

DEC 15, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

December 8 sermon— “Hope in the Word”

2 Timothy 3:16-17

This week we continue our series on hope. Last week we considered the hope of time. This week we consider the hope of the Word of God. We may not consider it as you might think. A few weeks ago in our series on spreading the Word of God we spoke about Peter calling us to always “have an answer for the hope that we have.” We unpacked the hope of redemption, community, calling and more. To do this again would be redundant. If you’d like to hear it the message was preached on October 20 and the written copy would be in the weekly update that week.

This time we will look at some senses of how we understand scripture differently, and yet despite this hope can always be found in the Word of God.

At the heart of many disagreements is trying to understand our passages this morning. What does it mean for scripture to be the inspired word of God? Some translations say inspired, others God breathed. Recently I heard another translation that harkens all the way back to Genesis. God breathed life into Adam. Perhaps a better translation would be that all scripture is “life giving”. Sometimes this passage is interpreted as saying that the Holy Spirit somehow divinely possessed the authors of scripture and everything they wrote was exactly as it was spoken by God and that as a result it should be taken literally from cover to cover. You’ve heard me talk through the years about why this is an issue and we’ll summarize it in a moment

An often used support for this idea of a divinely puppeted writing comes from Peter where he talks about men not using their own words but only those that were given by God. In the context Peter is using I would agree with him!!! The issue is that this is speaking about prophecy, speaking God’s word as to what is coming down the road. In this sense anything coming from the prophet is, and should be, the words of God and God alone. In fact this is one of the great tests of whether or not someone is true in claiming to be prophetic.

If what they say comes to pass then they have a mark in the credible column. If not they are proven a false prophet because God has a 100% accuracy rating.

Part of where the church has theologically been misguided is when prophecies don’t come to pass and the preacher isn’t held to account. Often flimsy excuses and loopholes are given a pass because too much of the followers’ beliefs have been reliant on the reliability of the preacher. Exposing him or her as a fraud threatens to shatter the supports of an entire belief system. Thus poor theology continues on.

The issue become then how do we view the Word of God? How we view it determines how deeply we are willing to dive into studying it.

There are two terms, exegesis and eisegesis. Exegesis is what we should do. Suspend our own sensibilities, dive deeply into scripture, and then see what scripture devoid of my own preferences and assumptions TELLS ME.

Eisegesis falls victim to dogma, those things we’ve been told to believe whether true or not, and we impose our beliefs onto scripture. Then the task isn’t scripture telling me what to believe but me twisting scripture to support what I already think it says.

One is seeking the God that inspired scripture. The other is hijacking God to endorse scriptural interpretation that I’ve inspired.

So in this we find many of the disagreements withing Christianity. Then, of course, there is translation. Which one to use? Well, to quote my friend Matt Schultz, keep in mind that “all translation is interpretation.”

They are translating languages that don’t always play well with English. In some instances they aren’t even translating from the original Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew. The Old Testament we translated from the Hebrew to Greek, we call this the Septuagint. St. Jerome translated the entire Bible into Latin, we

call this the Vulgate.

Sometimes translations translate the translations, particularly if they are missing certain manuscripts for a portion of what they are working with. It's not an exact science.

I remember being told the only legitimate translation is the King James' version. Anything else risked the devil leading us astray. The King James' version is poetic, it is traditional, it is many good things. That said:

It isn't the earliest English translation. The Wycliffe and Tyndale translations have it beat. It also wasn't working with the most complete manuscripts. The Dead Sea Scrolls helped fill in a lot of gaps. So the more modern translations are working with more accurate source material.

Translations try to make the scriptures more conversational. The Living and New Living are classic examples. The Message by Eugene Peterson is a modern preference. I even think there is a Millennial translation out there somewhere. In making it English conversational things get lost.

Some translations have a panel of translators slanted to a particular theology. The New International Version is preferred by many today. In it there are places where judgments have to be made and the theology of the panel weighs in. In some places adjustments are made to ensure that things agree with one another withing the body of scripture, even if in the actual text they have some disagreement.

The Updated New Revised Standard Version is widely considered the translation that tries to stay closest to the original all things considered.

Whatever you want to believe about translation, just be aware that they are not all the same. Many of not most times the differences are negligible but every now and then the differences are significant in determining interpretation. I believe just in English there are over 400 translations, which doesn't count all of the translations into non-English languages.

Whatever translation you use, just be aware of what the biases are. They can sway us.

All of this to say that our interpretation is influenced by a LOT of things. How do we understand its inspiration? How much do we come to scripture already assuming we know what it says? Who translated it and how does that effect it's transmission?

Yet no matter what, hope can be found. I'd like to appeal to experience to make this point.

King James: This is my King James Bible. I credit it with being part of my journey towards an active and lifegiving and transforming faith. This is the Bible I used when I became inspired that actual Bible Study was a core component of my faith. I took this Bible with me everywhere. I studied it on breaks at work. You can see how worn it is.

This Bible also accompanied me through one of the darker times in my life. Every evening I would sit on the front porch and read it seeking hope to get me through my situation. Every evening I found something.

