

**Sermon Series: Rhythms**  
**Scripture by David Hockett**  
**Matthew 4:1-11**

**Boone UMC**  
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On our Lenten journey to Easter, we've been thinking about those rhythms that help us live into the fullness of life in Christ. Having a faithful rhythm to life is critical if we are going to be more than culturally Christian. The early Methodists knew this and they ordered life intentionally around rhythms that would make possible growth in the likeness of Christ. In his list of the means of grace, of those places where we meet God because God promises to show up and be present there, Wesley includes among others things the rhythm of daily, prayerful Bible study.

It's not surprising that he would include reading and meditating on God's word as a means of grace and as one of those necessary rhythms for experiencing the fullness of life in Christ. If you hang around the Church much you will know that the Bible is pretty important, that it's of the ways in which we draw near to God and abide in Christ in order that we might bear kingdom fruit. As Christians we believe the Bible is authoritative for life and faith, that God is revealed in the pages of Scripture, that Scripture points us to God, teaches us about God and about ourselves in relationship to God. We believe that we actually meet God in the text. We believe that Scripture is inspired, or God-breathed, as the NIV puts it. This implies that the Holy Spirit somehow was involved in the writing of the Bible and likewise that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the faithful reading and interpretation of the Bible. We do not read alone. We read in community with one another and with the voices of the saints guiding our interpretation. *And* if we approach the Bible with a spirit of openness and a sincere desire for God, the Holy Spirit guides our reading so that we might hear what God longs to say to us and that we might be transformed and renewed after the image of God.

You know we love and serve a God whose word is powerful and creative. "Then God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light."(Genesis 1:3) There in the beginning, God broke the silence and spoke creation into being and called it good. God's word is powerful and creative. God's word breathes life into all that we see around us and even into us. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...' and so it was. (Genesis 1:26). God speaks and there is life. The Bible, as God's word, from beginning to end tells the story of the God who speaks, of the God whose word is creative, and redemptive, and which can still be heard wooing us, calling to us, inviting us home. The Bible tells that story. From beginning to end it tells the story of the God who, out of love, created all that is; and who out of love relentlessly pursues a wayward creation. It's both the tragic story of our sin and disobedience, and the beautiful story of the God who never gives up on us, even to the point of writing his own Son into the story in order that we might have life and life abundant.

In fact, the story of the Bible is *the* Story that narrates all other stories. It is the meta-narrative. It is in a sense the script that shapes our lives, that defines us, and gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Now we can of course ignore it, and we often do. And we can try and write our own story, and many of us do that as well. But when we do, we're living a lie and we become captive to myths and legends that are not God's truth about us or for us. These stories we tell about ourselves actually confine and constrict us, while the word of God offers an expansive landscape in which we can live, and move, and have our being. And so we should read scripture prayerfully and regularly, not as a set of propositions or rules for living, or as a catalog of self-help advice, but as a story that narrates our lives, that tells us who we are and whose we are and how we are to live in relationship with the Author of the story.

There is a sense in which when we answer Christ's call to come and follow we, among other things, we give up all of our vain attempts to write our own stories. Instead, we become caught up in the story God has already written. We become a part of the narrative of sin and salvation, of cross and resurrection. This story takes hold of us, shapes us, we become biblical people. Not in the sense that we use the Bible as a weapon, but in the way that Jesus is the embodiment of the story, the word made flesh, the word made visible. The whole story of the Bible took on life and flesh in him. To be biblical people means that the story of the Bible has its hold on us. The truth is we cannot faithfully read Scripture until we are willing to allow our lives to be shaped by this story. Obedience matters. As we saw with prayer, the faithful reading and hearing of God's word will change us, because you cannot regularly spend time with God and not be changed. And so a willingness to live the story of Bible, to be a Scripture-formed community is necessary if we want to understand it well. Curiosity is not enough. A sincere desire for this Story to have its way with us is required.

The purpose of the rhythms of the spiritual life, rhythms like Sabbath, fasting, prayer, and the study of God's word, the purpose is our total transformation, our becoming more and more like Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that we are to be transformed by the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2) and our minds are renewed by applying them to those things that will transform them. Paul writes, "Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think* about these things." (Philippians 4:8) "The study of God's word is the primary vehicle to bring us to *think about these things*. And so we should thank God that we are not left to our own devices but have been given this means of God's grace for the transformation of our inner spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Many of us remain captive to fears and anxieties because we do not allow God to transform us

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 62.

inwardly through reading and meditating on God's word. We may be going through the outward motions of religion but our inner lives remain dry and unchanged because we have never really availed ourselves of the transformative power of immersing, of steeping ourselves in God's truth. We drift aimlessly like a ship without a rudder, tossed around by the wind and the waves of life, uncertain of how to respond to all the brokenness and sin we see around us because our well has run dry. We've been drinking too long from wells that leave us thirsty and wanting, when all the while we're being offered the well-spring of life. Jesus is clear, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32) "Many of us are hampered in our spiritual walk; maybe we're stuck and struggling to move to the next level simply because we have not availed ourselves of the great storehouse of truth that is God's word."<sup>2</sup>

Matthew tells us that following his baptism, just as he was beginning his ministry of teaching and healing and announcing the coming reign of God, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Jesus knows our utter dependence upon God's word. He clung to it as if his life depended upon it.

The Bible is bread for our journey. It is food for our souls. God's word, God's story for us and about us is one of the places where we encounter God, who is the nourishment we long for. I love the way Donald Whitney imagines how Scripture shapes and nourishes us as God's children.

He says, "Your mind is like a cup of hot water and the tea bag represents your intake of Scripture. Hearing God's Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea's flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking. Reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word are like additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more permeating its effect. The regular, prayerful reading and study of God's word is like immersing the bag completely, and letting it steep until all of the rich flavor has been extracted and the hot water has been thoroughly transformed. Studying God's word is like letting the Bible brew in the brain. We might say that as the tea colors the water, so the study of Scripture "colors" our thinking. When we meditate on God's word it colors our thinking about God, about God's ways and his world, and about ourselves."<sup>3</sup> It makes us more like God to regularly ponder God's word.

And friends this doesn't happen overnight, all at once. I love the story of "...Rabbi Akiva who one day was shepherding his flocks, he noticed a tiny stream trickling down a hillside, dripping

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.

over a ledge on its way toward the river below. Below was a massive boulder. Surprisingly, the rock had a deep impression in it.

The constant dripping of the water over the centuries had hollowed away the stone. Akiva remarked, "If mere water can do this to hard rock, how much more can God's Word carve a way into my heart?" Akiva realized that if the water had flowed over the rock all at once, the rock would have been unchanged. It was the slow, steady impact of each small drop, year after year, that completely reformed the stone....It is by the slow drip of study and prayer, day after day, year after year, that God shapes us into what God wants us to be."<sup>4</sup>

God wants us to know the truth, the real story of we are and to whom we belong. God's wants this story to become the rhythm of our life. God wants the story of his desire for us, his love for us, the story of God's forgiveness and mercy and love to permeate every fiber of our being until we know this story like the back of our hand. The only way that happens is if we pick it up and read. There's no shortcut, we have to open our hearts and minds and pick it up and read, and let God's word brew in our brains. There are no secrets, no hidden tricks, just slow, prayerful attention to the word. The good news is, God will meet us here, and make us a part of the story, until it becomes so much a part of us, that without saying a word our very lives tell this story over and over again. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Lois Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*.