

## “READING THE BIBLE AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME”

January 2, 2011 – Epiphany Sunday  
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***“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”  
Psalm 119: 105***

From May 19 to June 6 of 2010 the Pew Forum for Religion in American Life, an arm of the Pew Research Foundation, conducted a nationwide poll of 3,412 Americans age 18 and older, on landlines and cell phones, in English and Spanish. Jews, Mormons and atheists/agnostics were oversampled to allow analysis of these relatively small groups.

As part of their rationale for conducting this research, the Pew Forum stated that: “Previous surveys... have shown that America is among the most religious of the world’s developed nations. Nearly six-in-ten U.S. adults say that religion is ‘very important’ in their lives, and roughly four-in-ten say they attend worship services at least once a week.”

This U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, however, showed that large numbers of Americans are uninformed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures of major faith traditions – *including their own*.

The results are fairly broad and very fascinating but time does not allow me to delve deeply into them here. I have included, in a footnote in the manuscript of this sermon, the web site that gives a very readable and accessible analysis of the data gleaned from the study.<sup>1</sup>

What I wish to focus on this morning is one small part of the survey, that which relates to protestant Christians, the group to which we belong.

The study included twelve questions that referred to the Bible, Christianity in general and protestant Christianity in particular. That means that eleven or twelve correct answers would earn you an A. Nine or ten correct answers would be a B. Eight would be, a C; seven, a D; and six or fewer, an F.

Of Christians, white evangelicals scored the highest on these questions with an average score of 7.3 or D+.

The average score for mainline protestants (that’s us) was 5.8. A solid F.

Mormons had the highest score, 7.9, just short of a C.

Jews (6.3) outscored mainline Protestants on questions pertaining to the Bible and Christianity.

And here’s the one that really hurts. The third highest score on questions pertaining to Christianity, just under Evangelical Christians and Mormons went to...atheists. Their average score was 6.7.

In fact, when you lump all Christians together, their average score was only 6.3 out of 12. And when you include questions about other world religions the highest scores of all went to Jews (7.9) with second place going to... you guessed it...atheists (7.5).

*Atheists, Jews and Mormons know more about Christianity than Christians do.*

Stop! I’ve heard enough...though I’m not surprised. No minister is.

### **A WILLFUL IGNORANCE**

We realize that our church members are, basically, biblical illiterate. And we realize that this ignorance is a willful one, chosen and embraced by our members. Many good and faithful church members simply aren’t willing to do the work required to know about their religious faith. They would rather pay the minister to know about religion on their behalf. Offered the chance to think about, discuss and learn about their own religious faith, fewer than 5 percent will ever take advantage of the opportunity. Learning, they insist, is for children. If you’re gonna teach me something, we say, you’d better do it in the 15-20 minute sermon because that’s all the time I can afford to give you.

Bible studies go unattended. Learning opportunities go ignored. The publishing arm of the United Methodist Church has determined that curriculum for adults has to be written at the fifth grade reading level or it will go unread even by those who are willing to learn. Lesson plans are created so they can be undertaken with no preparation and what we call adult religious education is often little more than a chance for us to share our ignorance in the guise of opinions.

I believe I have said this before but it bears repeating that even if we had perfect attendance in Sunday School throughout our childhood and went to VBS every summer we would enter our adulthood with fewer hours of religious education than we spent in the first grade of our public school education.

Most of us are trying to live our lives with less than a first grade education when it comes to things spiritual and religious and, here’s the saddest part: That’s just fine with us.

We have accepted uncritically that cliché which insists that as long as we “know God in our hearts” we don’t really need to “know about God” in our brains. We have affirmed the ridiculous claim that religion is more about what we feel than what we know. We have embraced the fatuous notion and we are handing it down to our children and grandchildren, that religions knowledge isn’t all that important, that it is all really just a matter of opinion and one opinion is as good and valid as the next.

Nothing, brothers and sisters, could be further from the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey.aspx>

## **EDUCATED AND TRANSFORMED**

The Maori people of New Zealand have always been a deeply religious people, a spiritual people whose worship was part of the fabric of their being as a people and as individuals.

For centuries their religion was a form of paganism or druidism. That is, they worshipped as gods the things they encountered in nature, especially the mountains in the interior of New Zealand and the ocean that surround the island nation. And, make no mistake, their worship was heartfelt and sincere.

One particular aspect of this heartfelt and sincere worship had to do with how they dealt with breech born babies, those who were born feet first instead of head first, and that was this: They were sacrificed to the gods of the mountains and the sea. They were, immediately after birth, separated from their mothers, taken by the priests or elders to a sacred spot atop one of the holy mountains. There they were held by the feet and their heads were smashed into a boulder that had been sanctified for this purpose. Their bodies were then thrown into the sea. For hundreds of years, this was part of their sincere, heartfelt religion.

