

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Mary Margaret Porter
“People’s Choice: If we don’t read Scripture literally, why is the bible important?”
Proverbs 2: 1-8; 2 Timothy 3: 14-17
6th Sunday after Pentecost
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The question we have before us today is – If we don’t read scripture literally, why is Bible important? I’ll say one thing for this congregation – you guys are smart! And have great questions! This people’s choice sermon series has been really fun, and difficult for those of us preaching this summer. And among the wonderful topics submitted by you all, I chose this one. Not because I thought it would be easy and not because I thought it would be the most difficult, but because it’s the one I often ask myself. I love scripture but I am often not sure what to make of it.

But in thinking about and writing this sermon, as is often the case when it comes to faith, instead of concrete answers, I was left with more questions but I hope that my thoughts will provide some insight as it has for me. I often wonder why the Bible is written the way it is. I am sure that God could have inspired a document that lies out in easy steps what it means to be a faithful person and follow Christ. Step one – go to church – mark that off the list. Step two – pray. Step three and so on.

Instead we are presented with a text that reads in some places like an epic poem and others like a really boring legal document. At times like a Grimm’s fairy tale with beasts and the miraculous and in others like a modern novel or mini-series with plot twists, war, love, betrayal and reconciliation. What are we to make of this? If it isn’t all true what does it mean and what’s the point?

First – There are two terms that are often floated around when talking about scripture and truth or fact. It may be helpful to define these two before we move on.

The first term is inerrancy. Inerrancy was defined by 300 evangelical pastors in 1978 in what is known as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy as “the view that when all the facts become known, they will demonstrate that the Bible, *in its original form* and correctly interpreted, is entirely true and never false in all it affirms, whether that relates to doctrines or ethics or to the social, physical, or life sciences.”¹

Under this view, every word of the Bible is completely true and factual, whether we understand it now or not. Scripture must be either without flaw, or it is just like any other book and is devoid of authority. It is all or nothing. Under this standard it is impossible, and is a sin, to pick and choose which parts of the Bible are true or authoritative, and which parts are not true or are only historical. After all, God is perfect and the Bible is God’s Word so it too must be perfect.

In fact, there is an entire museum in Petersburg, Kentucky devoted to this idea that the Bible is 100% factual. In it, dinosaurs live alongside humans, dragons exist and there was actually an historic flood, as described in Genesis that covered the entire earth. Their mission, according to the Creation Museum’s website is “to show why God’s infallible Word, rather than man’s faulty assumptions, is the place to begin if we want to make sense of our world.” This understanding obviously is a little difficult for me, especially today as scripture tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:34 that “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate.”

Oops!

The second term is infallibility. This is defined by most theologians as the belief that the Bible is completely trustworthy as a guide to salvation and the life of faith and thus will not fail to accomplish its purpose.² In other words, the Bible is reliable or constant when it comes to matters of faith. It is without flaw or error in pointing to God, faith, and fulfilling God’s purposes for creation.

¹ <https://www.theopedia.com/inerrancy>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_infallibility

In other words, “infallible” focuses on the conceptual content and ultimate ends of the Bible – the capital T truth, while “inerrant” emphasizes on the specific facts and details of the Bible, the lower case t truth. Many times these two terms are conflated but they carry very different meanings.

Some theologians believe that in order for the Bible to be infallible, (if the Capital T truth is to be accomplished) it must necessarily also be inerrant. The Bible must convey only complete truth and fact if the purpose of scripture, to bring us to salvation, can be accomplished.

Others, including those in our denomination, argue that infallibility (the capital T truth) does not necessitate a doctrine of inerrancy. As our General Assembly pointed out in 2001 ““Infallibility affirms the entire truthfulness of scripture without depending on every exact detail.”³

This view of infallibility argues that the biblical writers each wrote under a different set of political, historical and social circumstances and imbued their writings with their particular understanding of God in that particular time and space often using stories borrowed from their surroundings or allegory.

Followers of this train of thought agree that the authors of scripture were directed by a high degree of religious insight and were guided by God’s spirit. But they do not believe that this makes the Bible inerrant. The Bible was written by humans, who are inherently flawed, so there is logically flaw in their writing. In fact, most of the people the biblical authors are writing about (save Christ) are also imperfect, flawed and fallible people.

