

## Taking The Bible Seriously

(Psalm 119:103-105; Matthew 22:34-40; Acts 2:1-6, 38-47)

In our *Living The Questions* classes today, the topic is "Taking The Bible Seriously." This topic made me think of something that happened in our family many years ago....When my daughter Abbey was small, we drove to southern Illinois to visit my grandmother. While we were sitting in the living room talking, Abbey walked over to the coffee table, just her height, and touched the only thing that was setting on the coffee table: Nana's Bible. No sooner had Abbey touched the cover of the Bible with her little hand, though, than Nana loudly shouted, "Don't touch that! Don't let her touch that!" For the last 17 years, the main memory my daughter has of her great-grandmother is of a mean old woman who shouted at her because she touched her precious Bible.

Now, some might say that NaNa took the Bible seriously. It was to be prominently displayed and revered but not messed with--kinda like a work of art.

Others think they're taking the Bible seriously just by having it in their homes. They think that the mere presence of the Bible protects them and their homes--like a good luck charm.

Others think owning a Bible actually makes them holy. But of course this is not taking the Bible seriously. It's just wishful thinking. Just because I have a lot of my son Paul-John's books from veterinary school in my house, I'm not a veterinarian--nor do I know the things that a veterinarian knows. For I haven't read the books, much less practiced the procedures described in the books.

When we went on a mission trip to the hollers of Arnett, West Virginia, in 2001, we met a woman who used her Bible as a magic poultice. Whenever she had a wound or an ache, she tore out a page of her Bible and pasted it on the part of her body that was injured or hurting. Some of you may remember the photo of her with a torn page of the Bible plastered on her forehead.

Friends, I want to suggest to you that there's a better way to take the Bible seriously. And this better way has at least five aspects to it.

First, taking the Bible seriously involves us wrestling with what we think it is. Obviously, it's a book. But beyond, that, what kind of a book? Where did it come from? In other words, who wrote it? Let me suggest that there are three major ways we can answer these questions.

The Bible can be viewed as a book that came directly from God. Those who believe this way tend to take everything in it literally, and they tend to believe that the Bible has no mistakes or contradictions.

Other equally good Christians, however, view the Bible as a book that came from human beings but human beings who were inspired by God.

And yet other people who are just as religious and have just as much faith as those in the first two groups approach the Bible as a book that came from human beings who used their limited human vocabularies to describe and share their personal holy experiences of God as a testimony to the God they experienced.

We have good godly people in our own congregation who firmly believe each of these three ways, and we are stronger as a church family because of this diversity and the subsequent sharing.

The Tuesday morning Bible study that meets in my office has about 20 persons in it, and I daresay some believe the Bible came from God; others believe it came from humans inspired by God; and still others believe it came from human beings who were trying to share their witness to the God they had experienced. People with all three views gather every week in my little office. And what a sign of the presence of God's Holy Spirit--that we can approach the Bible differently and yet share openly with one another and listen respectfully to one another, all the while learning from one another and being inspired by one another's love for the Lord.

In any event, how foolish it is when we allow our opinions to cause fiction and division within the church. Thus, in our denomination, we respect everyone's right to wrestle with the Bible, theological issues, and social issues, reaching his or her own decisions. That which causes division or separates is sin. And

another big sin in the Bible is pride, acting as if we know more than we as humans actually know.

Besides, maybe God knows he can best reach some of us through one way of thinking and others of us through another. If you heard last week's DVD of *Living The Questions*, you can appreciate me saying, "I don't know!"

In addition, the bottom line is that all three approaches still take the Bible seriously as a holy book, a book about the holy God and how to enter into a relationship with the holy God.

Second, taking the Bible seriously involves reading it. The Bible is the book that is owned by more people in America than any other single book. But what do Bible owners really know about the Bible? Just listen to these statistics about us Americans:

82% wrongly say the idea that "God helps those who help themselves" is taken directly from the pages of the Bible.

63% cannot name the four gospels.

58% cannot name half or more of the Ten Commandments.

58% do not know Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount.

