

Sermon for October 16, 2016 (Proper 24, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Psalm 119:97-104; Luke 18:1-8

Title: Inspired and Useful

My friends: when is the last time you sat down and picked up your Bible and read it? Perhaps to read through an entire Book of the Bible? And how often do you meditate on short passages of Scripture for insight and guidance?

One of the most powerful stories of spiritual conversion is the one told by Augustine about himself. It happened long ago, in the summer of the year 386.

Augustine was a young man in a conflicted state. He was not happy with his life. He wanted to change, but he did not know how. He felt stuck in bad habits and routines.

He felt a call to be baptized, but he knew that this would require a full commitment to a different way of life. And he was afraid of making that commitment.

It was summer. He was in a garden near Milan in Italy, downcast and distraught, tears of frustration in his eyes, when he heard a child's voice calling out repeatedly "Tolle, lege", which means "pick up and read".

"Tolle, lege." Pick up and read.

Augustine has just put down a book a few minutes earlier and he understood this voice as a call from God telling him to return to that book and pick it up and read it.

Now, understand that Augustine did not have a Bible to read.

The Bible as we know it did not come into being until the Gutenberg Bible was printed and bound in quantity with the printing press in the 1450s.

What Augustine had was a book of the writings of the apostle Paul. He opened it and his eyes fell on a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:14).

And as he read that Word, all the shadows of doubt were driven from his heart. He stood up, ready to give his life fully and completely to Christ.

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Let me ask you: how did the Bible come to be? Do you know the story? I mean, did the scriptures fall out of the heavens as a gift straight from God?

No, and the story is much more complicated than that.

The reality of the situation is that the Christian community took hundreds of years to figure out which writings were actually “God-inspired.”

Our Bibles today have 4 Gospels in them, but in reality there were dozens of Gospels telling the story of Jesus.

And there were hundreds of different letters written – or claimed to be written – by early leaders of the Church. There were also many different texts written by Jewish teachers just before and after the time of Christ which some also considered to be God-inspired.

It was a very confusing situation. And with little communication between the different parts of the Roman Empire, each region developed their own lists of recognized texts.

Think about it in our own day, but without any modern forms of communication.

An incredible number of books are written and published in any given year.

How are we to know which ones will be considered authoritative, which ones will stand the test of time?

You might read something this year and say, “Oh my goodness! This book speaks the truth! I need to keep this book near me, on my nightstand, for the rest of my life!”

But many others will not know anything about it.

Slowly, you will tell people about this incredible book and the word will spread.

This is what happened in the early church, and it took a very long time until there was widespread agreement.

What we know today as the Bible is a result of that long process and has been handed down to us over the centuries as “inspired by God”, as a tried-and-tested divine gift given to teach, to correct, to guide and to train.

Do you know that every single person ordained in The Episcopal Church makes a solemn public declaration that they hold the Bible to be the Word of God?

Please pick up a Prayer Book somewhere around you and turn to page 538. I am guessing that very few of you have actually attended an ordination liturgy, so you might not know about this declaration. (Page 538)

It is made when one is admitted to the Sacred Order of Deacons, when one is admitted to the Sacred Order of Presbyters (which we colloquially call “priests”), and also when one is admitted to the Sacred Order of Bishops.

Right at the bottom of Page 538, the final paragraph. It is an answer in response to a question about loyalty to the tradition we have received and obedience to the bishop. Let’s read that answer together. Ready?

“I am willing and ready to do so; and I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church.”

And not only that. After each verbal declaration, a written signature to the declaration is required and is kept in the Bishop’s office.

I myself have made and signed this declaration twice. And I do believe it with all my heart.

Everything that you may possibly need to know about God, about your life – its origin and destiny, its meaning and purpose, and about how to live a life in harmony with God and with all of those around you – ALL of this is contained in the Bible. And you can discover these truths by reading and meditating on these texts.

Let me see if I can say this even more clearly: there is nothing that you need to read to understand God and human life except for the Bible.

Does this surprise you? I hope not.

We can quibble about how to interpret certain passages and how to make sense of apparent conflicts between some biblical affirmations and contemporary scientific research.

And we can wince at how some people use the Bible as a weapon to hurt others.

And I am not saying that we cannot learn truth from other sacred texts as well.

But, this Bible is a gift that we have been given, and the important thing for you and me is to actually pick it up and read! To pick up your Bible and read it. To meditate on it.

Now, I do NOT recommend picking it up and starting in Genesis and reading straight through. No, don't do that. You won't make it past the book of Numbers!

Instead, follow the lead of Augustine and read the letters of Paul.

Pick a letter and read one section at a time. Not too much. Perhaps half a chapter.

Keep a notebook or journal handy. Each day, write down the section which you read, then note any questions or thoughts that arise for you. Read the passage again slowly, prayerfully, and consider, what is God telling me through this Word?

And write it down. Whatever you hear, whatever you sense, whatever you intuit.

Don't judge, don't filter. Just listen, observe and write it down.

“All God-inspired scripture is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

And what we ALL need more than anything else is training in righteousness.

Training in how to think in ways that are free of fear and anger and jealousy, how to speak in ways that bless and encourage those around you, how to live in ways that are generous and caring and compassionate.

Training in how to be tenacious like the widow in today's Gospel reading, how to never quit and never lose heart.

The Bible offers ALL of this to you. It is a gift available to you at any time.

Find a Bible that you connect with. A Bible that you feel excited to pick up and read. I have one. It is this Common English Bible, a Reference Bible. I can't quite explain it, but opening this and reading it makes me happy. Just the simple act of reading it brings me joy and encouragement. And that's nothing to sneeze at!

So why do this? What are we after? What is the goal of being immersed in and trained by the Scriptures?

How does that verse in Second Timothy end? "So that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

How often do you read and meditate on the Scriptures, seeking insight and guidance, hoping to be equipped for every good work?

Let it be often, because the Bible has been given to bless us and guide us. Thanks be to God for such a gift! Amen.