Instead, they argue the primary intention of the biblical authors was not to record history or fact, but instead to confess their own faith and understanding of God’s love and grace for their community. If this were in fact their intent, then seemingly tricky passages are not troubling inconsistencies or non-truths, but rather helpful clues to understanding the particular confession of the author. What was the writer trying to say about God and his understanding of God? What does that tell us about God’s relationship with us, God’s covenant love for us? But this is a slippery slope. There can be a tendency when reading scripture in this way, to pick and choose which parts of the Bible we still hold to be completely true and which needs to be read through a filter of history and location. To identify the parts of scripture that we either like, or do not like, and argue that some things in the Bible are true while others are not - or might have been true in the past but are no longer true.

Thomas Jefferson, a son of the Enlightenment, may be the best example of this. Jefferson had trouble reconciling the miraculous stories of the Bible and Jesus Christ with his scientific understanding of the world so he simply cut those parts altogether out to create his own work of scripture.

Using a razor and glue, Jefferson cut and pasted his arrangement of selected verses from the King James Version of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in chronological order—putting together excerpts from one text with those of another to create a single narrative which leaves out all supernatural, miraculous or overly spiritual. Jefferson believed Jesus to be a great moral teacher but not a miracle worker or faith healer.⁴ In Jefferson’s Bible there is no virgin birth, no miraculous healings, no loaves and fishes and no resurrection.

An interesting exercise to be sure, but this way of thinking allows readers to focus on only the parts of the Bible with which they agree; ignoring or explaining the rest away with arguments of historical location, changes in society, science and interpretation.

Ok so we may not all agree on the facts of the Bible but we all believe in the capital T truth of the Bible right? The issue arises when different Christians are led to believe in conflicting “truths.” Liberal and conservative Christians have different sets of fundamental theological beliefs about what scripture teaches and the ultimate purpose of the Bible and thus develop different sets of moral truths derived from scripture regarding such topics such as abortion, human sexuality, salvation, etc. Each group bases their conclusions on their specific interpretation of the Bible. Both still hold the Bible as authoritative but since their understandings of scripture and its moral teachings are diametrically opposed, at least one group must have logically derived false beliefs from their biblical study. So where does that leave us? If we can’t, don’t or won’t take the Bible literally what does it mean for us?

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3APresbyterianism#Authority_of_Scripture

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Bible

One of my favorite books and one of the reasons I ended up going to seminary was Bruce Feiler's book, "Walking the Bible." In it, Feiler walks the path of Moses from Egypt to the Promised Land seeking spiritual insight from the stories and words of scripture. There were two parts of the book that spoke to me particularly about the truth of scripture and my understanding and relationship with the Bible.

The first is when Feiler enters St. Catherine's monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The monastery was built by order of Emperor Justinian I to enclose the site where Moses is supposed to have encountered God in the burning bush. The living bush on the grounds of the monastery is supposedly the same bush seen by Moses engulfed in flames yet not consumed – yes the SAME bush – more than 3000 years old – Growing in the desert - Right.

But here Feiler pauses to sit and pray and contemplate scripture, to consider the meaning of God meeting Moses in the bush - God's word encountering Moses in flame. He describes a feeling of awe and wonder that came over him as he sat there – maybe this could be the bush – God can perform the miraculous. Maybe God is here – even now. Sitting this way, deep in prayer and reflection, Feiler catches a glimpse of something bright red in the corner of his eye. Glancing over he sees a bright red fire extinguisher sitting to the side at the base of the bush. The burning bush of Moses where god spoke in the flames is guarded by a fire extinguisher. We believe – but just in case we have a fire extinguisher nearby. We consider the stories in the Bible to be so old, so ancient, that there is no way the miraculous could happen again.

The second story is a more personal one. Feiler goes on to describe climbing Mt. Sinai to experience the sunrise. Several years after reading this book, during seminary, I had the opportunity to go to Mt. Sinai myself on a biblical archeology tour. After driving hours into the desert, we woke before dawn to ride camels for the first third of the way up the mountain. The second two thirds were on foot, by flashlight. We reached the summit with a few minutes to spare before sunrise and quickly realized that we were not the only people on this mountain. There were others, from all nations, all ages. Each singing, reading scripture or praying in their own language – all thinking about the same thing - Moses, this holy place, The Ten Commandments came from here. This very mountain...

