

Why I Trust the Bible, Part 1

I think it is important that we are careful with the language that we use to describe the Bible, especially when we are attempting to give a reason for the hope that is in us to a skeptical and unbelieving world. We can easily create avoidable issues by applying 20th and 21st century terminology to 1st century documents (and earlier in the case of the Old Testament). I think it's much better to let the Bible describe itself.

For example, I've often heard people make statements like this: "*I take the Bible literally.*" I presume that this is to say that they are holding themselves to a higher standard of application of the teachings of the Bible than most others might. But I would contend that there is no one in this room who takes the Bible *literally* as a general rule.

Here's a simple test: is there anyone here who has ever committed a sin? Oh, let's say, someone who has looked at someone or something else in anger or lust? Or perhaps there is even someone here who has struck someone in anger in your lifetime? Perhaps taken something that wasn't yours?

Is there anyone here who has *not ever* done anything like that? Probably not... Ok then, let me make this observation: as I'm looking out here over our congregation I'm noticing that I don't see anyone who is missing an eye or a hand, having plucked them out or severed them as a result of your sin. (But that's what Jesus said to do, isn't it?)

How many of you have sold *everything you have* to give it to the poor?

I also notice that no women in this congregation wear head coverings – except perhaps as a matter of fashion or comfort. Yet again, Paul says, 'No woman should pray or prophesy (i.e., be in worship) with her head uncovered.'

Perhaps I could also mention that in some places Paul also forbids a woman to teach a man, and yet we all implicitly endorse our Associate Pastor by receiving her wisdom and leadership in this congregation, and we do it gladly.

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And I haven't brought up one Old Testament example: such as crimes that are to be punished by stoning – not just adultery, and murder, but also parents for having disobedient children. Punishable by stoning. Fortunately we do not take *that* literally!

In each of these instances, and in a number of others, we interpret the Bible with a hermeneutic other than literalness at times – we implicitly recognize that there are other factors that need to be taken into account in order to do justice to the actual meaning of the Scripture. Things like the type of literature we're looking at (is it poetry, metaphor, narrative history, etc?), as well the historical context – what was going on in the world/ society when this was written? Things like that. The biblical writers were products of their day and their time, just as we are of ours. (We'll talk more about that in two weeks.)

So, we take things into account when we read and interpret Scripture. When someone says “I take Scripture literally” perhaps what they *really* mean to say is “I find literal truth in the Scripture”, which is not the same thing. Our language is important. And in fact, I would boldly say that *I* find literal truth in the Bible! And I would hope that we all do.

In the beginning of the UM book of Discipline (everything you ever need to know about the organization, function, structure, and beliefs of the UM Church) there is a section called “Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task”. In that section, under the heading “Scripture” we read these words:

United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine. Through Scripture the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace. We are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God in our midst whom we trust in life and death.

The biblical authors, illumined by the Holy Spirit, bear witness that in Christ the world is reconciled to God. The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history.

As we open our minds and hearts to the Word of God through the words of human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our understanding is deepened, and the possibilities for transforming the world become apparent to us.

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Now, while I think that is a wonderful description of the place of the Bible in the life of a Christian, it does beg the question a bit of why I *trust* the Bible, which is the title of this message.

In fact, while I agree with every word in that statement, I do *not* trust the Bible because some years ago someone said that if you are going to be a Methodist, this is what you need to do! And I strongly suspect that this is the case for you as well.

Paul wrote in 2 Tim 3: 16 that '*all Scripture is inspired by God*'. The word 'inspired' is a word rich in imagery. It literally means "God-breathed". I believe that the *best* – the strongest-evidence for the inspiration of the collection of ancient documents that we call the Holy Bible is found by *reading it*. Experience it for yourself. God speaks through the Scripture.

In that statement from our UM Discipline we see that expressed: "*Through Scripture the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace.*" The deepest significance of the Bible is that it is a vehicle through which the Living God interacts with humanity. I find it troubling that in knowing that, the Church tends to *talk* a lot about the Bible but very few actually take the time to read it, to study it, to allow it to read *us*, and reveal *us*.

That is not to say that reading the Bible is always clear, or easy! I think we do a disservice to people when we throw that out as a blanket statement. It is certainly true that even children can read parts of the Bible and completely understand it – which is why we give Bibles to every child in our Sunday School who is moving from 3rd to 4th grade. But there are mysteries, and depths in these pages as well, that will require the perspective of Eternity to completely understand.

There are passages that are confusing in the Bible, there are questions that can and should be raised about what exactly is being taught in certain places, about why some things are in there; I have always believed that truth can endure the hard questions, that we *should* be asking these questions. And in some ways, the Scripture, like the existence of God itself is its own best defense!

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The best way to know that our Holy Scriptures are *God breathed*, is simply to read them with an openness of spirit. If we pray – even if we’re not sure of this, just *try* it – pray for illumination before we read the Scripture, [“God if you are there, show yourself to me in these pages”] we find some amazing things happening. For one, as someone truly said, “We don’t really read the Scripture as much as *it reads us!*”

But *initially*, what is it about the Bible that would make a person interested enough to do that? What is unique about it?

Well for one thing, the stories of the Bible (both Old and New Testament) stand clearly apart from other ancient writings. For example, unlike nearly all of the epic stories and poems of ancient times, the Old Testament writings especially, were obviously not written to exalt or justify the actions of human beings – kings and others. There are some ugly stories about the sins and flaws of pretty near every character in the Old Testament. Highly unusual in other contemporary writings.

