

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Psalm 119:105-112

July 10, 2005
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*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.
I am severely afflicted; give me life, O Lord, according to your word.
Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord, and teach me your ordinances.
I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.
The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.
Your decrees are my heritage for ever; they are the joy of my heart.
I incline my heart to perform your statutes for ever, to the end.*

The Bible can be a lot like a Japanese wok, most people have one, but few people really know how to use it. Mostly, it just collects dust and makes you feel guilty—like you should be using it but you're intimidated and so you don't. Sometimes you make a plan to use it, you might even buy some pea pods—or in the case of the Bible, a fancy bookmark—but the pea pods rot in the fridge and the fancy bookmark gets stuck in the latest Dan Brown novel. Using the wok or reading the Bible, it's something we'll get around to one of these days—just not today.

But why—why if a wok aids in the preparation of healthier and tastier food and why if the Bible truly is a light to our path—why don't we use them more often. As a person who has had a wok sitting in a storage bin since we moved over a year and a half ago, I can tell you I just don't know how to use it. And so, if the choice is to read a recipe and the instruction book to make a nice meal in the wok or use my experience to make an easier meal using the microwave, I'll opt for the microwave every time. And as to the Bible, well, truth be told, I don't know that I'd use the Bible nearly as often as I do if it weren't my job to do so. I do know that I didn't use it much before I went to seminary because it was hard for me to make sense of it. I didn't know how to get started. If you start from the beginning, it's okay for a while—as we're finding out as we read through Genesis during the scripture readings this summer—there are some good stories in there. Creation, Noah's Ark, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau. But, if you keep going you end up with this from Exodus . . .

¹⁵ "Make upright frames of acacia wood for the tabernacle. ¹⁶ Each frame is to be ten cubits long and a cubit and a half wide, ^[e] ¹⁷ with two projections set parallel to each other. Make all the frames of the tabernacle in this way. ¹⁸ Make twenty frames for the south side of the tabernacle ¹⁹ and make forty silver bases to go under them—two bases for each frame, one under each projection. ²⁰ For the other side, the north side of the tabernacle, make twenty frames ²¹ and forty silver bases—two under each frame. ²² Make six frames for the far end, that is, the west end of the tabernacle, ²³ and make two frames for the corners at the far end. ²⁴ At these two corners they must be double from the bottom all the way to the top, and fitted into a single ring; both shall be like that. ²⁵ So there will be eight frames and sixteen silver bases—two under each frame.

Really, what kind of light do these building directions to the ancient Israelites shine on the path of a retired corporate executive living in Northern Michigan? Not much. More likely it is boring, irrelevant, and yet another roadblock in our attempts to study the scripture. Shoot, most of us probably don't even know what a *cubit* is.

And then there are the other stories, some of which I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, that appall us. There's the story of Jephtha's daughter. During battle, Jephtha swears to God that if only he will have victory in the fight, Jephtha will sacrifice to God the first thing that meets him when he returns to his home. He was thinking that it would probably be one of the family's dogs or livestock. But instead, it is his daughter who greets him first upon his return home and, true to his word, Jephtha kills his innocent daughter to make good on the promise to God. Now what kind of light does that shine on the path of the young mother sitting in the congregation this morning who treasures above all things her children? Not much. More likely it is off-putting, disgusting, and a story from which she wants to distance herself.

And what about Jesus saying that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to make it into heaven. Now what kind of light does a passage like this shine on us—a group of folks who are pretty comfortable financially, who, though we may be living pay check to pay check, in the grand scheme of the economic spectrum, are doing okay? What kind of light does it shine on our path—a rather dim one if any. More likely it makes us feel guilty, it confuses us, and it makes us, were we to be completely honest, a little angry. After all, we work hard for what we have and since when does hard work keep us out of heaven?

And so really, is it any wonder that the following has been said about the Bible?

Noam Chomsky wrote, *"The Bible is one of the most genocidal books in history"*

Thomas Edison wrote, *"All Bibles are man-made."*

George Bernard Shaw wrote, *"No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says; he is always convinced that it says what he means."*

Mark Twain wrote, *"It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."*

And Oscar Wilde wrote, *"When I think of all the harm the Bible has done, I despair of ever writing anything to equal it."*

And yet, the following can be found in the same book about which those critiques have been offered . . .

Revelation 21:4 And He will wipe out every tear from their eyes and death will be no more neither will mourning nor outcry nor pain be any more.

