# Sermon Title: Read Faithfully

**Text: 2 Timothy 3:16,17 MSG.**

**Author: Rev. Tammie Isidore, First Bradenton**

***“Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.”***

This morning, we are going to talk about reading scripture faithfully. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan and Pastor Richard G. Watts in their book, *Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus*, state, **“My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally”** (1). This statement causes me to pause and reflect on what I know and do not know, what I understand and do not understand, as I read scripture. It makes me ask: how shall we read scripture faithfully in the twenty-first century?

In the story of the beginning, God comes in the cool of the evening to fellowship with the couple Adam and Eve, who were created in God’s image . I can only imagine the sweet conversation between them as this master intelligence placed humankind at the center of God’s will and purpose in the most beautiful place in the universe, the garden of Eden. Everything God creates is marvelous, declares Psalm 139:13-14. Then something happens, Adam and Eve rebel against their creator and that sweet relationship between the creator and the created is broken. From then until now, humankind has struggled to hear what is God saying, instead of walking and chatting with God side by side. God no longer speaks to people face to face except on a couple of rare occasions. Exodus 33:11 tells us God speaks to Moses face to face as a man communicates with his friend. Yet, the apostle John declares: “**No one has ever seen God”** (John 1:18).

The struggle to read, understand, and communicate not only with God but with one another is real. I remember being in my homeland attending a worship service. I was in my late teens. I was listening to an Anglo guest preacher and his Creole translator who were preaching two different sermons. They both went through all the excitements and motions but with all the challenges of languages and different cultures, the struggle to communicate effectively and accurately often led to many problems and conflicts. The Anglo person and the native translator couldn’t have been any further apart from each other. I then resolved that I was going to study the English language as much as I could to help the church.

Years later, I am still learning to make English my third language. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations are part of human communication. So much so, we find the people of God asking the Lord not to talk with them directly but to address them through a Hebrew prophet: **“*And they said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen. But don’t let God speak directly to us, or we will die*!’”** (Exodus 20:19).

From then on, we see God speaking to the people through prophets and apostles. The greatest book ever written and passed down to us was first transmitted orally over many centuries. Imagine, about 3400 years of verbal transmission of the Old Testament! 1500 years in its making! And 40 years after the life and work of Jesus before the first gospel written. Preserving what we believe and proclaim today truly indicates there is a mastermind orchestrating all this.

One of the Bible’s most striking features is that it claims to be the “inspired word” or the “breath” of an Almighty God. We see this in the words of the apostle Paul who writes: **“Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us”** (2 Timothy 3:16-17, Msg). The apostle Peter writes that the content of Scripture **“never came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”** (2 Peter 1:21).

The Bible describes the process of divine inspiration in the way God works with Moses: **“Then God spoke all these words ...And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord…When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law…Moses commanded the Levites… ‘Take this book of the law and put it beside the Ark of the Covenant’”** (Exodus 20:1; 24:4; Deuteronomy 31:24-26). Not only does the Bible claim to be divinely inspired, it claims to be the ultimate source of truth, revealed by the one true God. The Apostle John writes, **“Thy Word is truth”** (John 17:17, KJV).David writes: **“Your law is truth…all Your commandments are truth…The entirety of Your Word is truth”** (Psalm 119:142, 151, 160).In 2 Timothy 2:15, the apostle Paul calls Scripture **“the word of truth.”**

How shall we read the Holy Scripture faithfully in the twenty-first century while acknowledging some parts of scripture seem irrational or contradictory? Our forefather, John Wesley, agreed there are parts of the Bible that cannot be understood easily. Jesus’s disciples astonished and bewildered cried out, “. . . then who can be saved?” I personally wrestle with many parts of the Bible. Do we take the Bible literally? We find Jesus’ disciples not understanding their leader’s words: **“*I tell you; it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*”** (Matthew 19:24-25). You certainly cannot take this literally. Jesus says one must be born again and Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council), a follower of Jesus, does not understand. He says to Jesus, **“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”** (John 3:4).

I want to believe the disciples and all the people who listened to Jesus wrestled with his teachings. **“*If your hand or your foot gets in the way of God, chop it off and throw it away … And if your eye distracts you from God, pull it out and throw it away*”** (Matthew 18:8-9, Msg). Who does such things? Or, **“*if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.*”** (Matthew 5:38).

We cannot read the Scripture literally and extremely. No one cuts off their hand or foot or plucks an eye out when they sin against God and one another. A faithful reading requires that we pay attention to the entirety of the passage and not to bits and pieces here and there. The Bible is, on one level, a single book, from Genesis to Revelation. But in a deeper way, and to read it faithfully, we should see it as a library of books, each meant to be read from its own perspective and within its own genre. Altogether, the Bible tells the story of one people, the people of God, and of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Therefore, history, context, genre, culture, era, etc. are very important if one intends to “read faithfully” the written word passed down to us. I do believe God’s breath is spirit and life and goes beyond what is passed down to us. And we receive and honor the sacred book, for the Word of the Lord saves, builds, and transforms lives.

