

“Through the Bible in Twenty Minutes”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, April 13, 2008

Text: Psalm 119:105-122 II Timothy 3:10-17 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, illumine our minds and prepare our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit to receive your truth for us today. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

IMPORTANCE OF THE BIBLE

An elementary school student prepared a book report on the entire Bible. This is what he wrote:

In the beginning, which occurred near the start, there was nothing but God, darkness, and some gas. The Bible says, “The Lord thy God is one, but I think He must be a lot older than that. Anyway, God said, “Give me a light!” and someone did. Then God made the world. He split the Adam and made Eve. Adam and Eve were naked, but they weren’t embarrassed because mirrors hadn’t been invented yet. Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating one bad apple, so they were driven from the Garden of Eden. I’m not sure what they were driven in though, because they didn’t have cars.

Adam and Eve had a son, Cain, who hated his brother as long as he was Abel. Pretty soon all of the early people died, except for Methuselah, who lived to be like a million or something. One of the next important people was Noah, who was a good guy, but one of his kids was kind of a Ham. Noah built a large boat and put his family and

some animals on it. He asked some other people to join him, but they said they would have to take a rain check.

After Noah came Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob was more famous than his brother, Esau, because Esau sold Jacob his birthmark in exchange for some pot roast. Jacob had a son named Joseph who wore a really loud sports coat. Another important Bible guy is Moses, whose real name was Charlton Heston. Moses led the Israel Lights out of Egypt and away from the evil Pharaoh after God sent ten plagues on Pharaoh's people. These plagues included frogs, mice, lice, bowels, and no cable. God fed the Israel Lights every day with manicotti. Then he gave them His Top Ten Commandments. These include don't lie, cheat, smoke, dance, or covet your neighbor's stuff. Oh yeah, I just thought of one more: Humor thy father and thy mother.

One of Moses' best helpers was Joshua who was the first Bible guy to use spies. Joshua fought the battle of Geritol, and the fence fell over on the town. After Joshua came David. He became king by killing a giant with a slingshot. He had a son named Solomon, who had about 300 wives with 500 porcupines. My teacher says he was wise, but that doesn't sound very wise to me.

After Solomon, there were a bunch of major league prophets. One of these was Jonah, who was swallowed by a big whale and then barfed on the shore. There were also some minor league prophets, but I guess we don't have to worry about them.

After the Old Testament came the New Testament. Jesus is the star of the New Testament. He was born in Bethlehem in a barn. (I wish I had been born in a barn, too, because my mom is always saying to me, "Close the door! Were you born in a barn?" It would be nice to say, "As a matter of fact, I was.")

During his life, Jesus had many arguments with sinners like the Pharisees and the Republicans. Jesus also had twelve opossums. The worst one was Judas Asparagus.

Judas was so evil that they named a terrible vegetable after him. Jesus was a great man. He healed many leopards, and even preached to some Germans on the Mount. But the Republicans and all those guys put Jesus on trial before Pontius the Pilot. Pilot didn't stick up for Jesus. He just washed his hands instead.

Anyway, Jesus died for our sins, then came back to life again. He went up to heaven but will be back at the end of the Aluminum. His return is foretold in the book of Revolution. The End

The Bible is the most important book in the history of the world, yet many of us know so little about it. The Bible has been atop the bestseller list ever since Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press, ran the first copies some 500 years ago. Since then, it has been translated into more languages and sold more copies than any other book in history. Recent statistics indicate that over 150,000 new Bibles are sold or given away each day!

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist societies in England 250 years ago, once said about the Bible, "O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book."

Studying the Bible equips us to be effective and faithful followers of Christ. The psalmist proclaims to God, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105)

The Apostle Paul wrote his younger helper Timothy that the Bible instructs us 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." (3:16) Studying the Bible enables us to be proficient, equipped for every good work. If we are ignorant of the Bible, we cannot be effective, faithful followers of Christ.

Dr. Albert Outler once said, “The Bible is one coherent narrative from Genesis to Revelation. It is the story of what God has been doing on earth, is doing, and will always be doing in and for his people. It tells what he has created and designed us for, and what he rightfully expects from us, and what we can count on from him. It helps us to become truly and fully human. As such, the Bible belongs to all of us.”

