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November 10, 2019 “Is your headlamp on?”

Practicing Faith: Scripture Study/Digging Deeply Psalm 19:7-11; Psalm 119:1-18, 97-105

As we continue in our fall worship series of Practicing Faith, we come to the spiritual discipline of Scripture Study – Digging Deeply. To begin with, I wonder, what images come to mind when you think about the Bible? What emotions begin to bubble to the surface within you as you consider the Bible? How would you describe the ways you interact with the Bible? How would you finish this sentence? The Bible is _____.

For some of us these questions bring with them a sense of warmth, security, delight, and even joy. For others of us these questions bring with them a sense of dread, guilt, frustration, and even anger. We are considering the same book, the pieces of paper that hold the same words, and yet we can come to such varying experiences, interactions, and exposures.

If we had the time, we could engage in storytelling of times we have witnessed the Bible being used as a sword, a club, a weapon to defend one’s theological stance, and as a tool to engage in theological shaming. Perhaps other stories would depict how the Bible has been used as a heavy paperweight to hold down unshakable biblical truths. Other stories might complete the sentence of “The Bible is _____” by saying the “The Bible is mysterious, mundane, confusing, bizarre, out of touch with my reality.”

And for others, I believe that if we had the time we could engage in storytelling of times we have witnessed the Bible being used as a tool, a guide, a comfort, a teacher. To hear stories of the ways the Bible has spoken to us, transformed us, inspired us, and led us well on the path of following Jesus. Other stories might complete the sentence of “The Bible is _____” by saying the “The Bible is alive, powerful, relevant, refreshing, and inspiring.”

I believe that if given the time we could hear stories from both ends of the spectrum regarding our interactions with the Bible. However, even in the midst of that diversity I trust that we can agree that the Bible is significant as it provides us the story of God's people, the life and teachings of Jesus, and as it connects us to each other and with other believers around the world. As Anabaptists we believe the Bible is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. We believe that it is the Word of God and that God continues to speak in and through it.

A couple observations as we begin. First, there is more, much more, that could be said about the Bible than what can be contained in this one sermon. Some might recall that a couple years ago here at Waterford we spent an entire year focused on "Year of the Bible." During that year we worked our way through Heilsgeschichte, God's salvation history. Secondly, even beyond that though, we never reach a point where we have 'finished' the Bible, or reached the end of the story that it contains. Even if, you are like my 96 year old grandmother who has read the Bible completely through at least 50 times. We never arrive at the end of the journey with the Bible.

The final observation I would offer is that when we talk about the Bible we could take this conversation in a variety of directions. We could focus on the Bible's significance with the history of the church. Or on one of the main theological tenets found within the Bible. Or retell the story of God's people as found within the pages of the Bible. Or focus on our Anabaptist ways of knowing of the Bible and on Anabaptist biblical interpretation. Or on learning about the various genres found in the Bible. Or on learning more about how the Bible became canonized. We could focus on... I think you get the picture. Many, many, many angles, and all of them significant in their own way.

So, if we are not focusing on one of those areas, then what is our focus for today? Today we want to think about the Bible as it pertains to our interactions with it as a spiritual discipline. What does that mean? Well some of the previous angles one could consider that the Bible be viewed more as a textbook or a theologically rich teaching book. However, when we consider reading the Bible as a spiritual discipline, then we move to reading the Bible for spiritual transformation. We approach the Bible differently when this is our focus.

To begin with then, perhaps you are wondering why should we read the Bible? Again, many answers could be offered to that question. This morning I want to offer 3 as articulated by Mennonite Pastor and author Meghan Good in her recent book “The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today.” In her book Good outlines these 3 reasons for reading the Bible.