Aaaand then the sun began to rise. I was expecting this miraculous peak in the midst of sand dunes and flat land, not a vast mountain range. There wer literally hundreds of other mountains all around us! I realized there was NO WAY to know this is the actual mountain Moses climbed to speak with God. NO WAY. I was so disappointed. But just then from right below us a group of people began to sing. They sang in a language I could not understand but it was beautiful – it was holy. As they were singing, our guide began to read from Exodus the story of Moses meeting God on the mountain. As these two met in my mind it began to be less and less important to me if I were in fact sitting on the correct summit. I realized, mountain itself was not the truth – the truth was that God's words reach us – each of us in our own language – on mountaintops, in valleys, in joy and in sorrow - and speaks to our hearts - it tells the story of God's love for us, God's grace and covenant which keeps us now and always – and God's fellowship which binds us together.

You see the Bible is not a group of words and stories of the past; it is not ancient history, or a spot on the map. It is alive with the very Spirit of God. It breathes with God's spirit and calls us to join the story ourselves.

I appreciate what theologian Karl Barth has to say about the truth of scripture. He rejects any notion of the Word of God that reduces it to mere speech that imparts information. It is not an instruction manual or history book. Barth notes that the "Word of God is divine action; it breathes with the Spirit of God - it elects, creates, changes, judges, calls, forgives, saves! It is God's Word— God's very breath - powerful and dynamic, to which we respond (and can't help but respond) in obedience and faith!"⁵

Tom Wright, in his book about the Pauline Letters, writes of the passage we read from 2 Timothy "The early Christians believed that the reason the scriptures were alive was because God had 'breathed' them in the first place, and the warmth of life of that creative breath was still present and powerful."⁶ In fact, in verse 16 of Paul's letter to Timothy the word 'inspired' - All scripture is inspired by God – is actually the word for 'breathed' – All scripture is breathed by God. It is dynamic, alive!

⁵ <http://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files/pdf/journal/17-beach.pdf>

⁶ Wright, Tom. "Paul For Everyone: The Pastoral Letters." Westminster John Knox Press. 2004.

Wright goes on to say that, “Scripture not only gives us true information about how our lives can be transformed, it will itself be a part of that process.”⁷

I believe God wants us to ask questions of our faith and about the Bible and to be engaged and active in our faith. As the words we heard earlier in our Old Testament reading from Proverbs, God calls us to this, encouraging us to -

Cry out for insight,

and raise our voices for understanding;

seek it like silver,

and search for it as for hidden treasures—

then we will understand the fear of the Lord

and find the knowledge of God.

As I mentioned when I began this sermon, I really don’t have the perfect answer for this question. I do not believe God intends for us to read the Bible literally – but I also don’t believe we are able to draw the line ourselves about what is true and not.

I believe that it is ok if we struggle with our Biblical understandings or question parts of our faith. You see, it isn’t because we believe certain things that we belong to God; we first belonged to God, and that led to faith - and God continues to guide us on that journey daily. Our understanding of scripture or our faith may change over time but the God who guides and nurtures us does not.

Because we have faith in a God who continually reveals and is revealed to us by the Spirit, through relationships with one another, through worship and prayer, and through the Bible, we can turn to Scripture with an open mind that is ready to be challenged, willing to question, and eager to investigate. Our faith is not staked on a particular interpretation of a passage of Scripture — it rests on God’s grace.⁸

Reading the Bible with this sense of curiosity and wonder, our faith is not something we have to defend, as if it were a set of doctrines to which we must follow or else. Rather scripture becomes an invitation for us –God’s invitation - to dialogue with and be in relationship with scripture, God and one another – to seek the hidden treasures, even if they are difficult to understand or even if we disagree with and about them - to wrestle and study in fellowship with one another - to be led by the Spirit to encounter Christ in these words and to be led by His example. By these words, by God’s very breath, which is alive - warm and comforting, we will be led. Amen.

⁷ Wright, pg. 121.

⁸ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/the-bible-ii/>