

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent

Feb. 14, 2016

Pastor Pete Christ and Christine Fifield, Communications Coordinator

P: When things go bad on our 'journeys,' and they always seem to at some point, how do we react? Do we take a step back and re-group? Do we just grin and bear it, hoping things will improve if we're just patient? Do we turn around or throw in the towel and just head home? Or do we do what Jesus does when things get tough? Turn to scripture.

C: Really? That's where this sermon is going to go? Alright, this is either going to be really boring or totally irrelevant.

P: Three times the devil tests Jesus and each time Jesus backs down the devil by quoting scripture. Our lives are filled with temptation, trial and testing. Are you prepared to turn to scripture when things get really tough?

C: What?! You can't be serious! "Quoting scripture to take down the devil" Do you really think that this is relevant?

P: If it works for Jesus. Why can't it work for us?

C: Give us a break Pastor Pete! Are you really telling us that if we quote a couple of verses at life's challenges (or devils if you will) that everything will go smoothly for us? Please! I think that's ludicrous...and I work at church.

P: You know what? You're absolutely right Christine. This sermon is terrible and has no chance of connecting in any meaningful way to where you and I are at, not to mention probably the rest of the people gathered here too. The way that Jesus proposes in today's Gospel is way too important for it to be treated like this, a way that's all too easy to just dismiss and tune out. I think we're going to start over and I'm going to invite Christine up here to help me. (Move away from pulpit, set up two music stands at top step.)

C: As you may already suspect, Pastor Pete approached me a few months ago about collaborating on a sermon. I **definitely** didn't think I would be helping to preach on this topic, scripture that is. I was hoping to help collaborate on a uber-inspiring message focused on having the courage to walk through the wilderness that have people crying or jumping up and shouting "amen!" And those sermons

are great, but when the two of us actually sat down with today's text and grappled with it for a while, we found a surprising idea emerging. An idea that (frankly) made me quite uncomfortable.

You see even though I work in a church and have been active in faith communities my whole life, I have a finicky relationship with the Good Book. Like many young Christians, I grew up coming to Sunday School and Confirmation, learning the stories, and memorizing the need-to-know verses.

In spite of this, I hardly ever use it. In fact, I am not sure I would even consider it an important part of my faith life.

When I verbalized this to Pastor Pete, I think we both knew that I was not alone in this. The Bible is not an easy book. And yet it is the cornerstone on which we have built our rich faith tradition. There has to be some merit in it beyond forming the Church.

So today we want to invite you into a dialogue on how we can be like Jesus. And use scripture in the wilderness times of our lives, facing the devils that come across our path.

C: So to start, answer me this Pastor Pete, why is the Bible so important? Why should we care?

P: There are lots of reasons really but they can all be boiled down to a few key points.

[It's central to knowing God.]

The bible is a collection of writings, all sorts of different kinds, that all serve to reveal God to us. As such, we rely on the scriptures as one of the primary means through which we come to understand God's character and God's vision for creation.

[We make sense through story - the Bible is God's story.]

These scriptures contain the stories of how God's people have interacted with and experienced God over thousands of years. There are stories of surprise and joy just as there are stories of sadness and anger. Yes, sometimes it's hard to consider how stories compiled thousands of years ago could remain relevant to us today. As a result, it can feel clumsy to apply a seemingly ancient understanding of God to our very contemporary world. Consider the timelessness of Shakespeare's

sonnets... don't they have the capacity to help us understand love, even today, on Valentine's day.

[The story is big enough to match our own.]

The variety of material contained in the Bible, speaks to the variety we experience daily. So it takes a little work, or even a lot of work, to get at the timelessness of the scriptures but their witness to God and God's activity in the world at some very particular times and in some very particular ways help us make sense of things that are happening to us, particularly right now.

P: What are some of the biggest barriers to understanding scripture or, more importantly, having scripture be valuable to daily life?

C: Well, to name a few...

[It's takes too much time!] It is so long that generally don't feel I have enough time to dedicate to it. Even if I have the app, there's just so much there. I wouldn't even know where to start. I'd almost rather just have the pastor tell me.

[It's boring] I'm sorry I just need to verbalize this one, Pastor Pete. How can I pay attention to who begat who when I am just itching to read JK Rowling latest publication? (It's coming this summer people!).

[It's confusing!] It's full of contradictions! I feel like it tells me to do one thing in one chapter then not to do the same thing a few books later. But my biggest concern is that...

