

3rd Sunday After the Epiphany, January 21, 2007, Liturgical Year “B”  
**ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**  
The Rev. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

**“How to Get a Grip on God’s Word” (part 1)**

**DO YOU KNOW THE WORD?**

I am sure we are all familiar with the Gallup polls. They often are good indicators of where the heart of the nation is when it comes to various issues and candidates. Recently, I found a poll that was done last year concerning people’s views on the Bible.

When people were asked if they believe that the Bible is the actual Word of God and should be taken literally, only 28 percent agreed. In fact, Gallup found that over the past 40 years there has been a gradual decline in the percentage of Americans who believe that the Bible is the actual word of God. While today, roughly 28 percent of Americans believe the Bible is God’s Word, in 1998 that number was around 33 percent, in the 1970’s 40 percent, and in 1963 the number was 65%. We’ve gone from two-thirds to less than a third in just a generation! Why such a decline? The reasons are obvious: the Bible is no longer taught in the public schools, the secular universities teach moral and spiritual relativism, Hollywood and much of our entertainment is for the most part anti-Christian and anti-Bible, and our society is so caught up with materialism and the pursuit of pleasure that it has been blinded to the life-transforming power of God’s Word.

Now we can be discouraged by these figures, but the truth is if the 28 percent of those who believe the Bible is God’s Word, took the Word seriously, they could turn our nation upside down. There would be revival. And what God is concerned about is what are *we* doing with His Word? Do *we* know His Word? Do *we* take it seriously?

What I would like to talk about this morning is how to get a grip on God’s Word. Because the truth is everyone is holding onto something in life, whether it’s money or material possessions, an ideology or some philosophy, an addiction or a job, even other people. Everyone is holding onto something in this life. Sooner or later, though, we’re going to have to let go. Sooner or later we’re going to loose our grip. But there is one thing that we can hold onto in this life, one thing that can never be taken from us, one thing that will never let us down, and that is God’s Word. So how do we get a grip on God’s Word?

**HEAR IT!**

The first thing is we need to hear the Word of God. The Bible tells us in **Romans 10:17**: *“Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the Word of God.”* One of the first things we can do as human beings is hear. A baby can hear even before being able to see. A child learns a language by sound before he or she is able to read or write the language. God spoke *audibly* to Adam and Eve in the garden. God spoke to *audibly* Noah. God spoke *audibly* to Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob, to Joseph, to Moses and God spoke to the people of Israel and said in **Deuteronomy 6:4**: *“Hear O Israel! The Lord your God, the Lord is One!*

In **Matt. 7:24**: *Jesus said, “Whoever hears my words and does them is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”* The Apostle Paul says in **Romans 10:14,15**: *“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?”* So the foundation for getting a grip on God’s Word is to hear the Word. That’s why we tell our children about

Jesus and God before they even know how to read or write. That’s why we hear the Word of God every Sunday in Church – we hear the written word read, the spoken word preached, and the hymnal word sung. God’s Word is put to music and song so it will touch our hearts and move the soul. There is power in the Word when it’s heard.

But it is not enough to hear it, we need to be in the habit of reading the Word.

### **READ IT!**

God not only said, “*Hear O Israel, the Lord Your God is One,*” but God commanded that His Word be written down. In **Dt. 31:19-24**, God commands Moses to write down His law and words so that they can be read to future generations.

God’s Word is written down so we know what God expects, what He has promised, and what He has done and will do. God’s Word is written down so it can be preserved and spread throughout the world. And it is written down so that it can be read.

For the longest time, during the Middle Ages the Bible was kept from the people. The common language of Latin that once was understood by the laity eventually became the language of the nobility and upper class. Soon the majority of the people in Europe heard the Word in a language they could not understand. That was one of the reasons for the Protestant Reformation: to make the Bible available once more in the language of the people. So people could read it for themselves. So they could read it in English, French and German, and other languages. And with the invention of the printing press such an endeavor became possible. As a result, we now are able to have the Word of God right in our own homes. We can read it whenever we choose.

And the Spirit led desire to get the Bible into the hands of people everywhere has been the greatest motivating factor in getting people to read; of taking languages of native peoples and producing a written language for them. In fact, in many instances a people’s language has been preserved because of the work of Bible translators. Languages that otherwise would have been passed over, have been saved because of such work.

Moreover, from our earliest settlers, to the founding and development of our nation, the Bible was used in the home, in the church, in the schoolhouse and in the colleges as the basis for instruction. In fact, if you were a student at Harvard during the early days of our republic you were required to read the Scriptures twice a day. Harvard’s “Rules and Precepts” for its students included this requirement: “*Every one shall so exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day, that he shall be ready to give such an account of his proficiency therein, both in Theoretical observations of the language, and Logic and in Practical and spiritual truths, as his Tutor shall require, according to his ability;* and then there is a quote from Ps. 119:130 “*seeing the entrance of the word gives light, it gives understanding the simple.*” Could you imagine the uproar that would be caused if the student handbook at Harvard included the above, today?

