

Message for January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-9

Luke 4:16-22

An interesting article appeared online last fall that sought to answer the question of which is the most stolen book in the world. It was noted that stolen books tend to fall into certain categories. One is books that are on school reading lists such as Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms". Another category are books that people feel embarrassed to buy. Coffee table books are often targeted as well, while yet another category are books that make it on to the best seller lists. Which book however is *the* most stolen one of all? Whether it be from a bookstore, a library, or more likely from a church or hotel room, it is the Bible.

This may come as a bit of a surprise, but perhaps it shouldn't. The Bible is after all the world's most universal book. Indeed it is estimated that there are about five billion copies of the Bible in the world today. The second most common book by the way is Mao Zedong's "Little Red Book" with about one billion copies. These numbers certainly put the number of copies sold of books on the best seller's list in perspective, such as the Harry Potter series coming in at a couple of hundred million copies. A John Snider touches on the Bible's appeal in this little passage entitled "Universal Book".

"The Bible is literature. History, poetry, prophesy, philosophy, theology, humour, drama, tragedy, strategy, love tales, war tales, laws, songs, sermons, warnings, prayers, all are here. Was there ever such a literature? The Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city. It starts with a morning followed by a night and ends with a day that shall know no night. It breaks the silence with 'In the beginning' and it hushes the universe to sleep with 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all'."

Truly Snider is right; the Bible is a wonderful piece of literature. It is in fact one of the foundations upon which our western civilization is built. For almost two thousand years our values and greatest music, art and literature have been inspired by the Bible. But while the Bible is a wonderful piece of literature, it is of course something much more. It is also God's Word and as such it has long

played a living and vital role in the life of God's people. Indeed both of today's scripture passages illustrate the power and the impact of the Bible.

In today's first scripture passage Nehemiah tells us that the Babylonian exile was over and God's people were busy rebuilding their shattered homeland. The fields were overgrown, the cities lay in ruins and Solomon's great temple had been utterly destroyed. There was so much work to be done and so few resources. Quite predictably the people felt overwhelmed and started to get discouraged, and the country's leaders realized this.

One day all of the people in Jerusalem, from the youngest to the oldest, were ordered to gather at the Watergate. Ezra, who was the chief religious leader, along with six of his aides mounted a large platform that overlooked the crowd. Ezra then started reading from the first five books of the Bible and as he did so his helpers translated what he was saying into Aramaic. This had to be done because the Bible was written in Hebrew, a language that most of the people no longer understood. All day long Ezra read and his helpers translated while the people sat and listened. But as they sat and listened something strange started to happen. The people started to weep; at first it was just a few of them and then a few more until finally the whole crowd was weeping. But why? Did they weep for joy at this reminder that God loved them and was with them? Did they weep for all the wrongs that they had done? Or did they perhaps weep because while they may have given up on God, God had not given up on them? The truth is that we don't know why they wept. All we do know is that such was the impact of hearing the Bible that they not only cried but also returned to the rebuilding of their shattered land with a renewed sense of hope and vigor. That however wasn't the only time that hearing the Bible had a powerful impact on God's people; all we have to do is remember the event described in today's New Testament passage.

One Saturday morning early in his ministry Jesus returned home to Nazareth. As was the custom in small villages without a rabbi, a member of the congregation was expected to lead the worship service and that included preaching the sermon. That morning Jesus agreed to do so and his sermon text was a passage from Isaiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to
preach the good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of

sight for the blind.

To release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of God's favour."

This scripture passage was commonly understood to be a prediction about the coming of the Messiah and in the sermon that followed, Jesus said that that text was really about him. Even though the people present at the service that morning had known him all his life, he was the one! He was the Christ!

The congregation was amazed when they heard this but even so, they believed Jesus. Then however, Jesus went on to talk about what type of messiah he was. He had come for the sake of everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike, because God loves and cares about everyone. As a sermon illustration, Jesus told the Bible story of when there had been a famine and the prophet Elijah had miraculously fed a foreign woman and her son but no one else. Or, referring to another story, one that took place in the days of the prophet Elisha when so many people were stricken with leprosy, the only person that Elisha healed was a foreigner. Everything that Jesus said in his sermon was the Biblical truth but even so, the congregation didn't like it. Unlike their ancestors hundreds of years earlier, they didn't weep when they heard what the Bible had to say, instead they were transformed into a murderous mob and quite literally tried to kill the preacher! They did so because they could not stand the thought that the Bible did not say what they thought it should but instead challenged some of their most deeply held beliefs and prejudices. And such is the power of the Bible. In days gone by it has instructed, challenged, and filled people with comfort, fear and even anger. Does the Bible however still have such a powerful impact on us today?

