

Pay Attention

March 15, 2020

Text: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

We are spending Lent talking about spiritual practices that help us walk more closely with God. Last week, we talked about worship and prayer. We talked about worship as a community practice, drawing us closer to God and to one another. We also talked about prayer as an individual practice. I challenged us be more intentional about our prayer lives. I challenged us to pray five times a day: morning, at each meal, and in the evening. This morning we turn our attention to study.

These days we hear so many voices it's hard to know when to listen and when to ignore it. Take the current COVID-19 pandemic. We can listen to speculation, rumor, and fear mongering, or we can listen to doctors, scientists and health departments.

The same is true in our walk with God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes himself as the Great Shepherd. He says that the sheep follow him

because they know his voice and listen to him. How good are we at listening to God? How do we know it's God's voice we hear and not our own ego or a tempting choice?

Theologians refer to God's voice as revelation. We speak of general or natural revelation as how God speaks to us through nature, the arts, and our human stories. We also speak of special revelation, those times when God speaks directly to us.

Living on the seacoast, we all relate to the majesty of the ocean. The way the waves crash into the rocks at Beavertail or gently lap on Town Beach. Taking a long walk, watching a meteor shower, or smiling at hummingbirds on our backyard feeders remind us of God's glorious creation. Nature reminds us that we are part of something bigger, that while we may feel insignificant in comparison to the Milky Way, we are God's creation and part of God's plan for the world. We need to pay attention to that feeling and praise God for it.

I turned 40 in Paris. I did all the things you are supposed to do – the museums, sitting at a café, walking down the Champs de Elysées, watching the Eiffel Tower light up at dusk. But I wanted to do things off the beaten path. Nearly every night, I went to a performance at an ancient church or other site. I was at

St. Chapple listening to Vivaldi's Four Seasons and I was so moved by the music and the beauty of the setting sun filtering through the stained glass windows and the fact that I was actually in Paris that I cried. At the end of the performance, a lovely older French woman asked, "Do you cry because you are sad or because the music is so beautiful?" Art can do that to us. Music, paintings, film, plays...they all speak to us on a deep level. It may not immediately strike us as a God moment, but it can be. What are we feeling? What prompted that feeling? Is there something God wants us to learn in that moment? When those feelings hit us, we need to pay attention and allow them to shape us.

Our human experience also gives us insight into God's revelation. When I was in the hospital, I had several of those. A surprise visit at a time I really needed it. The reassurance of a nurse when I was scared. Being reminded that I was being prayed for when I couldn't connect to God myself. They were all reminders that God was with me, that hope was present even when I couldn't see it. I'm sure you've had similar experiences. We need to pay attention to those and how God is offering the grace we need.

I think we've all had this experience: a gut sense to call someone or go to the hospital to visit someone we didn't even know was admitted. Every time we

pay attention to the tug, we find we can offer love and hope when it is needed. Every time. God's special revelation is often quiet but steady. Other times it's more like a lightning bolt, what I call being hit with God's 2x4. No matter how we experience it, we know it when it happens. The question is whether we respond. God uses special revelation to call us, to urge us, to encourage us, to use us. When we feel that nudge, we need to pay attention.

Now all of this is interesting but perhaps you remember that I said we were talking about study this morning. What does God's revelation have to do with study? Well, I'm glad you asked.

Throughout the Gospels, it's clear that Jesus knew the Torah, the first five chapters in what we now call the Old Testament. From the Mount of Beatitudes to the cross, Jesus quoted Torah from memory. We think Jesus came up with the Great Commandment: Love God and love one another. Truth is, he drew on two passages from the Torah and put them together.

In our Epistle lesson from 2 Timothy, the early church was advised to study scripture as they grow in faith. Scripture is inspired by God and was given to us as a teacher. The fullest revelation of who God is came when Jesus walked the earth:

what he taught, how he lived, what he promised. And scripture is the best source we have to see who Jesus was and still is.

Our approach to scripture should be the same as our approach to revelation. We should enter into reading scripture prayerfully. Ask God to reveal the message you are to hear. We can read the same passage in our 20s and again in our 60s and it will speak to us in different ways based on our life experience. That's why life-long Bible study is so important.

Like worship, study is both communal and personal. Studying scripture together opens us up to different points of view. Ten people in a group study can have ten different interpretations of the same passage. With a mature faith, we can listen to other possibilities without it shaking our core. It can help us grow.

Personal study is also essential. There are several ways to approach personal study. There are study guides that take us through the Bible in a year with assigned reading every day. The lectionary takes us through most of the Bible in three years. Study bibles are helpful because they offer commentary from theologians and historians. They provide clues to the context in which the passage was written which is important to our understanding.

Once we pray to have our eyes opened to what God wants us to learn, we can answer questions to aid in our understanding. For example, we can ask what does this passage say about God, what does it say about humanity, and what does it say about the relationship between God and humanity. Or we can ask what this passage meant to the original audience and what does it say to us now. These sorts of questions help deepen our understanding, especially with difficult passages.

Last week I asked that we begin to deepen our prayer life by praying five times a day. This morning, I'm asking us to read five passages of scripture every day. You could begin with Mark, the first Gospel written, and take it five verses at a time. You could read a passage from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Letters just like we do in church then on the fifth day, read a passage that you know well to see if you have new understanding. In my experience, the more I read Scripture the more I want to read.

Reading scripture on a regular basis helps us walk more closely with God. With an open mind and heart, God will reveal new understanding, deeper meaning, and a greater connection. So if you do not currently spend time each day in study, I encourage you to start. With limits on our daily activities, now is

the perfect time to focus on prayer and study. Even with COVID-19, it is still lent.

Let's use this time to grow our faith.