There are many reasons why it is important to read the Bible faithfully, and one is that it helps prevent harm that comes from misguided interpretations. For example, there are those in the world who abuse women and girls, setting them aside as inferior to men. Many teachers and preachers use Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 2:12 to back their teachings. **“I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she must be silent”** (1 Timothy 2:12). **“Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is something they want to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church”** (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

In fact, we see and hear the apostle Paul praising and recommending women. He calls them his partners in ministry. Is he misleading or confused? He praises Phoebe, a leader from the church at Cenchrea near Corinth. The early Christian texts refer to various women activists in the early church. Priscilla, a Jewish missionary from Rome, helped found the Christian community at Corinth. She is Paul’s co-worker in ministry. She is a tent maker alongside her husband Aquila. She is a female preacher and travels as a missionary with her husband and the apostle Paul and tutors the Jewish intellectual Apollos. Junia is a woman apostle. There is no confusion in Paul’s teaching. Here is an example where we must read the story in its entirety and historical context. We err when we take the scriptures verse by verse trying to figure it out without the whole picture.

How shall we read the holy book faithfully? Can it be trusted? We cannot read the Scripture by taking one word here and there and trying to explain it in isolation from the text and context. Words do not have meaning in isolation. For example, if I take the word “family” by itself, it does not say much. I need to explore background, culture, ethnicity, chronology. Whose family, what culture, when and where they live, etc.? It is crucial that we read paying attention to the text, the context, the genre, the historical background and the culture and time.

The Bible has a lot to say about women in ministry. Jesus had many female disciples and very few of them made it in the story telling passed down because of the context and the culture of that era. Before Jesus was born, Anna the prophetess waited with the prophet Simeon in the Temple for the Messiah. The growth of the early church was to a great extent supported by the women in ministry. Women supported Jesus’ ministry financially. It says in Matthew 27 that they went out and witnessed the good news to others, they followed him. Mary Magdalene, a troubled woman became one of Jesus most loyal disciples. Deborah is a prophetess and judge leading Israel after Ehud dies (Judges 4:1, 4). It can be argued that if God made Deborah a judge and leader over Israel, certainly women can be leaders and clergy. Who is the unnamed sinful woman, in the northern regions of Nain and Capernaum, who anoints Jesus with oil? The anointing of oil is the ministry of elders. She represents every one of us. Again, my friends, we must read the Bible faithfully and with the understanding God has spoken and is speaking even now.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, emphasized the importance of **Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience** in understanding God's Word. He believes the Bible is whole and believes God is the author of the whole Book. In the book, *The Quadrilateral Renewing the Conversation*, the author offers this quote by Wesley on the nature of Scripture: “a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess”(Gunter et al., 1997). The Wesleyan Quadrilateral provides us with a holistic framework for interpreting and applying the Bible in our lives.

The United Methodist Book of Discipline states: “Our standards affirm the Bible as the source of all that is “necessary” and “sufficient” unto salvation … and “is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice.” (3).

The more we seek God and read faithfully the Holy Scripture, the more our character is formed into Christ’s likeness. The more we grow in the faith of God, the more we find ourselves rooted in the traditions of the ancestors, and the more we profess the Bible is still relevant for each of us even today in this modern world. That is proof of the wholeness of the Book, and it is as true today as yesterday, transforming lives and saving souls. The unity that exists from Genesis to Revelation, even though the sixty-six books were written over a period of approximately 1,500 years by very different people of all venues of life such as prophets, priests, a tax collector, doctor, rich, poor, a tentmaker, fisherman, etc.; these facts are enough for believers to overlook the disagreements between the writers and the obscure parts. We can trust in God’s written word and dwell on the main parts that the Holy Spirit clearly reveals to our hearts.

We cannot claim every part of the Bible is historically true, and we cannot support its infallibility. There are many claims to support the statement that the Bible is God’s word and is true. One of the most powerful claims is found in Jesus, the Word made flesh dwelling among humankind. All four gospels present a truthful account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Thus, Jesus himself becomes an argument in support of the truth of the Bible. What the Bible says about Jesus, what Jesus says about God, humankind, nature, salvation, and the Old Testament account, can be trusted and read faithfully without being read extremely. Theologian Thomas Oden states: “The Bible contains all that is necessary to be believed, and the church is commissioned to teach nothing less than that faith revealed in Scripture” (4). It sums up, we are saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus and not by might nor by our efforts and doings. Grace, mercy, and love open our eyes to see, our minds to be receptive and our hearts to understand so we may love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls and our neighbors as ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.

References:

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures cited are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

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