

4th Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

“Is the Bible Really God’s Word?” (part 1)

A VITALLY IMPORTANT QUESTION

Earlier this year, we looked at the question “*Is Jesus Really God?*” We found that the Scriptures give us over two-dozen ways that demonstrate Jesus’ divinity. But an equally important question is this: “*Is the Bible really the Word of God?*” And if it is the Word of God, how do we know? You see if the Bible is the Word of God, then everything it says is true. And if everything it says is true, then our very lives depend upon it.

And yet, we live in a world that takes the opposite view. A view that believes the Bible is either an archaic oppressive book that is out of touch with reality, or is just one of many ways to look at life. And when you think about it, this view is the core view of every facet of our society. I mean does Hollywood, for example, believe that the Bible is the Word of God? Does Wall Street, the hub of business and finance, look to the Bible as the Word of God? Or how about Madison Avenue and the world of advertising, or our politicians in Washington, or the scientific world? Or what about our educational system from the primary schools to the most prestigious universities? Do any of these institutions accept or believe that the Bible is the Word of God? The answer is NO.

But what about the Church? Certainly, the Church believes the Bible is God’s Word. Well, for the most part, thank God, it does. But even in the Church there are those who tell us that we need to be set free from taking the Bible, literally. For example, in his book, “*Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism,*” retired Episcopal Bishop Jack Spong writes “*I could not believe that anyone who had read this book would be so foolish as to proclaim that the Bible in every literal word was the divinely inspired, inerrant word of God.*” As might be suspected, Bishop Spong denies the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. In fact, he denies all the supernatural elements of the Bible. And while he is part of a radical fringe element, the fact remains, that many believe that only portions of the Bible are the Word of God. The Bible is not THE Word of God, but only contains the Word of God. And it is up to the reader to discern what is really the Word of God. The result? A buffet style approach to the Bible - you can pick and choose what is God’s Word.

Certainly, when we talk about the Bible literally, it does not mean we take every single word at face value. In other words, we need to know the meaning, we need to know the context, and how the word and passage relates to the rest of the Scriptures. But once we do know the meaning, we are to take that meaning literally and for the most part the Bible is written in a way that one can understand much of it by simply reading what it says. As I have said many times before, “If God didn’t mean what He said, why didn’t He say what He meant?” So there is a real division in our world. A division between those who believe that the entire Bible is the Word of God, and those don’t believe any of it, those who only believe some of it, and those who don’t care.

Of course, we shouldn’t be surprised that this is the case. In the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3), God told Adam and Eve “***Don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day that you eat of it, you will die.***” God said, “***You can eat from any of the trees of the garden, except for that one tree.***” But what happened? Satan came in the form of a serpent, and tempted Eve. He got Eve to question God. He asked, “***Did God say you may not eat from any of the trees in the Garden?***” What was Satan doing? Satan was instilling doubt. Eve corrected Satan. But then Satan didn’t just try to instill doubt, He outright lied and said that she would not die if she ate from the tree, and she ate! And that, my friends is the heart of the problem. Satan seeks to distort and deceive, and if we are not careful we can allow our own doubt and selfish desire keep us from recognizing and following the Bible as the Word of God.

The truth is everything we know about God is found in this book we call the Bible. It doesn't just inform us, it boldly tells us who God is, what He has done, what He is doing, what He will do, what He expects and how we should live. And the beauty of the Lord, the God of the universe, is that He has given us numerous signs that point us to the truth that the Bible is indeed His Word. Just like we have seen the numerous signs that indicate that Jesus was truly God in human flesh and the means of our salvation, God has given us everything we need to know, to be able to say without a shadow of a doubt that this book is the very Word of God.

THE TEST OF DISCERNMENT

Now, one of the admonitions we find in the Scriptures is that we are to test everything to see if it is good. **1 Thess. 5:21:** *“Test all things, hold fast to what is good.”* We call this discernment. Discernment is the ability to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. Regardless of what some in our world like to believe and claim, we do live in a moral universe. There is truth and falsehood; there is a right and a wrong way. So when it comes to the Bible we should be able to put it through a so called “test of discernment.” And one of the ways we can do that is by asking the four following questions:

- 1) **What does the Bible claim?** In other words, what does it teach? What is its message?
- 2) **Is the Bible relevant?** Does what the Bible have to say relevant to every man, woman and child regardless of their background, their culture, or when they lived in history?
- 3) **Is the Bible reliable?** Can we trust what the Bible teaches? Is it consistent? Has it stood the test of time?
- 4) **What has the Bible produced?** In other words, how has it changed lives, how has it affected human history, and how has it impacted our world?

If you can answer these four questions, then you will have answered the original question “Is the Bible really the Word of God?” Now what I would like to do this morning is address the first two questions: “What does the Bible claim? And is it relevant for today?” Please turn with me in Bibles to Genesis 1.

IN THE BEGINNING...

We start in the beginning. **Genesis 1:1** *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.”* Notice everything begins with God, and everything was created by God. And notice that everything was created simply by His Word. God spoke and it was done!

Now let's turn to **John 1:1-3, 14, 17-18:** *“In the beginning was the WORD, and the WORD was with God and the WORD was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him...and the WORD became flesh and dwelt among us,... full of grace and truth. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.”* Notice that the WORD was the means through which all things were created, but more importantly the WORD is God and the WORD is Jesus Christ, the Son of God! So the whole message of the Bible is that everything begins with God and the WORD, Jesus Christ.

Then we find that when our first parents rebelled against God, the Paradise that God had most graciously given them, was lost! And we now all suffer this loss. But Paradise lost is Paradise regained in Revelation. And everything in between is how God is working to restore that which was lost by our first parents in the Garden. And the key to understanding and experiencing that restoration is knowing the WORD made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. For it is Christ's ministry on earth, His death on the cross and His resurrection that reconcile us to God. That's the core message of the Bible.

