

**Sunday January 24th 2010 – Ladner United Church
JIM SHORT**

”Reading the Bible for the First Time”

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Nehemiah

8:1 all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel.

8:2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month.

8:3 He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

8:5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.

8:6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

8:8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

8:9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

8:10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Luke

4:14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

4:15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

4:16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

4:17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

4:20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue

were fixed on him.

4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

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My style in life is to jump off the diving board – and then in mid air – look down to see if there is enough water in the pool...

I took the same approach to last week's, this week's and next week's sermon – looking this week I thought – why did I think I could cover spiritual gifts, the bible and prayer in three x twenty minutes worth of sermon time...

Each of those topics alone has material and thoughts and reflections for a year...but none the less I will attempt that...

Beginning February 14th as it suggests in the bulletin and insert – alongside of our spring study which I am really looking forward to...

I will preach along side the study of those eight great core stories of the bible – so that if you aren't in the study group – then you will have a chance to connect to some of them and if you are – well then – you will be doubly blessed by both the study and the sermons...

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Prayer

Gracious God may the meditations of our hearts and the words of my mouth be worthy and acceptable to you. And may your word come to your people now either through me or despite me. AMEN.

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(The Idiot's Guide to the Bible)

The Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II when he was ill would eat actual pages in the bible in the belief that he would be cured. He died in 1913 after ingesting the entire book of 2 Kings.

I guess the abundance of fibre in the pages of 2 Kings was not helping him like it was supposed to...

The Bible...its one of those books that most people feel they need to have somewhere in their life...but are not always sure what to do with...

And probably most people in North American have one...statistics say that even amongst people very committed to the Christian faith – its one of the least likely books to be read...

It is one of the books that often arrives at our local thrift store...

❖ King James older black covered bibles and prayer books with writing that only those with 20/20 vision could read

❖ Those small newer bibles that are given out by organizations...

And surprisingly enough beautiful big packed with information study bibles (some of you who have done studies with me have benefited from my picking those lovely ones up and passing them on)

My guess is that they come either from people who in spurt of enthusiasm to read a bible –

perhaps having connected with their spirituality or gone back to a faith community – buy one and don't get beyond buying it – then feel guilty because they are not reading it and want it out of their site

Or they are given to young people – children and grandchildren from parents, grandparents – hoping faith might be rekindled through the gift...

There are a plethora of bibles available these days – still a best seller and perhaps the most widely published “book”. Mark Buchannan, a ministerial colleague of mine from Duncan Days and a published author describes it this way... (Your God is too safe)

“There is a...glut of the word of God...a deluge...we have every translation of the Bible you can imagine – the NIV, the NEV, The KJV, the NKJV, the NASV, NRSV, the Preacher's bible, the worshipper's bible, the spirit – filled believer's bible, the left-handed bald gypsy fiddler's bible with versions for the near and far sighted (the last I made up)...in hardback, paper, leather, cloth, in pink, blue, red, oxblood, turtle shell, iridescent orange, psychedelic paisley with maps and chants and indices and appendices and concordances and holograms of the Temple in the back and a little sleeve with a CD-Rom that takes you on a guided tour of the Holy land...”

In fact there is now a green bible – highlights with explanation the “green friendly” parts of the bible as well as it's made totally of recycled materials....

And a Manga bible (Japanese cartoon anima)

He goes on to say that people are buying bibles, sometimes reading them, but there is not much evidence that people are studying them, people are “nibbling, but not devouring”

Many people are tempted to treat their bible as a superstitious object – could never throw it away – but can't or more often are intimidated and don't know how to get into it...

Years ago I had a parishioner in Toronto with a small child – that parishioner went to sleep and would not go to sleep – unless she had her childhood bible under their pillow – but had never read it...

I want today to place the book in the context of what it means when we call it the “Word of God”

Strip away some of our false assumptions about what we need to be able to read the Bible

While upholding and pointing to its incredible beauty and mystery

And end with an encouragement that you just take the plunge, open and read it...

What is the Bible? And to answer that – I'll say the bible is the Word of God...