One has to wonder; it has been estimated for example that only nine of every one hundred people who claim to be Christian ever even glance at a Bible once during any given year. But why is this? Sometimes people say that they are just too busy to find the time to look at a Bible while yet others, trying to justify their lack of interest, say that the Bible has lost its meaning and relevance. Sometimes people say this simply because they want to be free to do whatever they want, and the last thing they want to be told is that what they are doing is wrong because the Bible says so. Other people justify their lack of interest by putting the Bible down. They say that the Bible is ancient history and a product of its time. It may have had meaning and relevance to people long

ago, but it certainly doesn't for us living in the modern technological age that we do. To a point this is true because the Bible is a product of its time and that is why we have to study it.

When we read our Bibles we have to ask ourselves; what was God saying to his people back then and what is God saying to us today? If we ignore the Bible then we are left with both a religion and a god of our own making; there is no divine will, rather just our own. Indeed what do we honestly expect when we open our Bibles? Do we really expect to hear God's Word and his message to us? Do we expect, or at least hope to be moved, challenged, or comforted? Or do we expect nothing at all? If we expect the Bible to nourish us, comfort us and guide us, then it can and will. If however we never open a Bible or expect nothing from it when we do, then it will give us nothing in return. Perhaps a Stanley Jones says it best in a little passage entitled "How to get the most out of the Bible". It goes:

"Come to the Word expectantly.
Come, surrendering to the truths here revealed.
Come, expecting to use the truths here revealed.
Come unhurriedly.
Come to it, even if nothing apparently comes from your coming."

We may take it for granted but the Bible truly is the most marvellous book ever written. When it was read to the people gathered by the Watergate so long ago, they were moved to tears and returned to rebuilding both their lives and their country with a renewed sense of hope and vigor. When Jesus proclaimed the Bible's truths about himself in Nazareth, the people were filled with a murderous rage. Truly while we may take it for granted, the Bible really is a tremendous book but what impact does it have on us? What role and influence are we, who as Presbyterians were once known as 'the people of the Book', prepared to let this book, that is far more than just a book, have on us?

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, earlier this week we were reminded of your power and glory when we experienced the largest snowfall in years. We give you thanks

for the wondrous beauty, and variety of your creation; a creation that proclaims your presence and reality.

We thank you for revealing yourself in the person of your Son. To know your Son is to know you. To follow your Son's teaching and example is to follow yours. We thank you for the life, now and forevermore, that he has made possible for us.

We thank you for revealing yourself through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, active in our lives, in the lives of others, and in the world around us.

Today we especially give you thanks for revealing yourself through that special book we call the Bible. The Bible is so many different things but above all it was your Word to people in days gone by and it is still your Word to us today. Help us we pray to discipline ourselves to read it, understand it, and to learn from it.

We pray this day for everyone who is traveling through life oblivious to you, not realizing who and what they are missing.

As the pandemic continues, we pray for all who are ill, all who mourn, and all who for whatever reason are unable to be with loved ones. We pray for everyone who feels so lonely and isolated. We remember families and friendships torn asunder because of the stresses of the present time. We pray for all who feel so overworked and even overwhelmed, and especially those whose task it is to care and provide for others.

We remember and pray this day for all those devastated by the tragic fires in Brampton and Toronto this past week.

We remember the people of Tonga after the destructive volcanic eruption last week, and we remember too the people of Ukraine, praying that a crisis may be averted and that cooler heads may prevail.

In this world of change and turmoil, we pray for the sake of your church both near and far. Grant that she, that we, may truly be your Son's body here on earth doing his work. May we all, in our own unique ways, be fitting instruments of your will, secure in our knowledge of your love and forgiveness when we fail to live up to your expectations and even our own.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