First, she writes, “seeking God without the Bible is sort of like trying to discover the principles of quantum physics... from scratch.”ⁱ She goes on to explain that “If everyone had to rediscover gravity for themselves starting with Newton’s apple, our knowledge of the world would be limited indeed. When we open the Bible, we stand on the shoulders of giants who have come before us.... (for example) Sarah, Ezekiel, and John... When we come to the Bible, we have the chance to lay down our own small grains of insight along this larger shoreline.”ⁱⁱ

The second reason she offers is that reading the Bible helps us see the true God, and not a god of our own making. She writes,

It’s crucial to remember that every individual, every community, every culture, and every generation has its own biases and blind spots. Just as your own personal experiences of God and the world opens you to particular insights, it closes you to others. Even pooling our experiences and ideas with a diverse group of friends is not enough to save us, because there are things in the water of history that all of us are drinking that affect us collectively whether we perceive the flavor or not. **Those who set out in search of God independent of the Bible almost invariably end up finding a God who looks very**

much like themselves – a God who shares their tastes and politics, their assumptions and ambitions, the trending philosophies of their time. When we come to the Bible, we look at God through the eyes of ages and cultures that don't share our own presumptions and preoccupations... In doing this – in humbling ourselves to engage this conversation – we are checked in our temptation to bow to a god who is no more than the spirit of our age, a god made in the image of our own particular distortions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now I think her first 2 reasons for why we should read the bible are both very compelling and we could have even stopped there. However, Good adds the third which is the real zinger. She says that the third reason for reading the Bible is the “hardest to pin down, (it) is the naked power of the book itself... God, in some strange and unique way, actually talks here. And where God starts talking, chains are broken, wounds are healed, and whole worlds are upended.”^{iv}

Our two scripture passages for today also add their voices for why we should read the Bible. If you have your Bibles I invite you to turn with me first to Psalm 19. This is a beautiful psalm attributed to David. It begins with this poetic description of the heavens declaring the glory of God, and the works of God's hands. In these words we grasp the majesty, the creative energy, and the sheer wonder of God in the presence of awe evoking creation. In verse seven David switches gears and begins to describe the teachings of the Lord. He employs adjectives such as perfect, sure, right, pure, clear, and true. While the sun provides physical light to the bountiful created world, the teaching of the Lord provide radiant light to the eyes for the journey which provides joy and refreshment.

Turning then to Psalm 119 we find the longest of all of the psalms. This psalm is completely devoted to celebrating the gift, delight, and life found in studying and knowing the teachings of the Lord, the law. One scholar observed that while it is the longest of all the psalms “One can start at the end and read the verses backward, and it makes equally good sense. One concludes that Psalm 119 was not composed for the epic moments of life, but for the 90 percent

of time in which life is uneventful, even monotonous. (Therefore) Psalm 119 becomes the moment of prolonged contemplation in God's presence^v as we celebrate and dwell on the gift of God's teachings.

I would draw your attention to verse 105, as the most memorized and quoted verse of this long psalm. There we read, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." This verse deeply resonates with the passion and images found in Psalm 19. It paints this picture of a pilgrim on a journey in darkness and the Bible providing light and direction for the path ahead. It brings to my mind running in the early morning and needing to wear a headlamp. On one such run I just couldn't figure out why it was still so hard to see the road in front of me. I found myself stumbling, having some angry thoughts, and wanting to give up and go back to my warm home. But then, aha. While I was wearing the headlamp, it wasn't turned on. Friends, it makes a difference. Without turning it on the headlamp was of no help to provide light and direction for my path ahead of me.

I wonder today how many of us would say that we are wearing our sturdy headlamps, but we have not turned them on. How many of us have a Bible, or two or three or ten, and perhaps have read most it not all of it, and yet cannot recall the last time we sat with it as a spiritual discipline? I would liken that to wearing your headlamp, but not having it turned on. For it to light your path, guide your feet, transform your life... we need to turn it on.

So this week I believe our challenge is to first make sure we are wearing our headlamp, and then to turn it on. But how shall we do that? There are a variety of ways that we can engage with the Bible as a spiritual discipline for spiritual transformation. Pastor and Author Ruth Haley Barton concludes that "When we engage the Scriptures for spiritual transformation...we engage not only our mind but also our heart, our emotions, our body, our curiosity, our imagination and

our will. We open ourselves to a deeper level of understanding and insight that grows out of and leads us deeper into our personal relationship with the One behind the text. And it is in the context of relational intimacy that real life change takes place.”^{vi}

A practice that many of us have used both alone and in groups is the practice of Lectio Divina. This practice provides a structure of slowing down and hearing the same passage several times, looking for different things with each reading. For example perhaps listening for a key word or phrase that stands out to you, or considering what image comes to mind.