Whatever one can say about this translation, what can not be argued is that in those moments of my life, God spoke hope to me through the words of scripture. The scripture here in this beat up Bible.

NIV: I was persuaded eventually to move to this Bible, the NIV. Some of you know that this Bible walked with me through my time as Director of Spiritual Life at the Board of Child Care in Baltimore. I preached from this Bible weekly. I used it in vesper and youth group services. We used it to say farewell from a grieving campus of staff and youth to more than one beloved staff member. We used it in Bible studies and Baptism classes.

In it's pages you'll see brackets, dates, and sometimes names. This was to remind me what had been covered, when, and which of our residents did the reading.

This translation, in its words and interpretations and use gave hope to hundreds of kids who needed hope. It gave hope to me that this Word has genuine transforming power. Regardless of how people agree or disagree over this Word, hope can be found when we are seeking it, and seeking it through God.

NRSV: This copy probably looks more beaten up than the other two. It is my Bible from seminary and it's unsurprisingly the NRSV...with a LOT of notes and commentary. Some pages there are more notes

and comments than scripture.

This Bible was part of my journey in discovering that there is so much more than I thought I knew about the Word of God. It has walked with me in studying tough passages, difficult issues, and challenging both my own senses of the Bible and challenging challenges to those senses as well. Love it or hate it, it is working with this Bible through those years that generated the honest questions that you hear in Bible study, and for some of you have given comfort that those questions you've asked for years or decades even are genuine, perfectly fine, and often have answers.

It is my time in seminary and since that have given me hope that the honest questions of unbelievers about scriptures have answers that are reasonable and genuine. And persuasive and faithful. That many of the things I was told "well that's just a mystery" aren't mysterious at all. And sometimes the lack of answers remind us of the bigness of God. That God will always have an aspect of mystery because none of us can fully conceive the infinite in our finite minds.

All of these and so many more are the Word of God. Despite their differences they all contain great and wonderful hope. It's all about how we approach the scriptures. If we think we know all the answers there isn't much more hope to find. If we go their cynically we look for doom and gloom, not hope.

If we approach scripture seeking the God of hope and trusting that somewhere in the pages, we'll find it. It might be in an unexpected place. It could be in affirming or challenging something we already believe. It could be in reminding us of God's presence and goodness, or the value of persisting through an uncertain wilderness of life. Whatever it is, there is hope to be found.

Here's the key. We can't find it if we don't go looking. Too many Christians talk about a Bible they rarely read. Read it. Not just to affirm what you already to believe. Not just to get it done for the day. Read it with an open heart and mind. Read it with expectation. Take the time to dive deeper than just what someone else says. In all of this you will find a hope that is sustaining and life giving. It is inspired, breathed by God.

BIBLE STUDY—2 Samuel 2

Chapter 2 begins the process of Israel cementing together under David, but we'll see over a little time it happens in an interesting way. Here at the outset David continues to distinguish himself from his predecessor, Saul. While Saul had alienated himself from God, David is still seeking the Lord's counsel. "What should I do?" "Go to Hebron."

The scene is worth noting. David's force of men we see began at 600 and I think it's safe to assume it's grown. These men plus their households all settle in Hebron. This would likely be thousands of people inundating a single town. It must have been quite the chaos as everyone tries to assimilate.

At this point there is no sense that everyone in Israel has knowledge that David was long before anointed king by Samuel. Certainly in several of the exchanges between David and Saul, particularly towards the end of Saul's life, Saul himself declares David's future leadership over Israel. That may have been in the water. Yet regardless Judah anoints David as their king.

David's political jockeying has paid off. Remember that David had been sending spoils of plunder to various towns in Judah. He had been protecting them. He has married two women, Ahinoam and Abigail likely both from Judah. In other words while he's been on the run he has also been cultivating favor with the tribe of Judah. Here they reward him. The king is dead, David is their choice for their tribe.

Meanwhile Abner is doing what a good and loyal general would do. He is trying to establish Saul's line on the throne with Saul's son Ishbaal. A note here is that it is likely Ishbaal's age is errant. The understanding is that he was too young to go into battle. At 40 he certainly would have qualified. At 40 he may have had the personal agency to make his own play for the crown and Abner wouldn't have had to be as active. We'll see in chapter 3 still another indicator that Ishbaal was likely much younger.

Here we interject an important interpretive note. To this point we have seen David=good, Saul=bad. It's easy to assume then that their generals, Joab and Abner, would fit those same categories.

Anything associated with David must be good. Anything associated with Saul must be bad. This is a mistake.

As the chapter pushes forward we will see that while Abner may have been on Saul's side, he displays some good and noble character over and against that of Joab and Asahel.

Ishbaal is king over Israel, David is king over Judah. We have the first face off to see who will rule. The two sides come together and Joab and Abner call for a contest with twelve from each army to battle. There is no real reason given for this. It may be they were engaging the custom to have a contest to determine the battle with one (or in the case a team) champion each rather than have more bloodshed in an all out battle. We don't know. We do know that whatever the purpose a fight broke out nevertheless.

