

**Sermon Series: You Asked for It**  
**“How Do I Read Scripture?” by David Hockett**  
**Hebrews 4:12-16**

**Boone UMC**  
**August 28, 2016**

It is likely the best-selling book in the world. *The Economist* estimates that over 100 million bibles are distributed throughout the world each year. It is a source of spiritual wisdom for the faithful, a topic of much debate for scholars, the inspiration for countless novels, movies, works of art, poetry, music, and is read and preached from pulpits all over the world every day of the week. It has inspired movements for peace and justice, and has lead ordinary people to lead amazingly beautiful, faithful, self-less lives – Benedict, Claire, St. Francis, John Wesley, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and on and on. It also has been the justification for horrible violence, acts of war, political maneuvering, unimaginable oppression, slavery, prejudice, all carried out with the supposed endorsement of God’s word. And it was apparently on many of your minds when we asked for suggestions for this sermon series.

We typically refer to it as *The Bible* or the *Holy Bible*, from the *Biblia Sacra* or the holy books, all with origins in ancient words like scroll, and papyrus. For Christians it is *the* book above all other books. While he was an Oxford scholar and widely read, and demanded that the early Methodist preachers be widely read, John Wesley referred to himself as *homo unius libri*, “a man of one book”. He writes, “God himself has condescended to teach me the way....He hath written it down in a book. Oh give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! Let me be *homo unius libri*....In God’s presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.”<sup>1</sup> If you read Wesley’s sermons it is at times difficult to differentiate between Wesley’s own words and quotations from scripture. It is so much a part of his vocabulary and his thinking that it simply flows out of him as if it were his native language.

For centuries, Christians have turned to the Bible for inspiration, for guidance and for an authoritative voice on matters of faith, morals, and life. The Bible is the Church’s book. While we often read it as individuals it belongs to the community. It is authoritative for faith and life and for shaping the witness of the Church because we believe it is God’s word, that God inspired the writing of these pages. That Scripture is God-breathed and somehow connects us with God in a way other books do not. It is truly, as we say each week, the word of God for the people of God. It’s also not really a book the way we think of a book, like say a novel which is essentially one continuous story, but more like a library of books, with various kinds of literature, written in different cultural settings over the course of centuries as God revealed God’s self and formed a relationship with God’s people. There is history, poetry, adventure, tragedy, gospel, liturgy, parables, and more. And yet, while it is a library of books there is also a meta-narrative, an overarching story of God’s love for creation, and God’s desire to set apart a holy people whose

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *Preface to the Sermons*.

vocation is to bless the nations and bear witness to God's dream for the world. The Bible is then *the* Story that gives shape to our stories. It is the truth about who we are and who we're called to be.

So as we think about reading this book, and we should read it often because it is sacramental, it is a means of God's grace for us, a place where we encounter the living presence of God. So as we think about reading this book there are a few things to keep in mind. First, let me suggest a couple of ways we may be approaching the Bible that aren't particularly helpful or faithful, that are in a sense a misuse of the Scriptures and actually hinder our ability to encounter God.

*The Xanax Approach.*<sup>2</sup> Feel anxious? Read Philippians 4:6. Feel tired? Read Matthew 11:28. The Xanax Approach treats the Bible as if it exists to make us feel better, as if there is a simple prescription for every ailment. With this approach to Scripture, Bible study is reduced to finding comfort for my issues. Now there is comfort in scripture. The problem with this method is that the question lying underneath this approach to Scripture is how the Bible can serve me, rather than how I can serve the God the Bible proclaims. In this approach, the central character in Scripture is me and my needs and desires rather than God.

Next, *the Pinball Approach*. Lacking a reference or any guidance on what to read, I read whatever Scripture verse I happen to turn to next, bouncing from one passage to the next. But the Pinball Approach gives no thought to the culture, history, authorship, or the original intent of the passage. It isn't concerned with how the Bible works as a whole. It lifts verses out of their context within the Bible and approaches each verse of the Bible as a stand-alone proposition from which I can find guidance for all of life's problems or challenges. It's very easy in this method to make the Bible say what we'd like it to say rather than what it actually says. And so to remedy this we actually need to read more of the Bible and not less.

*The Magic 8 Ball Approach*. Remember the Magic 8 Ball? You shake it and wait until it provides a clear answer to your most difficult questions. But the Bible isn't magical and its primary function is to transform us, to make us more like God, rather than to simply answer our most pressing questions. Because, sometimes we are asking the wrong questions or expecting the Bible to be concerned with the things we're concerned about when quite frankly it often is not.