[I don't know enough!] I'm worried all of time that I am not getting the full picture. The book covers so many different eras of history and culture. I feel you could spend years studying the Bible and still not have all of the answers. How do we average folks even have a chance?

P: I get it. And you're absolutely right. I'll let you in on some pastoral truth: Pastor's can feel exactly the same way. Allowing the Bible to play a role in helping you make sense of the world and of God isn't something that's reserved for academics and professional theologians.

C: I don't necessarily experience all of these barriers all of the time. And, I am not anti-Scripture. I just have a lot of reservations about how it's used and how to use it outside of church.

So, Pastor Pete help me. Is it possible to get past these barriers, (short of getting a theology degree)? Where do we start?

P: At the outset, again I want to emphasize that even pastors struggle with this but let's take a look at some more basic truths about engaging scripture in today's world.

[It takes effort.] It's not easy, but it doesn't have to be hard either. More importantly it takes commitment. Once you're willing to consider that the Bible contains some valuable truths about life, then the prospect of finding value becomes real. I would encourage you to seek out as many opportunities as possible to bring scripture into the meaning making that you're hoping to accomplish. It means reading the Bible with purpose and an expectation that it has something to contribute to your story.

[It takes friends.] We learn and interpret scripture in community. This is something important about our Lutheran tradition and worth acknowledging. Sometimes, this makes it harder (like when we encounter folks with opinions different than mine) but sometimes this dissension leads to productive revelation. Before it was popular catch phrase, the idea that there is "wisdom in crowds" holds a lot of truth. But it only works if you're first willing to consider that how others engage the stories and see them playing out in their lives has value to how you'll be able to see them playing out in your own life.

[It takes trust.] It's an act of faith. We approach scripture because we anticipate that God will be revealed to us in this way. John's Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." This is not only John's claim but it's a confession of faith. God comes to us and is revealed to us in many ways, but God is contained in Word and God is released back into the world in our reading and hearing of scripture.

C: So put all this to work for us. What do we do when others start quoting scripture at us outside of church or in the public sphere in ways that seem counter to what we believe? Do we quote verses right back or is there a way for me to actually use scripture outside of church in a positive way? Is there a way to use scripture like Jesus?

P: Don't you just love it when people shoot scripture bullets at you. The sheer breadth of the material contained in the Bible is staggering and it should be no surprise that taken, out of context, there's probably a verse that could be quoted in such a way as to support any possible opinion. This is a tactic we call 'proof-texting' and it's probably one of the most damaging ways to use scripture.

[Don't 'proof-text.']

So to start, don't do that! Just don't. In today's Gospel it might sound a little like that's what Jesus is doing to the devil, shooting scripture one-liners back in defense. But the difference here is that Jesus' quotations are carefully chosen in how they speak to the devil's challenges. Jesus gets that the devil is trying to be clever and his responses, though quick, are substantive and directly related to what the devil is attempting.

[Do walk the talk.]

Hypocrisy is one of the biggest challenges to having scripture be relevant in daily life. The devil knew Jesus meant what he said. He was clearly living a life that already reflected the words he was quoting. This isn't so easy for us, but the real power of scripture is located not in its recitation, it's found in your action.

[Do consider the WHOLE story.]

There's an important dictum that we Lutherans try to employ when approaching scripture. We call it understanding "*the canon within the canon.*" One part or section of the bible can't be interpreted or employed in ways that run counter to the overarching narrative of the biblical witness.

- God loves us and is faithful to us.
- God wants us to care for each other in life-giving ways.
- God expects that our response will help shape and bring about God's desired future for us.

These are some of the tenets of the canon within the canon and when we consider how any particular part of scripture should apply to our lives, we have to also consider these master narratives.

There was a time when Christians were particularly adept justifying the enslavement of other human beings in this country. That's because there's a tremendous amount of biblical material that seems to suggest slavery is a biblical principle. As a result, in many places in the world and especially here in the United States, we operated with a very false reality because we failed to allow the fuller story of God's love for God's people to be held over an above stories that guided a people living in very different circumstances and with very different expectations. The

same can be said of patriarchy, human sexuality, economic disparity, and the list goes on.

P: So Christine, let's check to see if any of this is practical. On social media, someone posts something that I REALLY don't agree with (like: "Why don't homeless people just go get a job? They're lazy and leeching off the government."). My first instinct is to dig in and fight. How could scripture be helpful in this moment?

