

Words matter. I'm sorry. I forgive you. I love you. Do you hear the words that are coming out of my mouth? Every week, we respond to the scripture reading with the response that you said just a few moments ago, "This is the word of God, for the people of God, thanks be to God."

What does it mean when we say that the Bible is the word of God? Today, we are going to take a closer look at that question, continuing our series taking a closer look at the scriptures and what power that they might continue to have for our lives today. As United Methodists, part of what we believe that when we say the the Bible is the word of God, is that we believe that the Bible reveals God's word through the words of human beings, as inspired by the Holy Spirit. The scriptures are both human and divine. They were written by particular people at a particular time and place, and this shapes the text. However, we also believe that the Bible is inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit and contains God's very words for us. It is the book, one that is distinct from all others.

One of the key verses in the Bible that helps us consider what it means when we say that the scripture is inspired by God is from 2 Timothy. I just want to read that verse again. "Every scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character."

What does the author mean by every scripture? What was the author talking about here? You remember that at the time that 2 Timothy was written, the gospels hadn't been recorded yet. They hadn't been written down. Acts had not been written yet. The author here was most likely referring to the Hebrew Bible, and yet there was some disagreement about what books should be included, and as we read it today, we indeed look at these words as referring to the entire scriptures. It would have been easier, of course, if Paul would have just listed out here, what are the scriptures? So we could say, "Well, these are them that he's talking about."

But they aren't listed. We don't have a list of what, specifically, the author was referring to. This is a broad statement in which the author is sharing an experience of the holy writings, these scriptures that are useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character. Absolutely. These are great ways to describe the Bible. This is true for this text. But what does it mean that these scriptures are inspired by God? The Greek word that is translated in this translation as inspired may actually have been invented by the author, by Paul. As far as fellows can tell, this word that's used here did not exist in the Greek language before it was written. Paul is the only one who uses it in the entire New Testament, and it's used only here. The word in Greek is theopneustos. It's literally two words, theos, which means God, and pneustos, which means breathe, or breath. So God's breath, or God's breathed these scriptures, is translated in this text as inspired.

Paul doesn't exactly tell us what that means, and there's a pretty wide variety of ways that we could understand this phrase. One way to think about this phrase is to think about our own breath. We breathe to sustain our life. It's something that we need. Our physical bodies need to breathe. We also use a breath to speak and communicate to other people. And I think that perhaps both of these ways are helpful in thinking about what the scriptures are. What it means for them to be God's words as it is God breathed. As words that we speak with our breath contain what we want to communicate with someone else, so the Bible contains what God wants to communicate with us. As breath sustains the life of our body, so God's word sustains the life of our soul.

We can get a better sense of this by looking at how the word of God, or God's word, is used in the Bible itself. The phrase, "word of God," or, "God's word," shows up 40 times in the entire Bible, Old and New

Testaments. And the phrase, "the word of the Lord," is found about 260 times. And very few times are these phrases used to refer to a book. Instead, in the scriptures, this phrase is most often used to refer to a message from God. When we read about the story of John the Baptist in the gospel according to Luke, the story tells us that God's word came to John in the wilderness. Now, what does that mean? Did a Bible drop from Heaven? Did a book fall from the skies? Well, no. It doesn't mean that. It meant that he had an impulse and a word from God that he was to preach repentance to the people. So John began to preach repentance and baptizing them to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.

In the gospels, Jesus is constantly preaching the word of God. In Luke, when Jesus is along the edge of the sea of Galilee, we read that the crowd pressed in around Him to hear God's word. Most of the time, when Jesus is preaching, He didn't begin with a passage of scripture. One of the only sermons that Jesus preached that began with a Biblical text was when He preached in the synagogue in his home town in Nazareth, and it begins with Isaiah, where He begins, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has appointed me to preach good news to the poor."

Do you remember that? After He was done with that sermon, the people dragged Him out of town to throw Him off a cliff. It didn't go so well that time around. Instead, most of the time, when Jesus is preaching the word of God, He tells a story, like this. The kingdom of God is like a father that has two sons. One of the sons went to Him and said, "Father, give me my share of the estate."

And he does. Then he goes to a far-off country and he blows it all in wild living, and he finds himself at the lowest of the low places and he realizes, "Even my father's servants have food enough, and here I am starving to death," so he decides he's going to go back and to say, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you. Please let me be like one of your hired hands."

But the father sees him while he's still a long ways off, and filled with compassion and love, he runs to him and says, "Welcome back. Let's throw a party and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found."

But the older brother didn't really like how that went. He says, "Dad, listen. I've stayed with you all these years, and you haven't even given me a goat to celebrate with my friends."

And he says, "Son, all that I have is yours. We had to celebrate, because your brother, my son who was lost, who was gone for good, who was dead and we never thought we'd see him again, he is alive."

This is the way that Jesus most often shared the word of God. By telling stories that help us understand the power and the depths of God's love and what it's like to live as a part of God's kingdom. In the book of Acts, we read about people accepting the word of God. Which means most often that they received and they believe the great message that God has for us in Jesus Christ. This message that they received as the word of God is the good news found and proclaimed by Jesus. Jesus is the definitive, inerrant, infallible word of God.

We see this clearly in the gospel according to John. In the first chapter, verses 1 and 14, where it says this, "In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God and the word was God. The word became flesh and made His home among us. We have seen His glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

The truth about God, God's desire to be revealed and God's will for all of creation became flesh in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the definitive word of God. When God wanted to speak clearly in human history, God didn't dictate a book. God sent Jesus. When Jesus lived among us, He didn't write a book either. He preached and healed. He ministered, suffered, died, and rose from the dead. And when Jesus was raised from the dead, He didn't tell His disciples to write a book either. Instead, He tells them how to live. He shares it in Matthew 28, "Jesus came here and spoke to them. 'I've received all authority in Heaven and on Earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I, myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.'"

We see the clearest picture of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the word of God by which all else is measured, and we see the clearest picture of Jesus in the Bible. This paints a picture of God, it tells the story of God's love from beginning to end. This book shapes our life. So we come again to 2 Timothy, this time one verse earlier in 2 Timothy 3:15. "Since childhood, you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus."

The good news is that the Bible contains God's word and all things necessary for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. So this week, I invite you to take the next step in your reading of the Bible. And it may be that you never open the Bible on your own, and that's okay. Maybe the next step for you would be to download the app on your phone, or to find a Bible and open it up. It may be that you read the Bible every day, and that taking the next step for you would mean extra engagement with commentaries, with scholars and resources, or sharing with others what you find here in this text and what it means for you.

When you read the Bible, listen for God's word. God is still speaking through these words in ways that are powerful and life-giving. Know that Jesus Christ is the word of God, and that the Bible contains all things necessary for salvation through faith in God and Jesus Christ. The Bible is indeed the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Will you pray with me?

Oh God, we give you thanks for the way that you speak in our lives. For the text of the Bible that shows us life and light and points the way to Jesus. For your son Jesus, most of all, we give you thanks. For His life and death and resurrection. We ask that the power of the resurrection might be made real in our lives, that we might follow after you, that we might look at this book to shape how we live and act and treat one another. Oh God, we offer ourselves to you in Jesus' name. Amen.