Then I'll define that negatively by what it is not – and what it is>

The Bible is not an object of worship nor is it God. We don't worship the bible nor have a relationship with it nor expect it to love us...

Though when you hear people talk about it – and even sometimes how they treat it – you might think it is the object of our veneration...

Neither is it a literal transcript of a conversation that happened between God and human beings...like a modern day court transcript may be....

Nor did not drop out of the sky one day – in King James English...bound with black letter and gold gilded pages...there is that famous story that floats around the church (who knows whether its true or urban legend – about when the first red hymn book – the joint Anglican united church one came to us – in one debate about whether a particular church would make the change from the old blue one – one person stood up and loudly proclaimed that if the King James English was good enough for Jesus, it was good enough for him)

But if we still call it the “word of God”...what does that mean?

Let's use this image – the Bible is like one of those road signs with a town name on it and an arrow...and you on foot, with your bike or in a car – can look at it, read it, see the arrow and know that if you follow that arrow – you will find the place that you are looking for...

The bible is a book – it's a sign with an arrow that points us towards the God who loves us and who calls us into a loving relationship

And the words – without a capital – that make up the many writings – expressed in countless literary styles – narrative, poem, proverb, parable etc...

are a kind of sacrament – a sacred experience – that opens us up to the “Word” which is God – as God has made God's self know to human beings through history and most fully came to us in Jesus and continues to be with us...in the Holy Spirit...

So hold on to that...

And let's think book for a moment...when I say book – you think a novel, a textbook, a coffee table book, a paperback...

In this morning's scripture: Jesus is “reading the bible” – what bible was Jesus reading... not the King James's bible from the 16th Century after Christ...

The tradition of the synagogue (the temple being the mother church in Jerusalem – and synagogues being village franchises) was that a visiting elder – like Jesus – would be invited to read the daily scripture lesson (much as we do here)

In his day – the scriptures were on scrolls

The Hebrew Scriptures as we call them – consisted of 39 parts – the tradition was for the lesson to be read – Jesus choose from the prophetic books...

Emphasizing God's justice much to people's surprise over vengeance

And his interpretation was that this was now being all fulfilled in his life...

Further on – the pew sitters were not happy...

Jesus 7/24 – page 12

“The bible that Jesus knew was those that Christians call the Old Testament or the First testament. These were first written in Hebrew, but Jesus seemed to be familiar with them in their more popular Greek translation as well. These scriptures had a spiritual authority for Jesus and he obviously studied them, because he was able to quote them with ease. Sometimes Jesus quoted the scriptures to provide a discussion that he thought needed to happen; sometimes he quoted them to stop an argument that was going nowhere; and sometimes he quoted them to spark the imagination to higher, nobler thoughts....Jesus knew that the experience of a whole nation formed around its belief in God for over 1500 years had to have something to say to him and his generation...”

To go from 39 scrolls to this book – long process...which is information readily available in a book or on the internet and topic of another sermon

from these separate scrolls – to the writings after Jesus to a church council around 300 ACE as we know say to decide which writings were authentic and in – what we call the canon – to translation from Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew to Latin (vulgate bible) to English and various English translations from the 16th to 20th Centuries to translations made in every conceivable language of the earth – alongside of that were power struggles about who should and should not translate the bible and how and who could own one and the printing press and that’s another sermon – by a book or go on the internet – fascinating process...

But there are four quick things to note:
(Jesus 7/24 – page 13)

There are no original manuscripts of the bible – there are only tests on papyrus or vellum preserved by continued re-copying

The analysis of fragments and scrolls found in the Great Archaeological explosion of the 20th assures us that mistakes made in the process of copying was negligible.

Comparing the original Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew texts with other texts of the day as and then comparing their subsequent various English translations assures us all are strikingly similar.

The challenge – especially for scholars is to take the words of the bible in terms of context and culture of that day – hearing it in that situation and then having us theologians interpret it with that information for now.

This would be a good place to refresh ourselves on something we spoke about in December when we were studying the story of the First Christmas...

And one of the tools I spoke about that we needed to have was understanding what it means to say the bible is literally true...