This morning I want to offer a newer structure of reading the bible as a spiritual discipline that Meghan Good outlines in her recent book, “The Bible Unwrapped.” Good provides 6 short, concise steps that I want to briefly describe for you.

The first step is “Downshift.” “Reading the Bible to hear God’s voice requires a deliberate move away from our normal Internet-reading mode, in which we suck up information with the relentless efficiency of an industrial vacuum cleaner and forget it just as fast.”^{vii} So Good offers that before “we even crack the Bible’s cover, we pause to shift ourselves into a new frame of mind... As much as possible, we release our agenda and hand control over to God. Then we simply settle ourselves into a posture of hospitality, receptivity, and listening.”^{viii} First step, Downshift.

The second step is “Read.” Good writes with humor, Read, “For real. (She writes) I mean it. Read. As in, actually take in words so as to comprehend their meaning, not sweep eyes across the page and hope to learn through sheer osmosis.”^{ix} This week I heard about a new German company called “Blinkist” which has raised over \$35 million in fewer than 6 years! What is it? It is an app that allows you to just take 15 minutes to blitz through the main points of a nonfiction title. One of their tag lines is “The reality is – everyone loves reading, but no one has the time.

Blinkist fills this learning gap and makes acquiring new knowledge effortless.” Friends, there is no Blinkist app for the Bible. We downshift and then we read. We must read.

The third step is “Explore.” Consider the literary context, what’s happening in the surrounding text, vocabulary used within the passage. But as Good points out, “You are not simply gathering information; you are listening for what God is saying to you through it. Imagine keeping one ear attuned down to the text and the other tipped upward... You are reading to be changed.”^x Third step, “Explore.”

The fourth step is “Talk. Start with God.” Similar to my sermon two weeks ago on prayer, here Good encourages us to talk with God about what we are seeing, experiencing, wondering, and exploring within the text in front of us. Talk with God about what stands out, what is challenging, what remains a mystery. The fourth step, “Talk. Start with God.”

The fifth step is “Zip it.” Good describes this step this way, “There’s a moment in the process when the best thing we can do is shut up and wait, just sit in the presence of God and let God do the transformative work underneath... What happens here is not on you.” Zip it. Focus on God. And invite God to be at work within you. Fifth step, “Zip it.”

And finally, the sixth and final step is “Live.” Again Good sums up this step as she writes “Whatever you heard as you pondered and listened and talked, whatever glimpse you may have caught of God’s vision for the world, whatever subtle tug of calling or conviction you sense, it wasn’t just there to enrich your mind – it was there to move your life... Tomorrow is the worst day to do anything about what you heard in the Bible. Words from God are not cellophane-wrapped Twinkies that can set on the shelf for years on end and emerge tasting exactly the same. Living words from God are like fresh bread. Their best moment is always right now.” So step six, “Live.”

Downshift. Read. Explore. Talk, start with God. Zip It. And Live. My challenge this week is that we find time to engage the spiritual discipline of scripture study and perhaps do so by employing these steps by Meghan Good. What text should you read for this spiritual practice? Anything! Not sure what to start with? Perhaps pick a story from one of the gospels, or sit with the story of creation in Genesis 1, or sit with the passage that Madeline Smith Kauffman is going to preach on next week in Genesis 18. Or sit with one of the psalms we looked at today. I trust and believe and celebrate that no matter what text we pick our God will use it to bring about transformation within us.

I see that we are wearing our headlamps. Now, let's turn them on. May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Meghan Larissa Good, *The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 31.

ⁱⁱ Good, *The Bible Unwrapped*, 32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Good, *The Bible Unwrapped*, 32.

^{iv} Good, *The Bible Unwrapped*, 33.

^v James L. Mays, editor, *HarperCollins Bible Commentary* (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, California), 439.

^{vi} Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (IVP Books: Downers Grover, Illinois), 50.

^{vii} Good, *The Bible Unwrapped*, 216.

^{viii} Good, *The Bible Unwrapped*, 217.

^{ix} Good, *The Bible Unwrapped*, 217.

^x Good, *The Bible Unwrapped*, 218-219.