



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy: Listening to Scripture Matthew 5; II Timothy 3:14-17

I want to thank those of you who have thus far written devotions for the Lenten season. You have shared with us the ways in which you have seen and touched and heard God right in front of you. You have leaned into the heart of the Holy, and it has made a difference in your lives. We are grateful to be able to experience those moments with you.

Last week we walked with Jesus in the wilderness and felt the tug of the Tempter every time he offered an opportunity for Jesus to satisfy one of those cravings that are so familiar to us. I love to watch the interplay between Jesus and the Tempter. These scenes are so dramatic. We see the Tempter holding a smooth, oblong stone in his hands, offering it to Jesus as if it were a hot, crusty loaf of bread with melted butter trickling down the sides, and urging him to make it so. In the next instant they are in the heavens, looking down on all the kingdoms of the earth like the astronauts in the international space station. Jesus is told he has won the Lucifer Lottery and can have it all. Almost as quickly, they fly Harry Potter style to the top of the temple and discuss whether or not God is trustworthy to take care of Jesus. But it is the dialogue that is so compelling. In each episode, the Tempter cunningly taps into Jesus' humanity to offer him something we naturally desire. And each time Jesus simply but eloquently quotes scripture to refute the offer. When the Tempter finally catches on and uses scripture to lure Jesus in, Jesus looks him in the eye and says, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Realizing he has met his match, the Tempter slinks away until another opportunity to get Jesus presents itself.

It is a magnificent story to mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry for from that day forward, everything Jesus does will be scrutinized by the scribes who were the students of Hebrew scripture and the Pharisees who were bound and determined to make the people live by the letter of the scriptural law. The challenges of the Tempter would prove to pale in comparison to the nipping and yapping, the tricks and traps of the religious leaders as they dogged Jesus all the way from the wilderness to the cross.

Several decades after Jesus' encounter with the Tempter, the Apostle Paul reminded his young protégé Timothy of the value of scripture when properly handled in the life of faith. We heard his words earlier: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16-17). Timothy had known this truth throughout his young life, but Paul knew that a reminder was always helpful.

How do we begin to comprehend holy scripture which we know as the Bible? Over a thousand years in the making, the people of God cobbled together divine laws, folklore, poetry, sermons, historical accounts, letters, wise sayings, apocalyptic visions, and the mundane lives of an ordinary group of people made extraordinary by the God who claimed them as his own. They produced the book we know as the Bible. Actually more a library of sixty-six books which somehow fit snugly together as one, the Bible is important to us precisely because, as Paul affirmed, it is inspired by God. That singular word tells the story—"inspired." Meaning "God breathed," that phrase carries us all the way back to the instigation of creation when God blew over the waters and life churned in the chaos. God spoke and life happened. God breathed into a lump of clay and humanity was born. Anytime God breathes or speaks, life happens. So all of these stories and sermons and prayers in the Bible have life in them because God breathed it.

Isn't it odd then that we are so afraid of scripture? And we are, aren't we? Admittedly, it is a big book, especially if you get one of those industrial size versions. But I have known many of you to sit down with novels, histories, and text books that are far larger and more complex and handle them just fine. We have this idea that the Bible is too difficult to understand, yet we read law and science and history and politics and psychology and manage to figure it out. Some of us complain that it is difficult to keep all of the names and relationships in the Bible straight, but if you can keep up with the Young and the Restless for forty years, you can figure out Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, Rebekah, Esau, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and their twelve sons with no problem! I guarantee you that these drama these characters offer will rival anything that *Downton Abbey* or *Scandal* can throw at you!

We have no reason to be afraid of the Bible. It is, after all, the story of ordinary people who realize that their lives mean something because there is a God who created them and loves them and wants life to be good for them.

That sounds a lot like you and me. So when you read the Bible, you are actually reading your own story. It is an autobiography of each one of us.

What does make the Bible distinctive is the story it tells and the resources it offers us, as Paul would say, “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Yet, Jesus made it clear that just as the Bible can be extremely helpful, it can also be harmful when misused. Time and time again, Jesus saw people using the words and examples of the Bible to suit their own interests, even to harm and oppress other people. Matthew collects many of Jesus seminal teachings in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. Stretching through chapters five, six, and seven, Jesus offers us a template for living the life of faith. But notice how he deals with what was for him the accepted scripture of the day. Hear these words from the fifth chapter of Matthew:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

Matthew 5:17:30

First, we see the high value Jesus places on the law and teachings of the prophets that have been handed down. They should be followed, he says, but be careful to not use them simply to your own advantage. Ethics and morality are a matter of the heart which is expressed through our actions. While we may not physically take the life of another person, if in our hearts we have murdered them, we are liable. In the same way, we may never commit adultery, but the desires of our heart can often do just as much damage because they control the ways in which we relate to one another. As Jesus said a little later, “Where your treasure is, your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

On numerous occasions, Jesus was chastised by the scribes and Pharisees for violating scriptural laws which prohibited work on the Sabbath. Whether his disciples pulled a handful of grain off the stalk of wheat or he healed someone who had been ill for years, if it happened on the Sabbath, he was called to account. Indeed, scripture is clear about Sabbath observance which is intended to provide a time for rest and regeneration such as God took after creating the world. Jesus, however, saw nourishment and healing of the body as regeneration and reminded the Pharisees that “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28). Time after time, Jesus went beneath the surface meaning of the scriptures and explored their context and consequences. We are all familiar with the incident of the woman who was caught in adultery. In order to test Jesus and his adherence to the law, the Pharisees asked whether she should be stoned as the Mosaic law required. Reflecting for a moment, Jesus conceded and said, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone” (John 8). Once again, Jesus honored the spirit of the law while challenging his hearers to look beneath their own interests to the heart of the matter.