52% do not know that the book of Jonah is in the Bible.

48% do not know that the book of Thomas is not in the Bible.

39% do not know Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

30% do not know that there were twelve apostles.

It reminds me of the Sunday School teacher who was talking to a class of young boys. She said, "Who went into the lion's den and came out unhurt?" One little boy blurted out Tarzan!"

If we're not reading the Bible, we're certainly not taking it seriously. If we find reading the Bible an intimidating undertaking, we should begin by reading what we can. Perhaps we might even start with a children's Bible....or only the New Testament....or just the gospels.

Third, taking the Bible seriously involves reading it for understanding. When Jesus was asked which commandment in the law was the greatest, he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38). And in Luke 24 (verse 45), we are told

that when the resurrected Jesus was with his disciples, "He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."

If we just read the Bible to be reading it, and we don't seek out a way to think about it so that we understand it, then we're not taking the Bible seriously--as a book that has a message to communicate to us.

Granted, there are parts of the Bible that are very difficult to understand. Sometimes this is true because only a portion of a larger story survived. Sometimes the Bible is confusing because stories are repeated, seemingly a little different. Sometimes the Bible is confusing because we have only one side of a correspondence. Sometimes the Bible is confusing because it says things that are outlandish today--things like condoning slavery and saying that women should be quiet in church and not braid their hair or wear pearls or gold. But our questions can be asked and wrestled with in Bible study and Sunday school. Since taking the Bible seriously involves reading it for understanding, Sunday School and Bible study are very important.

Our understanding will be worth the time and energy we spend, for with our understanding will come revelations of God.

Thus, fourth, taking the Bible seriously means relating it to our own lives. We do the Bible a disservice when we view it as a history book--a book that just tells us stories from the past. Whether we view the Bible as written by God, written by humans under the inspiration of God, or written by humans to share their experiences of God, the purpose of the Bible is the same. We are to take what we read in the Bible and apply the stories and the words and the lessons to our own lives. As the Psalmist said, the Bible is meant to be used as "a lamp to (our) feet and a light to (our) path(s)" (Psalm 119:105). If we fail to use the Bible as a blueprint for living, as a guide for the choices we make in our lives, then we're not taking the Bible seriously.

Juergen Moltmann, a well-known German theologian, shared how the Bible affected his own life. He wrote, "I was first drawn into the reading of the Bible when I got my first Bible from an American Army chaplain as a young prisoner of war in 1945 while I was in a Belgian prison camp. The Psalms of Lamentation spoke to me when I felt completely lost and forsaken. And the Passion story of Jesus spoke to me because I felt that Christ understood me in my situation. Step after step I discovered the Gospel and the promise of God for the poor and the imprisoned. The Bible is the book which rescued me

from resignation and despair." The Bible can do the same and so much more for us.

Fifth, if we take the Bible seriously, we will use it to generate our own personal encounters with God and thus stories about God. In Matthew 16:16, it's stated that Simon Peter answered Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the *living* God." And in Acts 14:15, Paul said, "We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." The Bible speaks of God as living. Is there any reason to think that God is not still living? And if he's still living and true to himself, as pictured in our Bibles, why would he not want to have encounters with us, just as he did with those we read about in our Bibles? Is there any reason to not expect that God can do a new thing with us, just as he did with the disciples on that first Pentecost?

On that first Pentecost, the invisible reality of God became real to the disciples. The disciples experienced the living God present and working in their own lives. They found themselves in communion with the God who had created and redeemed them. They had known about God before but now they knew God. They were transformed. Their lives were changed. And the changes just bubbled out of them. They had to share their amazing experience of God. They wanted everyone to know the truth, as later expressed so well by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, when she wrote:

*Earth is crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush is ablaze with God.  
Those who see take off their shoes.  
The rest just sit around and pick blackberries.*

If we take the Bible seriously, we will remember that the living God is not held captive in our Bibles but that he is all around us, still speaking, always doing new things. If we take the Bible seriously, we will read it and use it always with the intention and expectation of having our own personal encounters with the holy God. Amen.