Then, one day, the Methodists circuit riders arrived. These black clad preachers on horseback had come for the primary purpose of saving the souls of those criminals who had been banished from England to the penal islands of Australia and New Zealand but they were not about to limit their ministries to white criminals.

Eventually they began making their way into the interior of New Zealand where they came upon the Maori and when they met them, they introduced them to Jesus Christ, even he who said, "Let the little children come unto me for to such as them belongs the Kingdom of God," and they taught them a different, a better way.

Today there is a small chapel atop that terrible mountain and that awful rock, which is still there and still stained with the blood of unknown numbers of babies, has been carved and polished and a bowl has been carved into it that catches the unpolluted, unblemished, pure rainwater that falls on the mountain. And it is with that water at that rock that the babies of hundreds of Maori people, breech born and otherwise, are baptized every year.

Brothers and sisters, it is time to accept and confess that we do not know the things we should about our own religious faith and we are poorer for our lack of knowing. We are suffering because of it and our children and grandchildren are suffering because of it.

It is time that we began to polish and hollow out this stone of willful ignorance and allow it to be filled with the refreshing, renewing, revitalizing knowledge of the Word of the Lord. It's time for us – regardless of our age, our position, or our previous experience in the church – to start learning again, to open ourselves to new understandings and new insights about our religious faith, to ask and be asked the questions that challenge us and make us think, to refresh our spirits with the renewing of our minds.

It's time to start "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time."

## **THE YEAR OF THE WORD OF THE LORD**

Toward that end we of The Wilmington United Methodist Church are declaring 2011 "The Year of the Word of the Lord."

This year we are going to start reading and studying the Bible again as though it was the first time. We are going to be searching it for insight about how we live our lives. We are going to be asking it questions that we may have been afraid or embarrassed to ask in the past. We are going to be exploring and hearing and learning and thinking again about the difference this book can make in our lives if only we will let it.

We are going to be talking about what we believe and why we believe it, and we're going to be exploring those topics as both Christians and United Methodists.

We're going to be talking about Christian history and doctrines and why they are important if, in fact, they are important. And we're going to be asking what difference it all makes, or should be making, in our lives.

### **The Bible**

Our primary and most important emphasis for this year will be on Scripture. We are going to take Scripture very seriously and we're going to do it in a systematic, purposeful, and methodical way.

This emphasis will begin in the worship services. This year I will be preaching a year-long sermon series (that's right, a year-long series) entitled "50 Bible Stories Every Christian Should Know." This isn't every story in the Bible, of course, but it's a good start. Each sermon this year will be based on a story from the Bible, one that we should all know, and it will ask and answer some pivotal questions about that story:

1. What is happening in the story?
2. What was the historical context in which this story was written? That is, who wrote it, when, where and for what audience?
3. Why was this story told this way? What point was being made to the original audience? And...

4. In what way are our lives similar to or different from the lives of those first readers and what message can we take from the story for our lives?

These sermons will rely heavily on two books that we are going to make available for you to use as we go through the year. They are: *Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories that Everyone Needs to Know*, by Timothy Beal and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, by Marcus Borg.

Ten copies of each book are available for sale this morning in the narthex. They can also be ordered through our local book store or via Amazon.com and I saw some copies of the Beal book at Half Price Books.

I hope you will all commit to reading these books as we make our way through the sermon series this year. They are not easy reads, but neither are they oppressively difficult. They will challenge but not tax you. If you add them to your pursuit of scriptural understanding, by this time next year you will have had the opportunity to hear, learn about, and reflect on at least fifty biblical stories and those stories will have impacted your life in a new way.

But the sermons are only the beginning.

## **Classes and Groups**

Each quarter we will also be offering at least one opportunity for deeper learning and reflection by adults. These short term classes will cover topics that range from Bible study to theology and the history of our church and our faith.

The first, beginning in January, is called "Uppity Women of the Bible." This four week series takes an in-depth look at the stories of Judith, Esther, and Ruth and reflects on the poetry of the Song of Songs. Each class will feature a video presentation by the Rev. Dr. Lisa Michelle Wolfe followed by a directed discussion time led by me.

Dr. Wolfe is not only one of the world's leading Old Testament scholars, she is a very funny and entertaining speaker who will challenge us with some new insights and understandings of these ancient and precious texts and the women who people them.

Look for other classes or groups to be offered this year as well. We'll be studying biblical prophecy and how our understanding of it differs from that of the fundamentalists. We'll ask why the Gospel accounts are so different, what the Bible has to say about some tough topics, how the Methodist way of reading the Bible is different from the way others read it. And we'll take a look at the book of Romans and see how it changed Martin Luther, John Wesley and the whole world.

And I hope you will not wait for Amber or me to start everything that happens on this front. I encourage you, I urge you to start a group, yourself. Get some folks together and start reading and talking about the Bible with each other. Amber and I will help you get started. You need a book to direct your study? We'll help you find one. You need a place to meet? We'll help you get one.