The way it reads is very odd. It doesn't sound like a contest. It sounds like twelve pairs of men agreeing to kill each other at the same time. This sounds more like a murder/suicide pact of sorts. What is far more likely is that they fought, some of the fighting got into grappling, perhaps the broader painted scene happened with a pair or two, but however it shook out the gathered forces weren't content with the outcome and went to battle together.

At the end of it all David's force clearly comes out the victors, but there is some interesting interaction along the way.

As Abner is fleeing Joab's brother Asahel is chasing him. More than once Abner asks Asahel to back off. He has no desire to shed this man's blood. I think it interesting that he says that if he were to kill Asahel "how could I show my face to your brother Joab?"

There is a real sense that these men know one another. Whether it's full kinship, friendship, respect, or what have you Abner wants to spare Joab the pain of losing Asahel. I read into it the equivalent to inadvertently hurting the loved one of a friend and the shame causing us to say "how can I face so and so after what's happened."

Abner is trying to show mercy. Asahel won't have any of it. Here the bloodthirsty is on the side of David and the merciful on the side of Saul. It's flipped around. The only thing that makes sense in the sad way this turns out is that even in defense Abner is trying to spare Asahel. Rather than the business end of his spear he uses the butt. The only real explanation for how it penetrates is that Asahel was lunging, rushing so fiercely that even the butt ran him through.

Joab and Abishai find Asahel and then they too pursue. When they find Abner he's found reinforcements in the Benjaminites. Abner now calls out to Joab as he did to Asahel, begging him to stop the fighting. How much blood needs to be spilled? Joab then concedes and the battle is done.

What is notable here is the character of Abner. In the heat of battle he is still trying to have some sense of honor and respect. He is trying to show grace and mercy even to an enemy that is passionately seeking his death. When the other army is bent on slaughter, potentially turning the tide away from their own victory (Abner's force was beaten but when he was there with the Benjaminites he says "do you not know that the end will be bitter?") he is the one with the voice of reason.

Saul may have been unstable, cruel, and out for blood. Abner doesn't reflect this. Instead he shows a greater depth of respect and character. It's only fair to see him on his own merits and not an extension of Saul.

This holds true for us even today. Each of us desires to be judged on our own merits, not on those of another. Let us make our own name and particularly if it would be detrimental not be associated with the character of those we know just because we know them. If fair is fair this is how we should view those around us. Let their lives speak for themselves. More often than not we might be pleasantly surprised what we find!

On the other hand, a relationship between two men was equally consensual. There was no obligation to be loyal or faithful. So in regards to this lament, it makes sense. Jonathan's love and loyalty wasn't purchased, it was freely given. Thus David's greater grief.

We see in this chapter a wonderful example of grace towards an enemy. We also see the foolhardiness of a dishonest charade in the hopes of selfish gain. In both there is an example of what it means to follow God faithfully. Have a gracious heart. Have an honest tongue. In the end these two things flesh out the greatest will and design of God.

WEEKLY UPDATE EMAIL

A few highlights from the attached bulletin on a frigid Thursday (brrrrrrrrrrrrrr...):

MC DONALDS GIFT CARDS - This is the last weekend to bring those \$10 gift cards for the kids at the United Methodist youth home. Don't forget!

PICTORIAL DIRECTORY - Daren and I finalized the new directory this week, and we've got 50 *beautiful* copies completed for you, on the counter in the gathering area. I'll print them as needed. There will be plenty to go around, I promise. :-)

COMMUNITY MEAL - Next Tues - the 10th - is the Dec meal, and if it's anything like November, the place will be buzzing!

Ham, baked pineapple, green beans, roll and butter, cake and ice cream served buffet style. Hoping to use the table linens and ceramic tableware, play Christmas music, and enjoy new friends and old. A banquet! Plan to attend.

Invite folks! Pick them up in your car and make it "a whole thing".

Sit with people you've never met! The meal brings in quite a few neighbors - more all the time. This is the perfect opportunity to practice what Brent has been preaching.

There is a donation box at the beginning of the buffet line - the collection goal is to fully cover the cost of the meal (which is happening - thank you) and hopefully add a bit to the church offering plate to cover wear and tear on the facility.

Once everyone is served, take-home portions are available.

YOUR HELP IS ALWAYS WELCOME! Especially in need of a few younger backs to help clean up in the kitchen afterward. Callan could use a couple buddies from the under-40 club (hint hint...) ;-)

GAME NIGHT - Dec 21 is the 'Christmas Party Edition'. Bring a favorite holiday dish for the potluck buffet. Dress for the party if you like - "festive" is the word I was given :-). There will be an *optional* \$10 gift exchange -if you choose to participate, bring a wrapped gift.

In November, there were quite a few new faces from the community, which is exciting! Bring a friend who's disheartened this time of year. It's intended to be an uplifting time that gathers the isolated into the joy of togetherness.

Keep reaching out, church!

CHRISTMAS DINNER HERE -Remember to contact the West family if you want to participate in their generous offer of Christmas Dinner here at the church on Christmas day. This is for YOU - the Marion First UMC family. If you'll be alone on Christmas - DON'T BE! John, Kathy, Alyshia, and Zach will be here with a great meal and family welcome.

Blessings!

Rebekah Walck