

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving Creator, Holy Redeemer, Ever-Present Sustainer, no matter the season, we welcome you. With gifts of snow, rain, blazing heat or blowing wind, we praise you. We come to your house today to be the people that you have called, the people who trust in your ways, and seek to live in them. We come to reorient, to remember what is truly important, to set aside distractions. We come to be with each other, to carry one another's burdens and to share our burdens with one another. We come to be people of faithful word and faithful action. Be among us, be our God as we are your people, as we lift up all those prayers we have said in our hearts and out loud. Hear our prayers, Gracious Loving God.

Holy God, we enter yet another new season with you on our minds. We enter this season of Lent, a season of reconnection, of renewal, of reorientation. Holy Creator, we call upon you to lead us these forty days to remember who we truly are. In the fretfulness of each day, we delegate you to the background and neglect hearing of your Holy Spirit. We open our hearts to temporary things and leave your service to the time we have left. We know when we fall short, even when we'd not care to admit it. But this is not the season for self-blame; it's the season to reorient to you. Let us begin with the words of Scripture, Lord, the words that can bring us back to ourselves and to you. We look to the example of our forerunners in the faith that we may emulate their faithfulness. May we look at your world and your guidance with open hearts and minds, prepared to live for you always, and may we always do it Christ's name, as we pray the prayer he taught us, saying...

SERMON

Well, just like any of the other seasons in Wyoming, winter has finally come as we are less than a month from the official beginning of Spring. Snowstorm after snowstorm is

now here, and instead of preparing to sing Christmas carols, we're singing the solemn hymns of Lent while looking out of the corner of our eyes toward our yearly rendition of "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." In the meantime, the snow has come and keeps coming. But do me a favor. Next time there's a snowfall and you need to scrape off your car or shovel your sidewalks, do so without some necessary tools. Leave a shoe inside and try to walk in the snow. Navigate through a blizzard with only one glove or without a hat. Or, perhaps, scrape the ice off your windshield without a scraper. Try to use a shovel.

How do you think those things will go over? Not very well. I imagine you could do great damage to a car trying to use a shovel to scrape off a windshield. You're going to be pretty uncomfortable, even sick, if you don't wear the right clothing for weather. In all parts of life, you need the right tools to do the right job. So, want to use a hammer to get screws in? Nope. If you lack the right tools or just use one tool for every job, you can do others or yourself great harm. It's true for our everyday lives; it's true for our Christian life.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism was quite prolific. He had sermons that were incredible: long-winded and complex, but nevertheless held some great theological wisdom that we take to this day. One of those things is what we call today the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Put simply, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral describes the four ways in which John Wesley described how we can know how God is speaking to us and working in the world today. They are, essentially, the four tools in our God discernment toolbox. They are four God-given ways we can hear that still small voice and act through it. The first one is the one we probably know best, the one we turn to first, the cornerstone of the Christian story: the Holy Scriptures. The second piece is the history that goes beyond the scriptures, for they only tell the beginning of our story. The rest of the history is what we call Christian

tradition. Let us begin our journey through the Wesleyan Quadrilateral with the first and second tools as we look again at the importance of scripture, how we utilize and explore Christian tradition, and how we can best utilize these tools for a faithful life.

What can I say about the scriptures that we haven't said before? This great book had a long history to get where we actually are today. The development of the bible took hundreds of years with the biggest question being which books belong in the canon, or official listing, of Holy Scripture. Does anyone know when the first Bible as we know it today was assembled? It was around the early to mid 4th Century, but it wasn't finalized. Even today, some still don't agree on which books should be in the Bible and which ones should not. Some versions of the bible have an extra section called the Apocrypha that speak the history between the Testaments. However, for the most part, the question of canon has been resolved, and this is what we have. It is a conglomeration of sixty-six books, each one written in a different time to a different audience with different intentions. Some books were written to record history. Some were written as letters to churches and only later became canonized as Holy Scripture. Some are collections of poetry and song. Some are comforting; some are challenging. Some are confusing; some feel as clear as day to us. Some passages don't mean much to us today; some are as timeless as ever.

When do you go to scripture? Some incorporate it daily into their routines. Some turn to a beloved psalm or epistle when they need encouragement. One way or another, we have to do it well, because there is so much at stake when we open up the scriptures. One of my favorite stories reminds us that we can't just open scripture and expect us to find exactly what we need. The story goes that this man was really looking for God's guidance, so he prays, "God, I'm going to open up the scriptures; please speak to me what you want

me to do.” He opens it up and points: “And Judas went and hung himself.” “No, God, that can’t be what you want me to do. I’m going to do it again, and please speak to me, tell me what you want me to do.” He opened up the bible and put his finger down: “Go and do likewise.” First of all, we can’t expect God to lead or direct on our schedules. On the other hand, we need more tools to understand scripture well, for we can be certain that God does not advocate as this man seems to think. The stakes are high when it comes to this book.