C: (pause. take a moment to think). Well, if what you're saying about the canon within a canon is true then it would seem appropriate to lean on what I know of Jesus. I think I remember a story where Jesus actually encounters someone homeless. In this story, Jesus doesn't ask him first about his job or he came to be living on the street. I think the first thing Jesus asks him was his name. He wanted to know first who this person was. Do you remember what story I'm talking about?

P: Yup. That's the story of when Jesus visits the Gerasenes and is accosted by a person who's been ostracized from his community. The text says he was possessed by demons and was living in the town cemetery. The part of the story that everyone remembers is how Jesus exorcises the man's demons, causing them to enter a nearby herd of pigs and the pigs promptly run off a cliff, falling to their death. But the story isn't about evil bacon. It's hard not to imagine that the demons possessing the Gerasene man were no different than the mental illness that cripples so many even today. And that illness is what caused the man to be shunned by his society and how he came to lose his home. You're absolutely right to recognize that before offering any solution, Jesus' approach was to get to know the man and to learn his real affliction. Yes, I think there's real value in this story on how we approach the modern day challenges like homelessness and mental illnesses.

C: Okay, I knew I wasn't making it up. In this way, the scripture seems to lay the groundwork for a Christian response to homelessness. This story from the Bible tells me that we should attempt to get to know people experiencing mental health issues or homelessness before prescribing a solution or judgment. So if I were to respond to this Facebook post from a scripturally deep place, I might say something like, "I would wait to get to know these people before you decide what they need." So I guess I don't need quote scripture at people to have a scripturally rooted response. I really like that.

C: Your turn. Here's a hypothetical situation: I have just found out that a close family member has just been diagnosed something really serious. In fact, it's terminal.

What can scripture tell me about navigating through this wilderness time of dealing with a sick family member?

P: Remember, the Bible is filled with stories of how people have come to experience and be in relationship with God. This includes lots of stories of suffering, affliction, high anxiety and helplessness. These stories can help us give voice to what we're feeling and experiencing, especially in troubled times. They also have the capacity to offer both empathy and hope at the same time. Someone in your family is sick, how about listening deeply to their fears and their pain. Share with them the words of Psalm 69:

“Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck. I am sinking in deep mire, and there is no foothold. I have grown weary with my crying; my eyes are worn out from looking for my God.”

Hearing these words, I would hope that they would hear their own lament and know that it is holy and important to God. At the same time, remind them that our story don't end there. That God's love does come to us in the end. When they're ready, maybe share the words of Paul:

“And not only that, but we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3-5)

C: Last one: I come to church on Sunday and my pastor preaches a sermon, that's supposedly based on scripture, that I just don't get. In fact, I think they're totally wrong. What should I do now?

P: Well, obviously that has never happened to me. Everyone always agrees with me and trusts that what I have to say is truth!

Here's the thing about proclamation, it functions best when it's more of a dialogue. So if you don't agree with what the pastor has to say, find an appropriate time and way to engage them in further conversation on the topic.

C: And even though I modeled that particular behavior this morning, we aren't necessarily advocating that you just stand up and interrupt our pastors as they begin to preach. How about talking over your thoughts with a few others and thinking more deeply together on just what was being proclaimed.

P: Here at CTK we ground our messages in the texts and that usually our starting point. So make sure you spend some time with those texts and then 'bring it.'

Look, we could probably spend the rest of the morning, if not all day exploring how the Bible should be a useful resource in our lives and one of the primary ways we come to understand God. The biggest takeaway that both of us want you to leave with today is that even in the face of all the hurdles we face in acknowledging the value of scripture, inside there's still some truly valuable stuff, including a God who longs to be found.

C: Here are a few ways you might incorporate a new practice this lent that draws you a little more closely into this amazing story:

C: Sign up for a daily email devotional like Luther Seminary's "GodPause" or d365.

P: Join one of CTK's small groups, book or bible studies

C: Use "Worship Words" on Sunday mornings.

P: Focus on one particular passage (like the demon pig story) over the course of a full week or a month. You could also incorporate a practice like 'Lectio Divina' into your reading.

C: Add to the conversation at your dinner table and wonder together how scripture might influence what's going on in your life.

P: Open yourself up to the expectation that God can be found in those very pages and in your life. When you find yourself stuck in the wilderness and facing down the devil, the Word might just be what shows you the way through.

Both: Amen!