

**The Bible: God's Word to Us** (third in series)  
**2 Timothy 3:14-17 and John 1:1-4**  
**January 22, 2017 International Protestant Church of Zurich**  
**Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
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At the beginning of the New Year, I started a sermon series on what Christians believe, the basics of the Christian faith, and the series, as I have said, is going to follow the structure of the Apostles' Creed.

Sam and I are going to do this series together, and as a matter of fact he is going to take next week's sermon on "Who God Is." It will be our introduction to the first person of the Trinity – God the father.

Last week, I asked what I believe is an important question to ask close to the beginning of a series like this – namely, **How do we know? Where do we get information about God? Is it even possible for us to know who God is and what God wants or expects from us?**

And some of you will remember that last week we talked about what Christians have called General Revelation – this idea, sometimes a *controversial* idea, that God speaks to us in **history**, and in **nature**, and even in **human life**.

Psalms 19, which we read together, reminds us that **"the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge."**

When you read words like that, you think, **"Oh my, God is trying very hard to speak to us. God wants us to know him."** And of course I think that's true. God is speaking to us just about all the time, even in those moments when we think that God is distant and silent and not very communicative. God is speaking to us.

This week we are going to focus our attention on what is often called Special Revelation, which of course is the Bible, **“the written word of God.”**

If General Revelation can be controversial, then Special Revelation is certainly going to be controversial. Christians have argued for generations about how exactly to describe the Bible. There are a number of key words and phrases that have become important to us over the years, and we will get to some of them, but not all. I can't possibly say all that needs to be said in a sermon like.

One more comment before we take a look together at John chapter 1.

It's very hard to know what part of the Bible to read for a sermon like this, because the Bible doesn't very often tell us about itself. Beyond that, the Bible doesn't come with an owner's manual – a guide for reading it and understanding it.

On the other hand, the Bible often uses the phrase, **“Thus sayeth the Lord.”** Or, **“God spoke to them, saying....”** In other words, the prophets and others claim to be speaking on God's behalf or quoting what God said.

They want us to know that they aren't speaking for themselves.

And so, the Bible does claim to be authoritative. In fact, the Bible claims ultimate authority. I think it's important to see that. On page after page, the Bible demands that we pay attention. It demands that we respond. And of course it demands that we make a decision about what it says – either to accept its truth or to reject it.

It's not like the last novel I read, which was entertaining but made no claim on my life. When I finished reading it, I thought, **“That was nice,”** and then I turned out the light and went to sleep.

The Bible functions in a much different way. It makes a claim on us. And often the claim that it makes on us is so enormous, so far reaching, that we can't simply turn out the light and go to sleep.

These words from John chapter one, which I am about to read, are extraordinary. I have that feeling every time I read these words or listen to them.

Let's listen together...

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.**

**<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. <sup>14</sup> 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.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

In December, just before Christmas, I was sitting at breakfast with several of the men from this church, over at the Hauptbahnhof, and we were talking together about reading the Bible.

Imagine that ... at 7 o'clock on a dark and cold Wednesday morning.

And what we were talking about, specifically, were the attempts we have made over the years to read the Bible, in its entirety, to start at the beginning and to move through to the end, preferably in one year, although I'm never sure why one year should always be the goal.

During the conversation, we mentioned the tools that are available to us, the phone apps that send us daily reminders and that sometimes make us feel guilty, the study guides that try to make reading the Bible easier and more manageable, less daunting.

And I remember sitting there and being deeply touched by this conversation. I remember feeling gratitude that these men really wanted – with all of their responsibilities and obligations – to be good husbands and good fathers and good employees and so forth – they really wanted to be good disciples, faithful followers of Jesus.

And as a pastor, I can tell you that there is nothing more touching than that.

I know many of you participate in Bible Study Fellowship – or BSF, as everyone calls it – and of all the Bible study courses that are available, BSF has to be one of the most rigorous and demanding. You have to be “all in” in order to stay with it. Every church I have served over the years has been a host – in other words, has provided the space – for these meetings, something about which I am proud.