Psalms 23:4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Luke 11:10 For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks.

Isaiah 40:32 But those who wait on the LORD will find new strength.

They will fly high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

Romans 8:38, 39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And where does it all leave us—the good, the bad, and the downright ugly parts of the Bible. We could just take the parts we like and just pretend like the other stuff isn't there. We could do that, but that wouldn't be a responsible thing to do. We could take every passage quite literally, using the words of the books of the Bible as a basis of judgment on our own lives and the lives of others—but there's contradictory stuff in here, there are references and symbols that we can't understand because even the most distinguished of Bible scholars have come up blank when asked to explain them. So that approach won't work either. Or, we could just put the thing aside all together, leave it on the shelf, next to the wok, to collect dust and eventually be given to Goodwill or put out for the next garage sale. What indeed are we to do with this perplexing book of stories, commandments, laws, parables, prophecies, and insights.

Well, in many ways, I think we're doing what we can. Each week, we're listening to the stories, whether we like them or not. We get someone up here to read them to us, sometimes we follow along ourselves. So at least we're listening. And then we're singing about it. As we're finding out with our hymn story inserts this summer, most of the hymns we sing are based on scripture. So, even if we can't remember the name of the book, chapter, and verse, we are at least picking up the message of the passage as we sing the song it inspired. Many of us could sing, *In the Garden*, right here and now—at least the first verse. And even as it comforts us as we think about Jesus walking and talking with us, we also remember that this is the story of Mary Magdalene, who on that first Easter, met the risen Christ in the garden outside the empty tomb, and it is that same risen Christ who walks and talks with us.

And then there is the preaching. Corey says that you are the best congregation he has ever preached to. Now you may think that preaching is preaching—we orators just stand up here and spout out our stuff no matter who's sitting in the pews. And to a certain extent that's true, we do say what's on the page in front of us. And yet the spirit with which we say it is VASTLY different depending on who is in the pews. We pick up on your cues, we see your response in your eyes, in your posture, and in your smiles and/or frowns. It is said that preaching is a dialogue—between the preacher and the congregation, and if that's the case, you, my friends, are excellent conversationalists. And so, in the very act of “conversing” with me during the sermons which are based on scripture, you are engaging the words of the Bible.

And so it seems, we're doing a lot. But, as with any spiritual discipline, it wouldn't hurt us to do a little more, to use the book a bit more often. But how, outside of church, can we do that when, like I've already mentioned, it can be so intimidating and parts so appalling or irrelevant. We'll get into that in a moment. Because much more important to us than the how is the why. Why would you want to get all embroiled in this book of holy scriptures in the first place? Well,

because as the psalmist says, it can be a light unto your path. When you're trudging through the darkness of the valley of death—your light is the promise that you don't go alone. When you're feeling really tired and down, like you're a dirty sock on the bottom of the laundry basket of life—the light shining into your life even then will pick you up, hold you up, and help you to fly like on the wings of an eagle, that God will make it so you can run and not ever grow weary. And when you feel so disconnected from God, doubting and wondering, frustrated with your faith—the greatest and warmest light in the world is knowing that nothing—nothing in this world can separate you from the love of God—not even your own doubt of that love. And so that's why we read the Bible, that's why we haven't given up on it yet. Because, in between the stories of darkness that confound and frustrate us, there are brilliant moments of light and stories of a love that is so grand that we can't begin to fathom it. And because we feel and believe that love, we recognize that there is something to be gleaned from the hard stories, even if we're not sure what it is. We take the good with the bad because the good is oh so sweet and the bad, we can live with it for all we get from the good.

And now for the how. How, from Monday through Saturday, are we to use this here book. The first thing I recommend is that we not set our expectations too high. It's not about how much we read or how much we understand about what we read, it's that we're reading it at all. That's our job. It's God's job to bring about the revelation—we just need to do the reading and trust God to do the rest. And so, let's get started, let's do something. Let's begin by reading the book of Jonah over the coming week. I know it sounds like a lot, but it's only a few pages. I've even made copies and put it on the back table for you to take on your way out if you'd like. Just think of it, in a mere ten minutes, you can read an entire book of the Bible. And that's how we're going to do this, one step at a time. Read the book of Jonah, it's the same one the children are studying this month, and then, if you want to discuss it and learn more, meet me here next week at 9AM, an hour before church starts, and we'll have a little class on it. And that's how we'll get started, a little bit at a time. And together we'll see how God shines the lamp on our feet and sheds light on our path.