Well – in a post enlightenment world – a scientific and technologically marvellous world – when I say something is “true” – it usually means that somehow I can verify it scientifically or factually...data, tests, alternate sources etc...

Even that though is a challenge in our world – 6 people can watch the same event unfolding and both see it and remember it in different ways...especially if they did that after a period of time...

And we fall into a trap with the bible that only modern folk like us would – it would have never been an issue people even considered in Jesus’ day... – the bible is all true – its all God’s word...

You can study endlessly the philosophy of bikes, read the story of how they were invented, look at their different styles during their development, delve into the science and theory of motion, materials, operation...but you don't have to do all of that to ride a bike...

You can get a bike – and sit on the seat...put your hands on the bars, feet on the peddle and start riding...

There are very very few people whose ability to ride a bike will be profoundly affected by all the pre-study...

A United Church minister by the name of Alan Reynolds has written a book about the bible and why to read it:

He says we have to move beyond the carnage in our lives of “bible thumping and bible bashing” and reading the bible simply to hear...

‘The love of God...’

Remember the sign I spoke of – the arrow is pointing us this way – Eugene Peterson from Regent College writes:

“The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of those areas...if we want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way. God and love can't be separated.” p. 503 Introduction to John 1, 2, 3,

You need only one thing to read the bible... (In it is not – you have to be able to read – because if you can't – it's available on audio cassette, DVD and Mp3's)

You need only to be open in your reading to hear the love of God for you...

The love of God...for you, for others and for the world...

After all Jesus said

When asked to what are the greatest commandments, what is required...his reply was to love God and love one's neighbour...

That is what is required – to be open...

I suppose over all my years of church participation, study and work – I've at one time or another - in bits and pieces, through reading on my own, sermon work and study – read the entire bible...

There are some parts I'd be happy not to read again.....they were dense to get through...

There are parts that raise lots of questions and struggles and parts that are difficult and offensive...

There are parts that are near and dear to my heart

The discipline of sermon preparation and bible studies I love because it forces me to look at passages I might skip over, avoid or think I have all figured out... or don't want to hear because they challenge my life to much...

I have endless and copious amounts of study material, every conceivable kind of book, commentary, map, and introduction and on and on...

And yet the power of the bible
Is still for me
That through reading and hearing it – I hear God’s love for me...

Alan Reynolds in his book says that over countless years, when people have read the bible they did not read it to “learn” more – they read it to become more...

To become more of the person the love of God wanted them to be...

For our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God...relationship, encounter...

This is the challenge...

Try this week – just to open the bible up and just read it – and let it speak – it’s not so much that we need to understand and read the bible – we need to let the bible read and understand us...

It’s what the writer of Timothy said:

2 Timothy 3:16

“All scripture is God – breathed and it useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

I’ll play with my bike analogy again in a different way...

I would not read all of those books about biking – and immerse myself in all of that knowledge just to talk about it at parties or brag about being a so called expert and never ride a bike...it would only be of use and interest if eventually I got around to actually riding the bike...

and so I read the bible – not so that I can do crossword puzzles structured on biblical data and trivia...but rather so that as I integrate within my tissue and bone God’s love for me – my love for God and my neighbours grows and blossoms...

The great German theologian Karl Barth – over the course of his teaching and writing career wrote countless volumes and words about theology, religion, church scripture – every imaginable topic associated with the Christian faith – he was the most prolific of all Christian writers of his time – yet when asked how he might sum up the totality of the message of the Christian faith – he reflected for a moment and said – “Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so.”

This last Father’s day – my eldest daughter Katy sent me one of those amazing cards upon which you can record a voice message – when you open it – you hear the message....

I keep it on my desk – it says on the front – with a young child’s feet standing on her father’s shoes

Daddy – you’ve made me happy in a million ways...on the inside it says Happy Father’s Day

But when you open it – it says Daddy I love you...

Those four words with that familiar voice – give me Goosebumps and make me feel like the luckiest guy in the world...

May it be with us – when we simply read – the bible – that with goose bumps we hear – that God loves us...that when we open the bible – we hear God call our name and tell us that God loves us...