation, as one Biblical scholar has called human beings.³

One of our favorite “go to” writers and theologians Fred Buechner puts it as well as it can be said:

It is possible to say that in spite of all its extraordinary variety, the Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which he created it. That means that the Bible is a book about you and me, whom he also made and lost and continually seeks, so you might say that what holds it together more than anything else is us. You might add to that, of course, that of all the books that humanity

³ Alan Ross, lecture at Trinity School for Ministry, *circa* 1996.

has produced, it is the one which more than any other – and in more senses than one – also holds us together.⁴

So what is the Bible? It is the story us... and the God who created, redeemed, and sustains us.

How then might we best embrace Scripture and incorporate it into our lives? How do we “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the Bible, as we prayed in the collect?

First, listen to the three readings on Sunday...and to the sermon. Our preaching is the primary way we fulfill our obligation to instruct a congregation on the Bible. Our lectionary, which list specific readings for every Sunday will take us through almost the entire Bible over its three-year cycle. We might also take up the daily offices, which include prescribed readings from Scripture in Morning and Evening Prayer each day.

Actually acquiring an authorized version of the Bible and not letting the dust gather on it is almost too obvious to mention. It is after all the all-time best seller among published works. And, of course, if all else fails, just Google Bible.

One remarkably transformative way to read the Bible is to read it all in, for example, 100 roughly equal sittings. Jo has the breakdown if you want it. Read it as we would read a story. Forget the footnotes and commentaries.

But to mine the Bible more deeply, then do get a reputable study Bible, and do read the footnotes and commentaries. Ponder the questions and concerns and reservations and anxieties that come to mind. Play “stump the clergy” with your most pressing inquiries. Again, that is why we get the big bucks.

For the truly ambitious, we can suggest any one or two of myriad reputable commentaries and books that offer insight into the Holy Scriptures. Not only is the Bible the most popular book in history, but it probably is also the most written about book.

But we must be careful to avoid truly fanciful and heretical books and authors that take us down a problematic path on our spiritual journeys. Again, consult trustworthy clergy and friends. We always are happy to recommend books and authors for the Biblically curious.

Finally, in whatever way we seek to incorporate Bible reading and study into our daily lives, we should do it prayerfully. That’s the part about inwardly

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry*, HarperCollins (1992), https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003aa2/life_has_a_plot (accessed November 18, 2023).

digesting the Bible. That is when we are nourished. That is when we are edified. That is when we are inspired. That is when we are transformed. And that, my dear friends in Christ, is what it is all about.