

GOD'S WORD
Psalm 119:105-112
John 1:1-5
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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This morning's Old Testament reading invites us to consider only seven verses out of the longest chapter in the Bible. In many ways, I believe just one of these seven verses (out of a total of 176) pretty much sums up the essence of Psalm 119.

Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path..." (Psalm 119:105)

In the ancient world lamps were nothing like the ones we have today. The clay oil lamps used back then only gave enough light to help you stumble through the dark without falling on your face.

Like everyone else we occasionally lose our electrical power at our house reminding me once again how much we take our modern conveniences for granted. The minutes immediately after the lights went out we'll stumble around looking for candles. (Our flashlight's batteries always seem to be out too.) Finally, grasping my precious candle while carefully maneuvering my way around furniture and up and down the stairs, I suddenly have a new appreciation for our pre modern ancestors who didn't have the luxury of electric lights. Unlike today's electric light bulb which can instantaneously illuminate a whole room, a candle only lights a few feet in circumference around you; beyond that, darkness.

When you're stumbling around in the dark, the Psalmist's declaration, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path," gives a new appreciation for what the Psalmist was talking about. God's word is like candlelight giving you only enough light to take one step at a time in the dark. It's a spot on metaphor for walking forward in faith, trusting God will give you just enough light to take the next step into the unknown.

But what does the Psalmist mean when he says, "Your 'WORD' is a lamp to my feet?" Every Sunday when we read either the Old or New Testament lessons, we preface it by saying "Hear the word of the Lord." But what do we mean when we say "the word of the Lord?"

Your immediate answer may be, "God's word is the Bible." But is God's word the Bible or, is God's Word found in the Bible? Another way of putting it, is God's Word the Bible itself or does God's Word emerge from the pages of the scriptures?

One of the ongoing controversies splitting Christians into at least two camps is over our understanding of the scriptures. For some Christians, the Bible is absolutely infallible, in other words the Bible is meant to be taken absolutely literally. As far as

these folks are concerned the earth was created in six 24 hour days, the universe is only four thousand years old, and Moses actually split the Red Sea in two, à la Cecil B. DeMille.

I respect people who hold these faith positions, but I also respectfully disagree with them. Instead I appreciate what the late, great 20th century theologian Karl Barth said about the Bible, “I take the scriptures far too seriously to take them literally.”

I’m sure the fundamentalist would reply, “How could he say that? If you don’t take the entire Bible literally you’ll undermine the Bible’s authority. You can’t cherry pick what stories are true and what passages are metaphorical. People will get confused and their faith will be imperiled.”

I would reply, “Why? Why should that be? Why should a Christian’s faith in God, let alone the authority of scripture, be undermined by anything other than a literal interpretation of the Bible?”

Case in point: the miracle of the Red Sea. I personally have no doubt God, if he wanted to, could suspend the natural law and empower Moses to divide the sea in two to provide the Hebrews an exodus, a way of escape from Pharaoh’s avenging army. But I’m also open to the possibility that the real miracle of the Exodus was simply in God’s timing. Meteorologists have documented a phenomenon in that part of the world, a high wind in tandem with a low tide causing the waters to recede and give way to dry land. Isn’t it possible at the critical moment, this is what happened on that fateful day and God’s miraculous timing caused the waters to recede and then return just in the nick of time?

Having said that, let me ask you something. Doesn’t the possibility that God’s timing his manipulation of events that naturally happen instead of the Cecil B. DeMille sensational water works display, make this story more believable and accessible to us today? Another question to ponder, if all these fantastic stories of God intervening and suspending the natural law 4,000 years ago really happened, why don’t we experience similar fantastic situations today?

Anyway the Exodus story in the Hebrew Scriptures of their escape from slavery and their reidentification as God’s Chosen People is for the Jews the seminal event in salvation history. Scholars universally believe the earliest Psalm, attributed to Moses’ sister Miriam, celebrated this display of God’s sovereignty over his creation.

“Sing to the Lord.

I will sing to the Lord, for he

has triumphed gloriously

horse and rider (Pharaoh’s cavalry)

he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my might

and he has become my salvation.”

(Exodus 15:1-2)

So, in my mind, whatever happened that day, those who were there, those who experienced it, were indelibly transformed by this history changing event. How it happened isn't as important as the fact that something wonderful and mysterious happened that glorified God and forever changed human history.

At the same time the resurrection of Christ on Easter morning is the Christians' pivotal event in salvation history. Again, I personally believe in Christ's bodily resurrection. I believe with all my being God raised Jesus from the dead. But as I say almost every Easter morning, even if there were multiple television cameras broadcasting live to the world Jesus stepping out of the tomb along with impartial scientists with impeccable credentials taking the Risen Christ's DNA to compare with the Crucified Christ's DNA and the tests came back positive, there'd still be skeptics who'd say, "OK Christians, you proved your case, Jesus was bodily raised from the dead. So what? What does it all have to do with me and my so called salvation?"

My point is the authority of the scriptures doesn't come from a literal interpretation it comes from God, mysteriously revealing himself through the ancient narratives, poems, letters and histories that contain the truth that sets us free to know, love and serve God and each other.

So maybe those of us who believe in God and have submitted to Christ and hold fast to his Gospel should be sensitive to other Christians whose understanding of the scriptures differs from our own and instead focus on what we hold in common: God's revealed infallible Word is Christ himself.

"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 were created 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." (John 1:1-5)

Christ himself is the Word of God. Christ himself is Christianity. The great Reformer Martin Luther's word on the subject is instructive, "The Bible is the manger in which the Christ child is to be found." Maybe the Bible isn't always factual, but it's completely true. Christ, the Word, speaks to us through the scriptures and sets us free. God speaks and the Bible becomes God's word to us, the only rule of faith and practice.

"The word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light to my path."

(Psalm 119:105)

On this we can agree: the Bible, the authoritative and inspired witness of God's Word, is the most important document known to humanity. The Bible witnesses to Christ, in both the Old and New Testaments (Christ is concealed in the Old Testament and revealed in the New). That Word was with God from the beginning, up to the present time and way into the future.

God speaks to us through the Bible, telling us we are created in God's image and given a divine purpose. The Bible speaks and we are promised God wants our friendship. The Bible speaks of God's power overwhelming and overcoming the puny power and principalities of this present age. The Bible speaks of God's forgiveness, cleansing us from our sin and preparing us for eternity.

Way before God said, "Let there be light." God was determined the darkness wouldn't hide his truth even though we instinctively love the dark more than the light. Perhaps when we all agree to focus on God's light confounding our darkness, God's unrelenting search until he finds and brings all his children home, maybe the battle over theologically correct language will give way to the joyful, universal celebration of the Word becoming flesh to live among us full of grace and truth.

The Bible is certainly God's gift to us, but the greater gift is his Word, his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the lamp unto my feet and the light to my path. So open your eyes and let his light bring his truth into your life, and you will see things new and wonderful, around and within you, you never saw before.