You don't have to be knowledgeable to start a study group. You just have to be loving and willing.

## **FLIGHT PLAN**

Before we launch ourselves on this journey, let me conclude this morning's sermon by setting down a flight plan, an intended direction and way of traveling that will guide us as we go and remind us where we are going when we, from time to time, stray from our intended route.

### **The First Time You Read the Bible**

For many of us, the first time we read the Bible we did so with a certain way of seeing. That is to say that the biblical stories we read (or heard) were often told to us and interpreted for us through three filters: Literalism, Moralism and Doctrine.

The filter of literalism told us that we were to accept every sentence, phrase and word of every story as literally true, historical fact. No matter how odd or unbelievable an assertion might have seemed, we were told that we must not question it. We must believe or be accused of having no faith, a sin for which we would suffer eternity in Hell.

The filter of moralism told us that the Bible held the secret formula to that behavior which would make us good enough to get into heaven. If we read the Bible and believed what it said we would be allowed to know that secret formula. For some the formula had to do with following the rules, the laws of the Old Testament for instance. For others the formula had to do with believing the right things – that miracles actually happened, that Jesus was virgin born, etc. But the bottom line was that if you read and accepted the Bible in the right way you would be told what to believe and how to behave so you could go to heaven.

The filter of doctrine had to do with believing the right things that were not mentioned in the Bible but were inferred from the Bible and therefore necessary to believe if you wanted to go to heaven when you died. Primary among these was the doctrine of the Trinity, a word that is never spoken in scripture, but is inferred from the scriptures by most Christian scholars.

If you want to get into heaven, said the conventional wisdom, you'd better believe in the Trinity. Oh, and the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as well.

By reading and studying the Bible through these lenses and filters we created a Christianity that was often exclusive, patriarchal and death oriented. That is, it was about men, it excluded from the church, the Christian community and salvation, anyone who didn't believe exactly as we did, and it was focused almost exclusively on what happened to us after we died. It became a religion whose sole message seemed to be: "Be a Christian and believe now for the sake of salvation later."

### **Reading the Bible Again for the First Time**

This year I'm going to invite you to take off those old lenses, those old filters, and read the Bible with a new set of glasses. This way we'll be reading it again, but this time will seem like the first time.

The first new filter we'll be using is that of "**grace**."

If grace – God's unconditional love and acceptance of all of God's children – is the central theme of all scripture and the life of Jesus, then this must be one of the filters through which we read and interpret the Bible. Not all of the Bible speaks of grace but it must all be interpreted and understood with grace in mind.

The second filter is that of "**modernity**."

We are modern people with modern ways of knowing and understanding, most of which were created and developed during what historians call "The Enlightenment" period of western history. We learn via the scientific method, through observation and verification. We know that the universe is not built in three flat layers as early humans thought it was. We know about germs and viruses and mental illness and we know about two thousand years of human history that were not available to those who first set down on paper the words of the Bible. And these ways of knowing are all gifts of God given to us for our benefit.

We are not only allowed to use all these gifts of modernity in our study of the Bible, we would be ungrateful fools if we did not. We must use them and we will use them. Faithfulness demands no less.

The third filter is that of "**Methodism**."

As United Methodist we bring to the table a unique and peculiar way of exploring things of the spirit. It is a gift from John Wesley which was later named in his honor and it is called, "The Wesley Quadra-lateral" – a figure with four equal sides and those four sides are: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

Before we accept an understanding or a point of view as viable, we Methodists ask four very basic but important questions: What does the Bible say? What has the church had to say? What does my own reason tell me? What does my experience tell me?

While Wesley held that Scripture was primary among these four, he also understood that Scripture must be interpreted for it to have meaning in our lives and that our interpretation must be supported by these four foundations.

The fourth and final filter, for today, is that of "**spirituality**."

It is always fun to speak of the history that surrounds the Bible, the world view that informed the writing of it and the lives of those who first read it. It is amusing to ask "what really happened?"

But, it is more important to ask, "what does it mean?"

We know that a story doesn't have to be "true" in every respect for it to be "real." We know that, in fact, the more real it becomes for us, the less important are the details and the historical minutiae.

If we can learn to draw our study of scripture through the filter of spirituality we will see it impact our lives and our decisions, our loves and our relationships more than we ever thought possible.

This way of seeing and reading the Bible – through the filters of grace, modernity, Methodism and spirituality – "lead to a way of being a Christian that has very little to do with believing" the right things so we can go to heaven when we die.

In fact, the year-long journey I am inviting you to join this morning, will, I believe, lead us to an understanding of Christ and Christianity that is both relational and sacramental, an understanding that has naught to do with believing this or that doctrine or verse of the Bible and everything to do with our relationship with the God to whom the Bible points, the God whom we worship and who comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Won't you come? Won't you join this journey?

Welcome aboard.

**AMEN**