**Isaiah 34:16 declares: “Search from the book of the Lord and read...”**

Luke tells us that Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. **Lk. 4:16:** “*And He came to Nazareth where He had been brought up, and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him.*” (He read from **Is. 61:1-2a.**)

Last year, one of our parishioners, who works in the Admissions Department at Niagara University, told me about the time he went to see one of religious studies professors. He wanted to find some background information on the New Testament Scriptures and thought the professor could help him. It became apparent within minutes, however, that this professor had some peculiar ideas about the Bible and Jesus. To the amazement of our fellow member, the professor stated that we don’t even know if Jesus could read!

Unbelievable – a professor in a Roman Catholic university who doubts whether or not our Lord could read while He was on earth! Of course, Jesus knew how to read. It’s absurd to think that he didn’t. And

seriously, who should we believe? “Master” Luke or the “Nutty Professor”? I think I’ll stick with “Master” Luke.

The truth is if we’re going to get a grip on God’s Word, then we need to hear it and we need to read it. But we also need to do something else. We need to study it.

### **STUDY IT!**

You see hearing and reading God’s Word are the starting points, but if we are to grow in learning and understanding all that God is saying then we need to study His Word. This means going a little deeper than a superficial reading. It means making sure we look up words or phrases that may be difficult to understand. It means finding out more about the people, the places and events that are being described. It means understanding the context, finding the meaning of a passage and then being able to apply it to our daily lives. That’s why the Apostle Paul wrote in **2 Tim. 2:15**: ***“Study and show yourselves approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”***

And that’s why we heard in our lesson from Nehemiah how when Ezra read from the book of the law that the priests ***“helped the people to understand the Law...and they gave the sense, and helped them understand the reading.”*** (Neh. 8:7-8). In other words, the priests helped explain the meaning of the Scriptures in those areas that needed further clarification. You see for the most part the Bible is not hard to understand if you know a little of the background and you know the context. In fact, when it comes to the things necessary for salvation the youngest child can understand God’s Word. But if we are to grow in wisdom and in understanding, Bible study is important. And while there are many minor areas in the Bible where people of faith can disagree, when it comes to the major points and themes found in God’s Word there is consistency and clarity. And when we study, that consistency and clarity will become even more evident.

### **MEDITATE ON IT!**

What else is essential to getting a grip on God’s Word? We need to meditate on it.

You know in this world of ours there are three types of people when it comes to meditation. There are the stargazers. Those who like to meditate on the stars and the sky, the trees and the birds – the things of creation. Then there are the navel gazers, those who like to meditate on themselves and their own little worlds. Finally, there are the God gazers, those who meditate on the things of God. Those, whom Paul tells us ***“Seek and set their minds on the things above, where Christ is.”*** (Col. 3:1-2).

If we want to get a grip on God’s Word, then instead of meditating on the stars and creation, instead of meditating on ourselves, we need to meditate on God’s Word. And that means taking some time and focusing on a particular verse or passage of Scripture. Letting it’s truth penetrate your mind and heart, letting God speak to you through it. Reflecting on what God has done and what God has promised. The Bible tells us over and over again to mediate on the Word.

**Joshua 1:8:** ***“This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it, for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”***

**Psalms 1:2:** ***“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the path of sinners nor sit in the seat of scoffers, but His delight is in the law of the Lord and in His Law he meditates day and night.”***

**Psalms 119:148:** ***“My eye anticipates the night watches, that I may meditate on Thy Word.”***

**Luke 2:19:** *“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”*

It is stopping what we are doing and just letting the Word of God sink into our hearts and minds.

**MEMORIZE IT!**

Finally, if we are to maintain a grip on God’s Word, we need to memorize it. You say, “Memorize?” Yes, I said, “Memorize.” Now I know that takes effort, it takes work. But it’s not as hard as you think.

How many here can you say the Lord’s Prayer from memory? Or the Ten Commandments? Or the Nicene Creed? Why? Because we have said these things repetitively over the years. God’s Word isn’t just to be written on tablets of stone or on pieces of paper, God wants us to write His Word on the tablets of our hearts.

How else can we follow St. Paul’s admonition in **Colossians 3:16** to *“Let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom?”*

When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, how did Jesus respond? He responded with the Word of God. How can we defend against the attacks of Satan and the deceptions of this world? **Eph. 6:18** tells us, *“Take the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”* How else can we give a defense for Christ, unless we know the Word? How else can we face life’s greatest challenges unless we have the Word written on the tablets of our hearts?

Do you want to get a grip on God’s Word? Hear it, read it, study it, meditate on it, and memorize it! And the beauty of being in Church every Sunday is that you will be doing all five. We hear it, we read it, we study it (in the sermon), we meditate on it (during the consecration), and we memorize it (e.g. the Lords’ Prayer.)

Please turn in your prayer books with me to page 236 and let us pray this prayer together: *“Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN!”*

So this day and always, let us get a grip on God’s Word, for it’s the only thing worth holding onto in this life and in the life to come. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!