

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, who created us to be yours, we come to be in your house to day to honor and bless it. We seek to honor all those things in our lives that you have given us, for we are your stewards. We seek to care for and honor the people, objects, and stories that we have been entrusted with. Guide us to preserve all these things in the most loving and faithful ways possible.

God, we know that we hold great gaps in our lives. Those gaps are filled by you. There are many ways we can come to know you: through your creation, through prayer, through conversation and guidance from your hands and feet in the Body of Christ. We also name today that we come to know you through the inspiration of Holy Scripture. Holy God, we honor today the gift of scripture. It provides a foundation for us and a guide from our ancestors in the faith. From Samson to the Apostles, help us to respect these examples as fellow sojourners in the faith. We are all human, we are blessed but flawed, and we all search to find you and to know you in all parts of our lives. You show us our blessedness as human creatures through these examples, and we praise you for showing us faithfulness. Help us to find faithfulness for this day in age in scripture and beyond, in the many ways you speak to us. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, our key example, who taught us to pray...

## SERMON

There is a really well crafted scene in the movie “Back to the Future,” where Marty McFly, a time traveler from 1985, comes into a diner in his hometown in the year 1955. Walking into the diner, they make fun of his clothing, which does not fit with the time period. He goes up to the counter and asks for a Tab. “A Tab? I can’t give you a Tab unless

you order something,” says the storekeeper. Marty then asks for a Pepsi Free. “If you want a Pepsi, pal, you gotta pay for it!” Both people are talking over each other, because there is some assumed knowledge that neither have. Marty asks for a Tab, which was a cola in the 1980s. In the 1950’s, he was asking for the storekeeper to keep tabs on what he owed. Marty also asks for a Pepsi Free, a sugar free version of Pepsi, but the storekeeper thinks he’s asking for a soda without paying for it. They aren’t communicating well because they are hearing one thing that is common to their knowledge, but it means another thing to the other person. That’s the difficulty when we hear something from a different time. We hear one thing, but another thing is intended.

If it’s difficult to communicate between 1985 and 1955, it’s even more difficult to communicate between 2013 and 2000+ years ago. This wonderful example of disconnect between ages shows exactly how it can feel when we approach the bible. Have you ever heard an inside joke where you just don’t get it? Sometimes there is a reference that is based in a certain time and place that you don’t have. The bible has many of those. At the same time, it also has a wealth of timeless threads that support us and lead us as we seek to be faithful people in a confusing world. It also has been abused; many people used the bible as a justification for violence, slavery, hatred, and killing when the overwhelming arc of the bible has to do with loving the other as one’s self. It is complicated but timeless; loving but also to be handled with care.

I got several questions in the basket, and most were about the Bible. The bible is, no question, the greatest book and books ever written. Some questions were very specific, and some were more general. From the longest verse, Esther 8:9, to the shortest verse, Job 3:2 (or John 11:35 in some translations), the bible is one of the most complex and deep

writings of all history. Although I called this sermon “Everything You Wanted to Know About the Bible,” I realized that I couldn’t proclaim that sermon and still get you home for Valentine’s Day. Let’s look at some of the highlights which, I hope, will help you appreciate more of what these writings are that continue to speak to and bless us over centuries.

One question concerned why the bible is so overwhelming to understand. Indeed, there are a lot of things in the bible that are hard to understand from our contemporary viewpoint. There are many reasons for this. First of all, what we have here is what is best called an interpretation of the text from its original language. The original writings of the bible were written in ancient Hebrew and a dialect of Greek called Koine, and there is no one way to translate these texts. We often consider translation as a one-to-one science, but that’s not the most accurate way of looking at it. Translation is best summed up as an art that often requires a best guess. We can look at a word in the original language and literally find five to ten meanings for it, each depending on where it is in a sentence, what form it takes, and so forth. Language is difficult and can turn the meaning of a sentence or a book with a translation or mistranslation. That is why we have so many versions of the bible, for the art of translation often leads different people to different conclusions.

Another piece that makes the bible difficult to understand is that many people cherry pick verses out of the bible and base a theology upon it. They then look at the bible through their perceived meaning of that one verse. It is not only unfaithful to derive one’s whole understanding of God and Christianity from one verse, it also disrespects the rest of the bible. One could call this “bumper sticker theology,” since bumper stickers only allow a short thought. Bumper stickers don’t allow for a larger conversation; they just close people

out. Why would we have this great book of history if our whole story could be summed up in one verse? It just doesn't make sense and neglects the rest.