THE WORD IS THE MEANS OF GOD’S REVELATION

Now when we go back to the beginning, to the time of Creation, we read in **Gen. 1:26-27** that God created us in His image. That means we have a mind, emotions, a will, and a spirit, all of which enable us to be in relationship with each other and with God. God has also given us a body which enables us to use words and actions to communicate what’s on our minds and in our hearts, and to accomplish our desires and will.

But how does God communicate with us? He communicates through words, visions, dreams, angelic beings, nature, and miracles. The Hebrews had a term for this and it was “*Dabar*” or “Word.” “*Dabar*” meant anything God did to reveal Himself to mankind. But there is only one problem with this means of revelation. It is limited in that it never can fully disclose God. The only way to truly know someone is to be with them in person. And that is exactly what God did with us. That’s why we read in **Hebrews 1:1**: “*God who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.*”

Thus, Jesus, the Son of God, is the ultimate means of God’s revelation. And that’s why Jesus is called the WORD by the apostle John. Jesus is the embodiment of God to mankind. And as God in human flesh, He is the only means by which one can be saved. Jesus said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through Me.*” (**Jn. 14:6**).

THE WORD IS WRITTEN DOWN BY GOD’S INSPIRATION

Now if God’s people are to be able to know and remember what God has done, they need to write it down, don’t they? Let’s face it, if you don’t write something down, you will forget it. In fact, in **Exodus 17:14 and 24:4** God tells Moses to write down what He says. And if God is the one telling Moses what to record, do you not think God is going to preserve what He wants written down throughout the ages?

We call this process of putting down God’s revelation in writing, the process of inspiration. And the Bible time and time again declares that what has been written is either directly come from God or is inspired by God. In fact, the Old Testament refers to itself as the “Word of God” 3808 times. The phrase, “*God spoke all these words*” is found 160 times in the book of Exodus alone. That’s why read in **2 Tim. 3:16**: “*All Scripture is inspired by God...*” The Greek word for inspiration is “*theopneustos*” which literally means “God breathed.” It does not mean mere dictation or that the writer is a robot, or in a coma like trance, but that God is working through the writer’s individual personality, ability and circumstances to convey His will and word. So we have seen the message of the Bible, and we have seen that the Bible claims that it is the very Word of God. But is the Bible relevant?

THE WORD IS RECEIVED THROUGH GOD’S ILLUMINATION

One only has to turn through the pages of the Bible to see that what it teaches is relevant for all people. For example, the words that God spoke to the prophet Isaiah 2700 years ago are just as relevant today as they were then. God said, “*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.*” (**Is. 41:10**). What Jesus said, did, and promised is just as relevant today as it was then. Even those things recorded that were meant specifically for the people of God at the time, are meant to teach us about the nature of man and God, and how God has not only worked in the lives of His people, but how God is restoring all things to Himself. The truth is if you don’t know where you have come from, you can’t appreciate where you are and or where you are going. Everything has a purpose in God’s Word.

When we see the relevance of the Bible for our lives, theologians have used the term “illumination.” It is when we receive God’s Word in our hearts.” “To illuminate” means “to make known, to see clearly.” It’s when the

light bulb goes on in our hearts and minds. It is that “a-ha” moment when we see that yes, this is the Word of God. But even if one has not yet been illuminated by God’s Spirit, who can argue that the Bible gives us answers to life’s most fundamental questions? Questions like, *Who am I? Why am I here? Where did I come from? What is my purpose? What is the significance of my life? Where am I going? What is my destiny? What should I do? How should I live?*

Can you get those answers from Hollywood? Can you get them from Wall Street? Can you get them from government? From Madison Avenue? How about from school or from science? School and science teach us that we evolved from some primordial soup. That our grandparents a billion times removed were frogs and a million times removed apes! The truth is the Bible not only answers the fundamental questions of life, but the Bible gives us answers that are found no where else in the world. Answers that are relevant regardless of person, place, or time. That’s why there is not only a consistent message throughout the Bible, and but there is a consistent call for us to know God’s Word.

Listen to these verses for a moment:

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength. And these words which I shall command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Dt. 6:4-9).

Jesus said, ***“Man shall not live by bread alone, by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Mt. 4:4 and Lk. 4:4) “If anyone loves Me, He will keep My Word.” (Jn. 14:23).*** St. Paul wrote, ***“Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ.” (Rom. 10:17)*** And St. Peter tells us ***“Like newborn babes desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.” (1 Peter 2:1).***

A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER

The truth is that the Bible is unlike any book ever written. In fact, it is a book of books, 66 in all, written over a period of 1500 years, by forty different authors on three different continents, in three different languages, speaking about hundreds of controversial subjects, and yet there is a remarkable unity. Only God could have preserved such a book. And the Bible is today not only the best-selling and most read book, but the most translated book in human history. Thus, if there were any book that would have supernatural origins, the Bible would be the leading candidate, bar none.

Yes, the Bible claims that it is the Word of God. And as the Word of God, it claims that it is the foundation for knowing and understanding God, for building our faith and for giving us a blueprint for life that we might be a success in the Lord’s eyes. While many in our world and even in the Church refuse to believe that the entire Bible is God’s Word, we know better. And if we know better, we also need to know why the Bible is God’s Word.

We have already looked at what the Bible claims and why it is still relevant for us today. Next week, we will begin to answer the question, “Is the Bible reliable?” by facing off with the latest fad in our society – the obsession with the novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. We’re going to look at what the book claims, what it’s based on, and how God’s Word not only refutes every claim made in *The Da Vinci Code*, but how God’s Word truly is the most reliable book in the world. Let us pray....