

“Finding God in the Waves: The Good Book”
Psalm 119:105

One of the basics of our faith is the Bible. It is a gift to us because it comes with ancient wisdom that is still relevant to us today. Our invitation is to open to its wisdom for our lives. In order to get into it today, I am going to invite you to look at this painting and to tell me what you know about it (Starry Night by Vincent van Gogh).

Unless you have studied art, most of us don't know the context of van Gogh's life and what led up to this painting. Most of us know just a little bit about van Gogh's life. One popular fact is that he cut off his ear. But that is only one little piece of a very rich life. In his book, *Finding God in the Waves*, Mike McHargue tells this about van Gogh's life: “van Gogh wanted to preach the Gospel and actually sought to become a Methodist minister. He was a man of deep faith who wanted to serve others, and his experiences as art dealer left him cold to commercial enterprise. His zeal for God...didn't translate into academic achievement. He failed both an entrance exam to a school of theology, as well as a three-month course at a Protestant missionary school. But van Gogh didn't give up...he took a missionary post in a small Belgian village...Soon after arriving, van Gogh sold his possessions and began sleeping in a haystack behind a baker's house. Imagine van Gogh showing up to preach, covered in hay and smelling like bread. His congregation...took a collection to raise funds and told Vincent to buy a place to stay and some clothes that didn't smell. But Vincent van Gogh did a remarkably Christ-like thing: He gave all his money away to the poor coal miners in the village. Returned to his haystack, where the baker's wife reportedly would hear him sobbing at night, possibly grieved by the poverty all around him. But as much as Jesus might have approved of his actions, neither van Gogh's congregation nor church authorities could cope with the idea of being led by a homeless man. So they fired him.

The reaction of Vincent's family was mixed. His father often spoke of committing him to an insane asylum, but his brother Theo told him to pursue art. Theo went so far as to support Vincent financially. Vincent taught himself to draw and to paint, and he became an artist. Having been disenchanted by the rejection of the Church, this painter who loved Christ learned to reveal the tragic beauty of human existence on canvas.” This context makes a huge difference. Take a moment to look at the painting and see what you notice now. This masterpiece shows how light and dark share space and influence each other. There is beauty and sorrow mixed in this painting. Notice the church that is central to the village. There are no lights in the window.

This is a good exercise for helping us see how important it is to pay attention to context in any Bible reading and to know that even though the Bible is our book of faith, it is about our interaction with it and seeing ourselves in it. It is not a history book. It is a book of faith and more like a work of art to be explored not for facts, but for meaning. One of the greatest struggles of faith for Mike McHargue was how to read and understand the Bible. He grew up in a conservative church where he was taught that the Bible was literally the word of God and everything in it was factual. That reading

reduced the Bible for him and made it impossible to take seriously knowing that science contradicted the Bible in many instances.

He was fortunate enough to get to the point of making this statement: “All the anachronisms, contradictions, and similar stumbling blocks I found in its (the Bible) pages aren’t flaws in the Scripture. Instead, they are flaws in the assumptions I hold as I read the Bible.”

Approaching the Bible without a context and thinking of it as one book or as a book of facts about God are among the things that rob us of its deeper meaning. Let’s turn today to a passage from Psalm 119 to give us the inspiration we need for approaching the Bible as a work of faith expressing very human experiences of the divine; both successful and mistaken experiences. Let’s listen to Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

The famous words in verse 105 of Psalm 119 speak to us of a wisdom that guides our lives. Our lives have meaning and purpose because they are guided by God’s presence and Word. We have to remember that the Psalmist’s view of the “Word” was more inclusive than that of just the written Word of God, as the Bible. The Hebrew people understood the Word of God to be a living and breathing kind of relationship with God. According to Genesis God spoke the world into being and God continues to create and recreate the world through breath. The written word is a witness to the living word of God. In the Gospel of John, we hear these words, “In the beginning was the Word” which was a reference to Jesus as a manifestation of the living Word of God. So, when we read Psalm 119 verse 105, we can expand our vision to see the importance the Word of God, both the written and the living Word as a relationship, to our lives. God speaks to us today not just in the past. It is important that we pay attention and open our ears and hearts. The stories of our faith, the stories of our ancestors as recorded in the Bible, the stories of our parents and grandparents, the way God speaks to us today are all part of that word of God guiding our feet. Through these words, we know that we are not aimless in life. This word of God can be lifesaving and life-transforming. When many of the words around us speak of death, violence, hate, divisions, we open our hearts to the living word of God which speaks to us of life, love, compassion, service, and justice. By allowing the word of God to take root in our hearts, we are not then guided by the fears of our world or the fears in our own hearts. Instead, we are guided by the light and love of God that gives us meaning and hope, a sense of security that comes from abiding in God and not from fixing or controlling everything in our lives. Only then are we freed to live beyond the limits of worry, control, self-esteem, and security.

Words whether spoken, read, or lived have the power to lead or mislead us. That is why the stories of God’s presence in our lives are essential to our journey here on earth. That is why we need to come together to share those stories from ancient times till today: From the written words of our faith in the Bible to the embodied words of God in Jesus, the saints, the prophets, and all who speak of God’s love and justice to us. When the world speaks to us of scarcity and fear, we remember the stories of God’s abundance in our lives and in the lives of others. And that makes all the difference.

The scriptures are so important for our faith journey. By looking at the journeys and experiences of people before us, we can find our way if we focus on the meaning and the essentials of faith such as compassion, justice, love, and peace. We can learn from the stories of the people of God missing the mark and from their stories when they got things right.

Each of you as you walked in received a psalm paraphrased by Nan Merrill. For those of you watching online, we have posted Psalm 23 for you:

Take a few moments to read your psalm and let it speak to you about where you are or where we are as a humanity.

We will conclude with the invitation to share one word from your Psalm as our closing prayer.

Prayer: God we thank you that your Word can be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Amen.