Further, from the study of the Bible as an historical document, we can reach another conclusion. It was clearly not the intention of the authors to write fables or fiction. We cannot say for certain that they were telling the truth, but a study of their work leaves us with no doubt that they want us to believe what they are saying. Peter tells us “these are not myths”, while John says “I saw...I touched...I heard....” The introduction to Luke’s Gospel and the book of Acts make it clear that Luke intended to recount events *as they happened*. They do not expect us to see their work as fiction.

In cases where there is archeological evidence the Bible is so overwhelmingly verified and affirmed that only ‘scholars’ with a strong anti-faith bias deny that it is one of the most accurate ancient historical documents that we have today. That is just a fact.

Again, that’s not something that leads to a conclusion that it is God’s Word, but it might be something that would make a person interested enough to look at it. And, of course, it doesn’t say anything about non verifiable stories in the Bible, (i.e., the Flood, the Garden of Eden,

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Creation, and other early Genesis writings.) Yet there are books by the truckload that have been written about the Archeological evidence for the Bible, as well as fulfilled prophecy. Most of the prophecy relates to the coming of the Messiah, whom Christians believe is Jesus (mainly *because* of the prophecies and their confirmation through the Resurrection). I don't have time to even start on that today – but it is truly, in that regard, an amazing book.

The most powerful aspect of the Bible, to me, is the consistency of its message. Someone once said that there is a 'scarlet thread' running through the pages of the Bible – meaning that this widely varying collection of stories, history, genealogies, social commentary, poetry, and more, is woven together by one theme: the redemption of lost people. What starts in the Garden ends with the return of Jesus, and right in the center of it all is this little three year span when a man named Jesus entered his public ministry, taught, healed, was crucified and raised. Everything before this points to him, everything after it is built on the reality of what has been reported about his life.

The Cross of Jesus and the Resurrection is the center of it all – nothing else in those 66 'Books' makes a bit of difference if that is not true, or has not been reported inaccurately. (That's going to be the focus of next week's message!)

But everything in the Scripture moves, in one way or another, toward the climax of the revealing of the Living Word, Jesus the Christ.

The Old Testament begins the story – here is this amazing God who created all things, who is holy and set apart in utter purity, yet still wanting to establish a relationship with the people he created. And as you read the story of how that happens, from the call of Abraham, to the establishment of the people in the Land, of their slavery in Egypt, to the giving of the Law, to the first kings of Israel and the divided kingdom, the social prophets who constantly came on the scene saying, "this is not how God wants you to live!" the poetry in the book of Psalms... we begin to realize that this is not just the story of an ancient people – this is truly *our* story as well.

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We don't have to read too far before we realize that the Scripture *is* our story. It is about us. Think about the Old Testament. I love the way Adam Hamilton sums up the Old Testament: something like this

It's the story of the Israelites who make a Covenant with God and God with them – God says, 'you'll be my people' and the people say 'you'll be my God'. But after awhile the people get bored with God and they get distracted. And they begin to chase after other gods. They become unrighteous and disobedient. They fall away from God. So God withdraws his protection from the people and a nation comes and invades.

And the people cry out to God – “God deliver us and help us!” and God hears them and has mercy on them...he delivers them. And God makes a covenant with them and they with God. And they follow God for awhile until they get bored with God and begin to follow other gods. And God withdraws his protection from them and a nation comes and invades them. Things go badly until they cry out to God, who hears them and has mercy on them

So they cry out to God (“God deliver us and help us!”) and God hears them and has mercy on them, and he rescues them. And they enter into a covenant together and they follow God for awhile, until they get distracted, and they begin to follow other gods on and so on...

See, this is not just the story of an ancient people, this is *our* story. It is the story of the universal human condition. We know the right way to go and we tend to fall away from it. At some point in our lives we may find a relationship with the living God, we begin to love him and follow him, and then after a time we begin to lose sight of who we are, and we start chasing the ideas and values that are prevalent in our time.

And then we get ourselves in trouble, and we call out “God, please help us” ... and God does. In his mercy God delivers us. And we say “I'm going to follow you forever” and that lasts for a couple of years until we fall away again, and we call out to God...who hears us again.

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See, this is what is powerful about the Scripture – it is our story! The Old Testament ends with a promise of the coming of a King who would be the ultimate one who delivers us from this bondage to sin and death. This endless cycle.

And the New Testament begins with the story of the birth of that King. And it tells his story, it tells how his life, death and resurrection gives birth to the Church, through which God has opened doors to the liberation of countless souls. Through which God's love and mercy have been made known throughout the generations.

This is a powerful book. It raises questions (and we'll look at some of the most difficult ones in two weeks, and I'll give you a perspective that may help you to understand why some of those passages are there.) It raises questions but it answers so many more. It gives us a reason for hope in midst of a world that is often dark and frightening. It tells us the truth about ourselves, it explains the restlessness in our hearts and leads us to the only place that we will ever find the lasting peace that we all seek...

A powerful book...

It took us a while to get here, but I hope that even if you do not agree with all the conclusions in this message, you can see that it is not just blind faith that underlies the Christian view of Scripture. Through a process of careful investigation we can reach a conclusion through the Scriptures about who Jesus was. When we reach the understanding that Jesus is truly "God with us" we can also see in a deeper way, that the Bible, which tells us the great news of Jesus, is very special. If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, then surely his biography is much more than just a book.

Next week we're going to look at the center of the Scripture: why we can believe what the Bible teaches about the Resurrection, we'll look at some of the prophecies that hold the Book together, and ... some more!