How do we know how to interpret scripture so that we get it right? How can we get over our fear of scripture and enable it to become the life-giving source God intends it to be?

First, we have to read it. We have to become familiar with it. We have to get to know the Bible and the only way to do that is to dust it off and open it up. It is a phenomenal collection of resources for our faith. We have to do more than just read it, however. I can read Shakespeare and get the gist of the story, but if I don't try to understand his turn of phrases, his puns, and cultural and historical allusions, I miss half of the fun! I can read all of the Harry Potter books, but if I come away with the impression it is nothing more than an entertaining and fantastical story, then I have missed the struggle between good and evil played out in its pages and the message that the bonds of friendship and affection are what get us through the trials of life. When we read the Bible, we have to do more than read the words. We have to listen to the story.

Frederick Buechner, a gifted storyteller and Presbyterian minister, explains it in this way:

God is known in the Bible as he speaks—speaks to and through the prophets and patriarchs, the priests and poets, speaks through the mighty acts he works both in the history of Israel and in the small histories of men and women when their ears and lives are in some measure attuned to him, or sometimes even when they are not. The Bible is the Word of God—the word about God and God's word about himself—and it is also the endless words of God, the unanticipatable and elusive self-disclosures of God to countless numbers of people through the medium of what in Hebrew is called *dabhar*, which means both *word* and *deed*—the word that is also a deed because it makes things happen, and the deed that is also a word because, through it, is revealed meaning.¹

In order to hear God in scripture, we have to listen. We listen to what is said and for what is not said. We listen to the cries of the Hebrews seeking freedom from Pharaoh's oppressive rule. We listen to the people whose prayers went spinning into the air for ages as they begged for the Messiah to

¹Frederick Buechner, "The Good Book as a Good Book," *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 187.

come. We listen to the silence of the Bethlehem night just before it is exploded with the song of the angels. We listen to the nervous shuffling of the people as they wait for Jesus to answer the Pharisees. We listen to the sobs of Mary and Martha as they pour out their grief over their brother's death and their frustration that Jesus did not come sooner. We listen to the prayer of forgiveness on our behalf and then cringe as we hear Jesus beg God for mercy on the cross. And we listen to the empty silence of the tomb just before daybreak on the morning of resurrection. Those sounds are not always printed in the texts, but they are there nonetheless.

Jesus listened to scripture and that is why he was able to rebuke the Tempter because he knew the Tempter never listened to God. Jesus knew the words of the law, but he listened for the life which gave those words power. When Moses implored the Hebrew people to renew their covenant with God, he said,

The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him

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Deuteronomy 30:14-20

If we do not listen to God's Word coming through the words of scripture, then we miss the point of it altogether and the Bible becomes little more than a compendium of history, folklore, poetry and prognostication. When we listen, however, really listen to the stories and prophesies and prayers and laws and letters, we hear God whispering life to us, breathing life into everything we do, inspiring us toward life.

So listen to scripture. Literally listen to it. Read it out loud at times. Remember that it is a story, a drama, and try to capture the emotions and innuendo in the words. Listen to what is said and not said. Pay attention to the pauses and silences. Listen to the references and restatements of what has come before. Listen for reactions that may not be printed but which are probably playing in your own mind and heart. Above all, listen to what Jesus has to say for ultimately we interpret scripture through him.

Listen. And in order to listen better, lean into the Holy. Get a little closer to God and pay attention to what is being said and not said. Lean in and hear the wonderful words of life whispered from the heart of God. Amen.

February 21, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Like young Timothy, we too have been nurtured by scripture throughout our lives, O God. Through its stories we have learned about your love for us. By its laws, we have understood your expectations of us. In its prophecies we have discovered your hopes for us. And in its psalms, we have heard our own prayers spoken for us. We thank you for this gift, O God, and pray that it will always remain a light for our path.

Like all of those good souls who poured out their hearts in the psalms, we, too, open our hearts to you. Each of us has a long list of concerns for other people. We pray for healing for each one who is ill. We seek comfort for our friends who are grieving. We cry out for peace in this world which, at times, seems to be collapsing beneath anger and violence. We whisper our own doubts and despair, hoping no one else will hear but that you will listen. We pray and we trust that our prayers go somewhere far beyond this room.

We also praise you, O God. Although our needs are many, we do not forget how blessed we are. Already today we have been gifted with the strength to get out of a warm bed, the good fortune to have breakfast to eat, and the blessing of this fellowship of friends with whom to worship. We acknowledge those prayers that have been answered, the people who have been helped, and the abundant ways that you have made yourself known.

Thank you, Lord, for loving us because of and, sometimes, in spite of ourselves. As we walk this road through Lent, help us to rid ourselves of those things which inhibit our spirits and take on the things which will enrich our faith. Make us mindful of needs we can meet, of ways we can demonstrate your love, and of other souls who need a friend to walk with them.

How blessed we are, O God, for the gifts you so generously give us. Accept now these prayers as an offering of faith and a witness of hope, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.