Now we've probably all read the Bible in one or more of these ways and I'm not here to point fingers but to simply say there might be a better way to approach Scripture. I have friend who is a Catholic priest and Father Joe is a deeply faithful, holy man. He used to tell me, David, when you open God's word remember that you come to it in poverty. Don't approach God's word with your mind already made up looking for confirmation for what you already believe, or think,

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<sup>2</sup> Each of these three approaches to Scripture is delineated further in an article by Jen Wilkin.

or know. Be humble and receptive for God to provide what you need, even and especially when what you need makes you uncomfortable and uneasy. It is likely in those moments that you are most close to truly hearing the voice of God.

I love the way the author of Hebrews puts this.

*The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. - Hebrews 4.12-13*

Ouch, a two-edged sword diving joints from marrow. Steve Garnaas-Holmes has argued, “The “piercing” here is a not violent assault on us by God’s word, but skillful surgery, perfect knowledge of what is inside us; the “dividing” is not cutting us apart but discerning, distinguishing between what is eternal and what is passing, what is true and what is false. The Word is God knowing us deeply.... The Word of God is a presence—indeed, a person— who knows us, who understands what moves us....The Word knows the difference between what is truly you and what is false, imposed, and needing to be removed.” When we read Scripture we should approach it with a desire that through the words on the page and by the power of the Holy Spirit that God will have God’s way with us. We sell Scripture short when we believe it is merely a helpful tool that we can take up or lay aside as we find it useful for making us nicer, healthier, more well-adjusted people. When in truth, the word of God has the power to re-create us, to reform our imagination, our way of thinking and seeing, and to make us holy. What if our prayer when we read scripture is not something like, “God help me apply this to my life, and to what I already think, and know and believe.” ..but rather, what if we prayed, “God through your word make me more like you.”

Garnaas-Holmes goes on to say, “Let the Presence of God in Scripture pierce us. Let it read us and interpret our lives and lay bare the intentions of our heart, so that we can see ourselves clearly, as God sees us. Let God’s love sink deep to the marrow of our fears, the bone of our desires, not to cut us up, but to see what does not give us life and free us from it, so that we become more truly and wholly the person God has created us to be.”

The primary challenge is not to make the Bible relevant so that we can then apply it to our lives. The more important question is how are our lives relevant to Scripture? That is, how are we in step or out of step with the way of life Scripture reveals? We will never read Scripture well until we are willing to have our lives upended and transformed by the God Scripture points to. Faithful reading and understanding of the Bible has less to do with intelligence and more to do with our desire to be holy.

Luther once said, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.” What a beautiful thing to have your life overtaken by the word of God – to have your imagination, your thoughts, your heart, your actions, your words, look and sound like God. A love of Scripture illuminates life as a whole. The practice of meditating on God’s Word enables us to understand better what God longs to say to us and it provides a real encounter with Christ. When we allow the Bible to take hold of us we become a people who not only know a lot about the Bible but a people whose lives have been shaped and formed by the Scripture in such a profound way that our life begins to resemble the life of the God that we encounter in the Biblical story.

Now there are lots of different ways to read the Bible. What I’m essentially suggesting here is that we should read it with an eye towards transformation as much or more than we read it simply for information. Again, faithful reading and understanding of the Bible has less to do with how clever we are, or with our ability to prove that our position is right or wrong, and more to do with our desire to be holy. So any interpretation or use of Scripture that doesn’t end in our looking more like Jesus is simply not a faithful reading of the text.

So where does this leave us? Well, some of you are familiar with the method of reading and praying Scripture known as *Lectio Divina*. Jeff has talked with us about it and some of you may have encountered it on retreat at Mepkin Abbey. *Lectio Divina* is a Latin term which means “divine reading”. The practice dates to at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century and describes a way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us. It involves reading a passage aloud so that we not only “think” the text but hear it. The purpose is to read prayerfully in order to listen and pay attention to what God might be saying to us. As you read you should be thinking, what parts of the passage catch my attention? What words, phrases, or images do I hear as though for the first time? You then allow those words or phrases, from God’s word, to become the source of your prayer and meditation, carrying them with you throughout the day.

As we close I invite you simply to listen for God speaking to you through God’s word. I’m going to read a section from Psalm 119 and I invite you into a time of prayer, to listen for the voice of God speaking to you, inviting you into a deeper relationship, calling you to become more fully the beloved son or daughter you were created to be. Hear the word of the Lord...

*Oh, how I love your law!*

*It is my meditation all day long.*

*Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,  
for it is always with me.*

*I have more understanding than all my teachers,  
for your decrees are my meditation.  
I understand more than the aged,  
for I keep your precepts.  
I hold back my feet from every evil way,  
in order to keep your word.  
I do not turn away from your ordinances,  
for you have taught me.  
How sweet are your words to my taste,  
sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
Through your precepts I gain understanding;  
therefore I hate every false way.  
Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path. – Psalm 119:97-105*