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE

Although we tend to think of the Bible as a single work, the people who brought these books together understood it for what it really is – a collection of works by a variety of authors. There are 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books for a total of 66 books.

The Bible includes legal texts, history, poetry, philosophy, hymns, personal correspondence, and prophecies. The people who wrote the biblical books were a diverse group. They include shepherds, kings, farmers, priests, poets, scribes, prophets and fishermen. There is also quite a moral diversity among the biblical authors, from morally upstanding citizens to morally challenged individuals. Among those contributing to the Bible, we find traitors, embezzlers, adulterers, murderers and even ancient IRS workers!

At its heart the Bible tells the story of how God is in relationship with his creation – most particularly people. God initiates this relationship through a series of covenants.

The Bible begins with the “book of beginnings” – Genesis. It describes the creation of the cosmos. Then it focuses on the first two people, Adam and Eve. They start out in Paradise, but end up “East of Eden” – literally. The reason for this move is that a serpent convinces Adam and Eve to disobey God’s command not to eat the forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve’s offspring, Cain and Abel, have the first sibling rivalry. Cain murders Abel and becomes a fugitive. This downward spiral continues as the world becomes so filled with violence that God sends a flood to destroy it. The only survivors

are a man named Noah and his family, along with the animals they bring on the ark that Noah builds to ride out the flood.

Although given a fresh start, humans again start down the wrong moral path by deciding to build a city and giant tower “whose top reaches into the heavens.” It becomes the tower of Babel when God disperses the inhabitants of this city by confusing their language.

Then God chooses a man named Abram whom He renames Abraham. God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising him that his descendants will become a great nation and that through them, “all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” Then comes a fascinating family history. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, miraculously have a son, Isaac, when they are in their 90s. Isaac and Rebekah give birth to Jacob, whose 12 sons become the progenitors of the 12 tribes of Israel. One of these sons, Joseph, cares for Jacob and his brothers when a famine causes them to move to Egypt.

Generations come and go. The Egyptian king, Pharaoh enslaves the Hebrew people who are living in Egypt. God calls Moses to deliver the Hebrew people from their bondage. In the most significant event of the Old Testament, Moses leads the Hebrew people out of Egypt in the Exodus. This miraculous deliverance is remembered by the Passover feast. The Hebrew people travel to Mount Sinai, where God gives his people the Law, which is succinctly embodied in the Ten Commandments.

After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the Hebrew people enter the Promised Land of Abraham under the leadership of Joshua. The Hebrews begin to settle in the land. After Joshua’s death, their moral resolve weakens. The Israelites begin engaging in the forbidden practices of their neighbors, including worshiping other gods. Various neighboring nations harass and oppress the Hebrews. When the Israelites repent and ask for help, God sends deliverers known as “judges” who defeat Israel’s enemies and initiate a period of peace.

After a period of years, the people ask the last judge, Samuel, to anoint a king for them. Reluctantly, Samuel anoints the first king of Israel, Saul. Then God appoints a new king, a shepherd boy named David, who had defeated a giant named Goliath. David is a man “after God’s own heart.” Yet he commits adultery with Bathsheba and conspires to murder her husband, Uriah. In one of the most dramatic moments in scripture, the prophet Nathan confronts the king with his actions, and David confesses his sin. After David’s death, his son, Solomon, becomes king. God gives Solomon exceptional wisdom to rule his vast kingdom. Solomon’s crowning achievement is the construction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Shortly after Solomon’s death, around 925 BC, the ten northern tribes of the kingdom secede, forming their own kingdom called Israel. The southern kingdom remains under the sovereignty of David’s descendants and takes the name Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel has a series of mostly evil leaders and only lasts until 721 BC, when it is conquered by the powerful Assyrians.

The southern kingdom of Judah lasts until 586 BC, when it is conquered by the Babylonians, another powerful nation from Mesopotamia. It is one of the saddest chapters in Israelite history. When the Babylonians conquer Judah, they destroy Jerusalem, including Solomon’s Temple, and send its most important inhabitants into exile.

The Jews live in the Babylonian Exile until 539 BC, at which time the Persians conquer the Babylonians and give the Jews permission to return to their land. Enough Hebrew people do make the return journey to reconstitute a Jewish community in the former territory of Judah. The Jews eventually rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. Under the leadership of Ezra, a priest, and Nehemiah, the governor of Judea, the Jews rededicate themselves to obey the Law of Moses.

