

"The Bible: Introduction to the Word"
2 Timothy 3:10-17

When the pandemic hit our world last year, many of us were trying to find answers and a perspective as to what we were dealing with and what the future would hold. The pandemic of 1918 became a point of reference for us. I know for me, I ended up researching what churches did and didn't do during that pandemic. I found out that Presbyterian churches closed their buildings and cancelled their Christmas celebrations to protect people. It was comforting to know that the churches found their way out of the pandemic and continued vibrant and effective ministries after the recovery. Looking back at the experiences of our ancestors can be a great source of wisdom and inspiration. And that is precisely why we use the Bible in our worship and devotional lives each day and week. Learning from the experiences of the faith of those who have gone before us is essential to our own journeys of faith and life.

Each human journey is unique, and yet there are some universal patterns that can help guide us on the way. That is what the Bible does for us. Sometimes we reduce the Bible to a set of beliefs, doctrines, and literal history. We even misuse it to justify our own opinions and prejudices. Many human evils such as slavery and war have been justified using the Bible. So we have to be careful as to not fall into those traps. The Bible can help or hinder us from growing in our love for God. We always have to be humble to not think that we can ever know God's truth fully. As Madeline L'Engle put it "Truth is eternal. Our knowledge of it is changeable. It is disastrous when you confuse the two."

And so today, we look at the Bible as a way to mirror our own experiences of faith. The Bible's truth and authority comes from its impact on our lives. It is about seeing other people's experiences of the divine and learning from their successes and mistakes. A couple of good images about the Bible come from David Lose who says that it is like a quilt or a family scrapbook. It has a lot of different pieces that come together to form a beautiful whole where we see God pursuing humanity through love from the beginning till the end. At the same time, as Richard Rohr puts it, we see people's response to God being three steps forward and two steps back. Steps forward are the stories of people like Abraham and Sarah following God's lead in their lives based on faith; leaving their homeland and being willing to believe in God's hope even when all the evidence around them was that of despair. Steps back are stories of Abraham and Sarah lying to Pharaoh to save their necks or when they violated their slave Hagar to have children. In the Bible, we can see ourselves and our own journeys. Just like the biblical characters, we experience the ups and downs of life and we struggle and each time we are invited to believe in the mystery of God's love. Covering the span of about 2100 years, the Bible has sixty-six books of poetry and prose, personal and communal activities, disasters and blessings, love and hate, fear and faith, and certainty and mystery to tell us of God's love and how to wake up to it, accept it, and live it personally and as communities. The Bible can be a source of challenge and inspiration which God uses to transform us.

According to our scripture for today, the scriptures are so important for our faith journey. The writer of the letter to Timothy, which is attributed to Paul, wrote these words to help

a disciple by the name of Timothy stay focused on what was important instead of being dragged into falsehoods. One of the things the writer prescribed was holding on to the scriptures to find his way through life. By looking at the journeys and experiences of people before him, he was going to find his way.

Richard Rohr writes, "Life itself is always three steps forward and two steps backward. We get the point and then we lose or doubt it. In that, the biblical text mirrors our own human consciousness and journey. Our job is to see where the three steps forward texts are heading (invariably toward mercy, simplicity, inclusion, nonviolence, and trust) and to spot the two steps backward texts (which are usually about vengeance, exclusion, a rather petty and insecure god, law over grace, incidentals over substance, and technique over actual relationship)." This approach is so liberating because we know that the stories in the Bible are about people's reflections on their experiences of faith which are limited by their own time and perspective and can only point to the larger truth of God when seen in light of God's patterns of love. It can show us where we fall short and where we can grow. That is why next week, we will be looking at how to read the Bible as Jesus did. That is also how we can affirm that all of scripture is inspired by God and is useful for us.

One of the most powerful ways to pay attention to God through scripture is a practice called *Lectio Divina*. It is holy reading. Each week, we are going to be using a Bible verse that I hope you will get to know by heart so that it could become a guide for you on your journey of faith. *Lectio Divina* has 3 steps. I will read the text three times. The first time, you are invited to listen to a word or a phrase that shimmers for you. The second time, you are invited to pay attention to your feelings around your word or phrase. The third time, the invitation is to listen to a message from God for you right now. I will give you some silence between each of the readings.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." Psalm 23:6 Amen.