So, many of you, not just those men on that Wednesday morning, many of you are trying your best to be students of the Word of God, to immerse yourselves in its mysteries and its truth. And I could not be more grateful for that.

But I found myself on that Wednesday morning unable to keep quiet. This happens often to me. I knew I should let them speak, but I couldn't keep my mouth shut. And so, finally, I said, **“How do you do it? Without a little commentary to refer to, without some online help, how are you able to read this book?”**

And I even suggested to them a one-volume Bible commentary to help with the difficult words and the hard to pronounce names and the complicated geography.

So, maybe this should be the first point I make today. Reading the Bible is enormously difficult. Not just reading it, but getting something from it. The meaning does not come easily to us. It requires effort and concentration and determination. It can baffle us at times and leave us with more questions than answers.

It was written in a language – more than one language, actually – with which few of us are familiar today. Words with a very specific meaning, two or three thousand years ago, can mean something very different today.

As a young pastor one of the first tools that I acquired for my pastor’s tool box was a 10-volume set called the *Theological Dictionary of New Testament*. I was so proud of it. There were long articles on important biblical words like “covenant” and “kingdom” and so forth. (When I tried to pass along this precious tool, which cost me hundreds of U.S. dollars, to my older daughter, she said, **“It’s all available online now, Dad.”** Children are so precious.)

In any case, that leads me to say, **“How do we drill down to the Bible’s essential meaning for us, how do we read and get to God’s word to us and to our world?”**

And to that question, I would say this (and I think this is very important to hear): We need to come to Scripture with humility, with a recognition that we are not going to master it in a single day or even in single a year.

The first time I put on my running shorts and laced up my running shoes, I was not a marathoner. Far from it. The first time I picked up a camera, I was not an award-winning photographer. The first time I held my daughter in my arms, I was not about to be named **“Parent of the Year.”**

Why do we suppose that we can pick up a Bible and get it the first time we open it?

Reading the Bible – as with so much else in life, as with *everything* else in life – requires us to devote ourselves to it, to approach it with humility, to use diligence and patience, and to forgive ourselves when we are slow to understand.

Before I move on, I would say this to you: If you are serious about God and your relationship with God, wouldn't you want to devote at least as much time to reading the Bible as you devote to these other parts of your life?

If the Bible is the most important, most reliable, most authoritative way God speaks to us, all of which I happen to believe, wouldn't you want to devote yourself to it – with at least as much energy as you devote to other activities in your life?

Let's move on.

With all of the other truths I could mention this morning, I think it's critically important to mention this particular one: **The Bible points us to Jesus Christ.** If you lose sight of that, then you have lost sight of why we have a Bible.

In my home group sermon questions for this week, I asked a trick question. I apologize for this. I asked: **Do you believe in the Bible?** (knowing that most of us think we should answer “yes, of course” to that question).

But I wrote that the *correct* answer to that question is no. We believe in God. We don't believe in Moses or David or Paul. They are important to us because they point us to Jesus Christ. We read their stories and letters and histories, not so much to know them, although they are fascinating people with inspiring stories, but rather we read them to know the God who loved them and cared for them and saved them.

We sometimes forget this, but they are not the main characters of scripture. God is.

I like the Martin Luther quote about this – and I commend it to you for reflection:  
**“Scripture,”** Luther wrote, **“is the manger in which the Christ lies. As a mother goes to the cradle to find her baby, so the Christian goes to the Bible to find Jesus.”**

And then I really like this concluding line. He writes: **“Don’t let us inspect the cradle and forget to worship the baby.”**

And I probably shouldn’t say this, but I feel as though I should: Lots of people spend a lot of time inspecting the cradle. We become fascinated with the geography and the archeology and the history.