The story of the Hebrew Bible concludes with promises of future blessings for the Jews in their homeland under a king from the line of David who will come to deliver

them from their enemies. Unlike King David, this new king will establish a kingdom of justice and peace that will be for all people and will never end.

A group of prophets describe the future blessings of the Jews. Three major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and a dozen minor prophets speak for God.

Another group of writings, known as Wisdom Literature, encourage the Hebrew people to pursue wisdom and righteousness and continue in their worship of God. These writings include wise sayings in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The book of Job shows us what happens when bad things happen to good people. Song of Solomon contains erotic love poetry. The Psalms, all 150 of them, is the magnificent songbook of the Bible.

The Apocrypha is a part of the Bible for approximately two-thirds of the world's Christians. It is part of the Catholic and Orthodox Old Testament, but it is not a part of the Bible for us Protestants. It is a group of 14 books of history, poetry, philosophy and theology which are set in the time period of several centuries between Ezra and Nehemiah and the New Testament.

A number of years ago Hampstead United Methodist Church hosted an ecumenical Thanksgiving service. Father Casimir Sabol, priest of St. Jude the Apostle Catholic Church, was the preacher. One of the scripture lessons that evening was from the Wisdom of Solomon. After the service, our parishioners commented to me that they had never heard of that book. The reason was that it was part of the Apocrypha. They could not find it in our Bible.

When the New Testament begins, Judea and the lands formerly known as Israel are under the rule of the Roman Empire. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell us about the life of Jesus. They recount Jesus' humble beginning as a baby born in a stable in the little town of Bethlehem and his upbringing in the smaller town of Nazareth in Galilee. Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. He is tempted by Satan.

Jesus claims to be the promised Davidic king or Messiah, literally “the anointed one.” Messiah is translated *Christos* in Greek, from which the name Christ derives. The gospels tell about the ministry of Jesus: his teachings, healing, compassion, and forgiveness of sins. They also describe his conflicts with the Jewish religious leaders. Because the Jewish and Roman leaders perceive Jesus as a threat to their authority, Jesus is tried, condemned and crucified.

The gospels also proclaim that Jesus rose again from the dead. Jesus’ resurrection demonstrates that he has defeated sin and death, and that one day God’s kingdom of righteousness and justice will be established on earth forever.

In the meantime the promised Holy Spirit arrives on Pentecost. Jesus followers begin to spread his teachings. Soon thousands of people become followers of Jesus and his teachings. The Book of Acts is a history of the early Church. It describes the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and throughout the Roman Empire. It highlights the ministry of Peter, a disciple of Jesus and a leader in the early Church. It also describes the missionary journeys of Paul. Paul is a one-time persecutor of Christians. Through extensive traveling and letter writing, Paul founds churches throughout the borders of the Mediterranean Sea.

Many of the letters of the Apostle Paul to individual churches, and to people, such as Timothy and Titus, are found in the New Testament. Other letters included in the New Testament are written by Peter, John, James and Jude. There is one letter specifically addressed to the Hebrews. It shows how Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

The growth of Christianity begins to be perceived as a threat to the Roman Empire because its followers give their allegiance to Jesus and not to Caesar. Intense persecution breaks out against Christians. The character of this persecution is described in the Book of Revelation. The author of this book envisions a day when God will vindicate those who die as martyrs by overthrowing the kingdoms of this world and

establishing the Kingdom of God. In the end Paradise will be restored. There will be “a new heaven and a new earth.”

With the Book of Revelation, the Bible concludes. What an unforgettable journey it is! I think we finished it in 20 minutes!

As we learn how God has acted in relationship with his people throughout the centuries, we discover how God is acting in 2008 in our lives. The Bible is amazingly contemporary. Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “When you read God’s Word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, ‘It is talking to me, and about me.’”

The Bible is a precious treasure. It tells us God’s will for our lives. In a troubling and confusing world, it is a beacon to the very best way to live. I encourage you to study it, to meditate upon it, and to obey its words for us all.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, thank you for providing us with the Bible. You have inspired men of old to record your witness in their lives and your instructions for how we are to live – in relationship with you and in relationship with one another. We praise you for your desire to be in covenant with us, your children. Help us to study your Word, so that we can best know how to love you and how to love our neighbor. We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.