Furthermore, the bible is not a single work; no one single person wrote it. It is the conglomeration of generations and generations of writers, over hundreds of hundred of years through different circumstances and different events. We finally got the shape of the bible today first around 325 AD. In a way, they are all trying to grasp with how God relates to our world and to them. There are a lot of what we may call "inside jokes" that the bible writers wrote to their audiences. I don't mean joke literally, but hints that allude to some previously known information. They knew the inside information, so they could understand the reference behind the story. The movie "Back to the Future" is one example of how there can be a disconnect, but here's another way of looking at things. Think about a comedy show like Saturday Night Live, for instance. They perform sketches that joke around about current events, like famous sports stars, political figures, and such. What makes their joke funny is that you know what has been going on in real life. You have the back-story; you have all the information on who these caricatures are in real life, so the over-done portrayal is funny. If you didn't know who Richard Nixon was in the 1970s, you would never understand what they were talking about on SNL. In the bible, there are subtle allusions to things and people that the people of that time would know. In bible study this last Wednesday, we read parts from the book of Lamentations. Bonnie Carley mentioned right away how absolutely difficult it was to read and understand. Indeed, it truly is. We need to encounter the history behind this book, from the pains of the Exile to Babylon to the theological difficulties that the Jews in exile were facing. Where was God? Did God forget all of those promises that God made? We were going to have a King on the throne of

David for all time, but the line of kings was broken! All of these things would be understood by people in biblical times but not necessarily by us just glancing at the text. We did not live in the same environment, the same culture, the same times, so we often need to get ahold of the context to get a full grasp of the story.

The Bible is a guide to our history and our faith. Although it was written at a certain time with a certain people in mind as its audience, we consider the threads of the bible to be the ongoing source of our identity as people of faith. Another question mentioned whether we should memorize the bible. Actually, no one has ever memorized it, and that would really do no good. While I have memorized certain passages that held great meaning for me, I am not a big fan of rote memorization. Think about a favorite movie or song you have. You can memorize all the lines, sure. If that becomes the basis of your understanding of that movie or song, then the song quickly becomes old and too familiar. However, if you return to it from time to time, new things catch your ear and your eye. In the same way, scripture is remarkable in that every time we look at it with new eyes, we see something new. We are never the same from one point in time to another; in the same way, we will hear and see something new in God's word when we approach it at different times. I've had verses I've read now and then, but one day, when something in particular happened, I will look at that verse and think, Wow, God is speaking to me in a particular way through this verse. Scripture can take on new meaning depending upon where we are and how we are seeing a verse with new eyes. The bible is a living source of the faith today as in the past.

I think one of the greatest parts of the bible is that it presented people who wanted to grow closer to God that were often just as frail and flawed as we see ourselves. From beginning to end, the faithful people are not perfect but very human. The Judges in the Old

Testament were the leaders of Israel before the Kings. Everyone, of course, remembers Samson, the Judge who was known for his great strength. He was no example of morality; he was considered more of a rough guy and somewhat foolish. Delilah continued to tempt him over and over but he kept falling under her spell. On the other hand, you have Nabal, a man who encountered David in 1 Samuel 25. He disrespected David when David asked for help, and forever became immortalized as a fool. Indeed, "Nabal" in Hebrew means "fool." He provides an example of what it means to be unfaithful to God, for he was asked for hospitality and gave none. He goes down as the example of someone we do not want to follow. Of course, the greatest example was Jesus.

I consider the Bible like our passage from Luke. This is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday when we recognize the change of Jesus on the mountaintop in front of his disciples. The Transfiguration did not bring the disciples into full communion with God, but it allowed them to catch a glimpse of God's glory through Jesus. They were not transported to the absolute the divine. However, in that moment, the veil was pulled away and they saw a foretaste of the divine. They saw Jesus as he really was. The bible, in the same way, is not God, but it allows us to catch a glimpse of God. It takes us into the history of our faith and brings us closer to the works of God as they have affected the community of faith throughout many ages. The bible will never give us a complete picture of who God is and how God interacts with us, but it gives us the essentials. It provides the path to life through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior if we will listen and follow Christ to the mountaintop. It provides a picture of his teachings and ministry as well as our forerunners in the faith, those we admire and those we sometimes think less of.

Scripture is integral to our lives as the foundation of our history and our faith. It presents how our ancestors grew in their faith, and it gives us the opportunity to grow in our faith. It presents the ways they interacted with God as ways we can interact with God (or, perhaps ways that we should not interact with God). From Samson to Nabal to Jesus, from all the good examples and all the bad examples, we find what it means to be a sojourner on the path of faith. It is never easy, and none of these examples learned how to find God easily either. It deserves our respect and the treatment with great gravity, for many people throughout history have used it for the detriment of our brothers and sisters when we are called to love one another. Let us use it wisely and lovingly, for that is how God calls us to be throughout all of scripture. Amen and amen.