Some of those stakes can be seen in our first scripture, the prologue of Gospel of John. It is, by far, the most poetic and cryptic of any Gospel, speaking of Jesus, the Word, the Logos in Greek, coming into the world. As it says in our Lenten Devotions, “Logos” is the root of many English words, such as “logic.” Jesus, in that mindset, is the logic that gives the Universe form. Jesus is the Word that gives the words of scripture their form and meaning. But there is danger. In a past sermon, we said that scripture can become so much of the focus that it takes our eyes off the greater goals. Indeed, scripture can become our sole focus so that it becomes an idol in itself. One message of this passage reminds us where the written word of scripture falls in the scheme of things. So, what is written scripture in this passage? It is not Jesus. The written word actually takes the place of John in the relationship the written word of scripture has to God: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Scripture testifies to the light, but scripture is not the light itself. The true light has, is, and will come into the world.

When we talk about the adjective “biblically,” I find myself losing interest. It is one of those words that has become so overused so many different ways it has lost all meaning.

One person speaks of “living biblically” and points to one passage, and another person speaks of “living biblically” and points to a different passage and conflicts. All have to do with living according to a piece of the bible, but “living biblically” has a more overarching message: what we read here from John 1. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Word is the underlying point of scripture, the thread that brings it all together. It is not the written word, but the force that gives the written word all its power. That is Jesus Christ, the Word, the Logos, the logic behind it all.

Jesus Christ was, is, and will be the logic behind it all. But the ministry he provided did not give us the exact answer to every question that might pop up throughout history, nor did we get all of the observances that we live out today. So, let me ask you a question. Where in scripture do you find the meaning of the Christmas tree? Where in scripture do we find the debate between those who believe in infant baptism and those who do not? Where in scripture do we find the season of Lent itself? Indeed, Holy Scripture does not give us the whole story or all the answers; it is only the beginning our story. It gave us the basics, and we have built on that to fashion the Christianity we know today. Once you get beyond the bounds of scripture, the history continues, but we call it something different. The story of Christianity from our scriptural origins to even now is Christian Tradition, and it is our second tool. Every age of the church had to address new needs and new concerns that the first apostles had no idea existed. Scripture is the foundation, but the foundation does not build the house; the house is built upon the foundation, and every new age of the church added a new layer of bricks. Indeed, Christian Tradition is still being written today. We will keep building new layers and addressing new concerns and opportunities as long as the Body of Christ serves throughout this world. It is ever changing and dynamic.

Our second scripture lesson alludes to this Christian tradition, for it is something that goes into the thousands of years after scripture. Indeed, the heroes and scholars of the faith still continue to this day. They and we continue to write the next chapters of the Christian story. The Book of Hebrews states, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...” This cloud of witnesses include all those who came before us, who understood many of our problems, who dealt with problems we do not anymore, and those who never could have imagined our situation but provided great guidance on the road ahead. They are the saints.

This cloud of witnesses should push us to grow and respond to the Lord Christ with greater and stronger energy every day. I see heroes of the faith that drive me to grow and deepen my own faith. Martin Luther King Jr. was an exceptional prophet. I admire the scholarship and wisdom of people like Walter Bruggemann, whose writings profoundly affected my own journey. There’s Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote about the dangers of cheap grace and eventually gave his life for his beliefs. Even great reformers like Martin Luther and John Wesley still profoundly affect the church today. These people spoke and acted with the wisdom of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Who are your heroes of the faith? They may not have written the words of scripture, but they act with its power. Each one responded to the needs and issues of the world around them, motivated by the spirit that brought about the words of scripture. Scripture has an ending point, but the Word, the Logos, that crafted it still works among us today, and that is why we emphasize the ongoing work of the Logos as Christian Tradition beyond the words of scripture. We need their examples, for they connect us to our current day with a timeless model.

As I said, these are but two pieces of a four-piece puzzle. We begin with scripture and Christian Tradition today because they are where we usually begin with our Christian Journeys and our Christian discernment, but the puzzle is greater than that. God has given us the words of scripture and the example of our Christian brothers and sisters as beloved guides, but that is not where God's gifts and God's presence in this world begin and end. Whether we realize it or not, we utilize so many of God's gifts in our search for how God is working in the world and how we are called to live in God's light in the world today. We find God and we seek God not only when we are reading scripture and Christian guides but also when we are living in this world. Therefore, we will continue this journey across Lent to reconnect with how we can best understand God and understand how God presents God's self to the world. These are big questions that require a lot of discernment and tools at our disposal to even begin to grasp the enormity of God and God's calling to this world.

Scripture and Christian Tradition are the first two pieces in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. They're like two shoes; you travel further with both than just one. Scripture tells us our start: Creation, the story of God's people in Israel, the coming of Jesus Christ, the formation of the first churches, and the hope of God's work to come. Nevertheless, we are called to utilize it as the word who points to a greater Word, the Logos of Jesus Christ. When we do, scripture not only comes into focus, but all of life does as well. But our history goes on beyond the words of scripture, and we see those who have shaped the faith and called it to accountability when it has gotten off track. We have the scholars, the reformers, the regular people, and the brilliant leaders that have sought to keep Christ's example foremost. Thanks be to God for these wonderful, powerful tools, and may we always use them well, seeking Christ behind all the words and all the examples! Amen and Amen.