



The Word of God for the People of God

Theology Statement

The collection of books we call the Bible or Scripture includes many kinds of writings by a wide array of authors representing diverse communities and spanning many centuries. Christians give special attention to the Bible as an important record of the way people have encountered God in the past. Although most Anglicans are comfortable with language describing the Bible as sacred and divinely inspired, we are not of one mind on exactly what we mean by that claim. All Episcopalians would agree, however, that the Bible continues to shape the lives of Christians today, but not as a rulebook or a science textbook or even as the literal word of God dictated to a secretary.

The Bible functions something like a family photo album for people of faith. Just as we do in our biological families, by turning to our faith family album we find a wildly diverse cast of characters. Some of their stories inspire us; others make us cringe. Yet each is instructive and full of insights for carrying on the ‘family business,’ for connecting us with our history, and for helping us discern how God is working among us today.

Anglican Christians rely on the Bible as an integral component in our life of faith. We also recognize that the Bible rarely speaks for itself; it requires the hard work of interpretation, which we engage through centuries of traditions and our own reasoned reflection. In fact, we do the work of interpretation every time we pick up the Bible to read it as we bring a whole set of assumptions, personal histories, childhood memories, religious education, and images from popular culture with us when we read those texts. As we engage the intentional work of interpretation we do believe God can speak to us through Biblical texts and stories, that we can hear the word of God in Scripture. What that word holds for us and how it will shape us at any given moment depends on a host of cultural, political and social factors. The fact that God can speak to different communities and in a variety of places through the same Biblical texts bears witness to the richness of those texts, the meaning of which will change and evolve just as the communities who read them grow and develop.

You will find lively and often passionate conversations about the meaning of Biblical texts in the Episcopal Church, and the role those texts play in our lives. These encounters with one another as we consider Scripture indicate how seriously we continue to treat the Bible in our lives of faith. Rather than reading it superficially, as a rulebook for example,

or dismissing it as irrelevant, we continue to wrestle with these texts for insights. Moreover, our worship is filled with Biblical references, and we typically hear from at least three different Biblical texts every Sunday morning.

Episcopalians don't make up religious faith from scratch, nor do we preserve historical expressions of that faith as if they were museum pieces. Instead, we treat our faith, including the Bible, as a *living* tradition that we make our own. This means that we are always expecting to hear something new, fresh, and life-giving from ancient texts as we interpret them for our own day. The Bible continues to surprise us precisely because God is with us, and speaking to us through these texts.

Take-Home Materials for Session Five

The work of the Gospel calls us to go out into the world, to take the learning, prayer, and spirit of the community to the people of God who are not gathered in our community. This week, as you reflect on your experience, here are some resources to focus your meditation, prayer, and study. You may have time to do all of these things during your week. You may only have time for some of the suggestions. Whatever you do, please keep the members of your small group in your thoughts as you carry out your work.

From *The Preaching Life*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass. 1993

For all the human handiwork it displays, the Bible remains a peculiarly holy book. I cannot think of any other text that has such authority over me, interpreting me faster than I can interpret it. It speaks to me not with the stuffy voice of some mummified sage but with the fresh, lively tones of someone who knows what happened to me an hour ago. Familiar passages accumulate meaning as I return to them again and again. They seem to grow during my absences from them; I am always finding something new in them I never found before, something designed to meet me where I am at this particular moment in time.

This is, I believe, why we call the Bible God's "living" word. When I think about consulting a medical book thousands of years old for some insight into my health, or an equally ancient physics book for some help with my cosmology, I understand what a strange and unparalleled claim the Bible has on me. Age does not diminish its power but increases it. When I recognize my life in its pages – when I am convinced that this story is *my* story – then I am lifted out of my own time and space and set free, liberated by the knowledge that my oddly shaped piece of life is not a fluke but fits into a much larger and more reliable puzzle. In other words, I am not an orphan. I have a community, a history, a future, a God. The Bible is my birth certificate and my family tree, but it is more; it is the living vein that connects me to my maker, pumping me the stories I need to know about who we have been to one another from the beginning of time and who we are now, and who we shall be when time is no more.

Prayer for the Week (Book of Common Prayer, Page 236)

Proper 28

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Scripture for the Week

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 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. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1-14, New Revised Standard Version

Journaling

Journaling is a good way for adults to pay attention to their faith lives. You are encouraged to journal so that you can consider the questions that develop during our time together. Like with other prayer disciplines, it often helps to pick a time to write in your journal each day, setting it aside in some way. The question to think about as you write this week appears below.

Reflection for the Week

It is often said about the Bible: "I don't really know if it happened, but I believe that it's true." What this can lead us to understand is that there is a negotiation between what is "true" and with what is "Truth." As you read the Bible this week, what is your understanding of what your reading is calling you to do, or of who it is calling you to be.