And to be honest, I have spent lots of time on those subjects, but they are not the Bible’s purpose and focus. Those subjects are interesting, I’ll grant you that, but – as Luther put it five centuries ago – **“don’t forget to worship the baby.”**

Let’s keep going. There’s a great deal to cover, and I already know that I can’t say everything this morning that – perhaps – should be said.

St. Augustine, the fourth century bishop from north Africa, was trying to explain the Bible and so he said that the holy scriptures **“are our letters from home.”**

One of my own Bible teachers wrote an article recently in which he said something similar – namely, that **“the Bible is God’s trustworthy voice that guides his children home.”**

And what they mean by that, I think, is that the Bible not only points us home – and shows us the direction in which to travel – but that the Bible reminds us about who we are. The Bible tells us our story. It tells us where home is.

When we read the Old Testament – and all of those stories about ungrateful Israelites, who are saved from Egypt, but then spend the next 40 years in the wilderness complaining about it – we are supposed to think, **“These are my people. These are my ancestors. I am descended**

**from them - with all of their good qualities and most of their bad ones as well. When I wonder who I am, I read these stories, and then I am reminded that I have a family.”**

No one in my family (that I know of) wrote a family history. That’s probably a good thing. But sometimes I am curious about where I came from. I wonder about it. Maybe you have wondered the same thing.

My mother has lots of framed photographs on the wall of her apartment, floor to ceiling, and to be honest I have no idea who most of those people are.

But every time I visit, she will carefully go through the photographs and identify each person, as though this is important information for me to have. This is your great-grandmother, whom I never met (she died on the boat from the Netherlands), this is your great uncle, and so forth.

And of course the people in those old photographs are not smiling, and they’re wearing weird clothes, and they look as though they hate the whole idea of being photographed. But they do look kind of familiar.

And when I look at those photographs, I realize that I came from somewhere. I am living out a family history. I am a Brouwer, and there were lots of Brouwers who went before me. I have a name and an identity. And I can be proud of it (mostly). I know who I am.

And that’s what the Bible does for us as well. It gives you and me a place in history. We have an identity. We know who we are. We can feel proud of our name. As the Bible tells us (this is in 1 Peter), **“once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.”**

Actually Peter says more than that. He says, **“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”**

Let's keep going. One more thought about this that I think you should know. The Bible does a lot more than make us feel good about our heritage.

John Stott, an Anglican pastor and writer (he passed away in 2011), once wrote that **“we must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency, and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior.”**

And so, the Bible not only tells us who we are and gives us an identity, which is nice, and good news, but it also has this confrontational quality.

If we're reading it right, if we are allowing it to have its way with us, then there are times, Stott says, when we should feel convicted. There are times when we should close our Bibles, set them down beside us, and think, **“Oh my, how could I have been so wrong, how could my thinking have been so confused? I thought I knew what God required of me, and now I see that God wants so much more.”**

If you have never felt completely undone while reading the Bible, if you have never broken into a cold sweat because of something you read, then ... I don't know what to say to you. I would like to feel for a pulse. Are there any brain waves?

Plus, I have a few verses from the gospels that I would like you to see. And maybe you can guess the ones I have in mind – the ones about **“denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him.”** The Sermon on the Mount also comes to mind. **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other one also.”** And there are more. Lots more.

You know, it's one thing to tell everyone what a high view of scripture you have, and what reverence you have for this book, and how some people don't really respect the Holy Word of God. It's another thing altogether to live out what it says.

The Letter of James puts it better than I ever could: **“Be doers of the word,”** he writes, **“and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup> For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup> for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”**

I hear in those words a kind of challenge, which I will leave with you today: If you are going to read the Bible (all of it in a single year), if you are going to carry it around, if you are going to have an app on your phone, all of that places a kind of obligation on you, doesn't it?

Let me ask you: what good does it do to read these words, and to say how important and authoritative they are, and then to make no attempt to live them?

May our lives be changed in the reading of God's holy Word.