

## The Right Map

3<sup>rd</sup> Weekend of Easter – April 9/10, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

*John 14:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)*

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

*2 Timothy 3:14-17 (New Living Translation)*

But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. <sup>15</sup>You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. <sup>17</sup>It is God’s way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do.

*Today we begin our journey toward the Good Life, the abundant life that Jesus desires for us all. This trip requires a true compass, an accurate map, and even some navigators. God has provided us with all this and more.*

For the next five weeks, we’ll continue to use unabashedly the trip metaphor<sup>1</sup> to talk about our journey to the good life, the life to which Jesus pointed us in last week’s passage from Matthew: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33). The good life is not a place of stuff and status but the place where God rules with love, mercy, and justice. How do we make our way to this place? What guides has God given us? Three: Jesus (the compass), the Bible (the map), and the church (the navigators).

*The compass*

I don’t think that I ever truly mastered a compass in Scouts. But I did learn this – a compass is always true. It will always point us in the right direction. As Christians, Jesus is our compass. It is in our imitation of Christ, our apprenticeship of our Master, that we stay on the road toward the good life. We could do far worse than to check the progress of our trip with a simple, “What Would Jesus Do?” Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. But I also remember from my Scout days that I could reach my destination a lot easier with a compass and a reliable map.

#### Ever New Anxieties!

Jesus urges us to turn our backs on the worries of life, yet we continue to create ever-new anxieties that plague our journey to the good life. In *The Progress Paradox*, Gregg Easterbrook chronicles some of these new anxieties. Here are a few. They are so right-on that they make me chuckle, guiltily!

*Catalog-induced anxiety:* “People can see in agonizing detail, all the things they will never possess. [They] make what a typical person possesses seem paltry” when, in truth, what we possess is astonishing by any measure.

*Collapse anxiety:* “Deep-seated in the minds of Americans and Europeans – perhaps in the mind of most – is a fear that the West cannot sustain its current elevated living standards and liberal personal freedom. We fear the economy will collapse; not just sputter, but cease functioning.”

*Choice anxiety:* Once upon a time, humans often felt trapped in their situations. Today, we have constructed so many choices for ourselves that we sometimes feel overwhelmed. Not only do we struggle with the big choices in life, we anguish over the small ones. Where will we eat from among the dozens of restaurants within two miles of our home? Don’t you ever wish there was just two or three kinds of dish soap?

<sup>1</sup>Any metaphor can only take us so far. Every metaphor breaks down at some point. Still, talking about our Christian life as a journey has about as good a pedigree as any metaphor in the Bible. In this series, the image in my mind is that of the great American family road trip – me behind the wheel, Patti next to me with a road map in hand, and the kids in the backseat.

## The map

In the letter from which today's passage is taken, Paul urges Timothy to remember what he has learned from childhood and who he has learned it from. Like most Jewish boys, Timothy had been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures from a very early age. Paul reminds him that those sacred writings are able to instruct Timothy and make him wise for salvation in the faith that is in Jesus Christ. We need to remember that the writings Paul refers are only the writings of the Old Testament. Though some of the NT writings existed and were circulating among the churches, they had not been collected and canonized. Just as the Jews had a tradition of sacred and inspired writings, so would the Christians, who came to understand that the writings of the Old and New Testaments were inspired by God in a way unlike any other literature. Paul puts this quite bluntly when, in v. 16, he refers to the sacred writings as *theopneustos*, literally "God-breathed." Though the process of inspiration is a mystery, God is the source of these writings. When we read the pages of scripture, when we open this map, we hear God speak.

Because the scriptures are "God-breathed," Paul reminds Timothy that they are "useful" – teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, and training us. In his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Paul's words this way, "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live in God's way." This is pretty much how we learn anything important. We have to be shown the path forward, we have to be shown when we have fallen off the path, we have to be shown how to get back on the path, and then we have to be trained so we can stay on the path. What a map!

Regrettably, sometimes we try to turn the Bible into the sort of book that we think God ought to have given us rather than the one he did. We might try to turn it into a sort of rule book, as if it is no more

### The UMC and the Bible

Despite the scriptural roots of the Methodist church, in the closing decades of the twentieth century the UMC undervalued the Bible, failing in many congregations to teach even the basics. But this has begun to change in the last twenty years or so. The General Conference, the governing body of the UMC, has reaffirmed the place of Scripture in Methodism. We at St. Andrew created the Bible Academy four years ago so that we might improve the biblical literacy of our church and enable us all to read and embrace Scripture.

In the United Methodist Church, we affirm that the Bible is the "primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine. . . The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history."

Further, the UMC affirms that the sixty-six books of the Bible are "to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. . . We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community. We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole. We are aided by scholarly inquiry and personal insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

from the UMC *Book of Discipline*

than a list of do's and don'ts. Sometimes, we try rearranging the Bible into a systematic book of right beliefs. Or perhaps we simply try to turn the Bible into a magic answer book. But instead, in his wisdom, God has given us a book of stories about God's relationship with his people. The Bible is the dramatic story of God's journey with the people of God, a journey that we are very much a part of today. Even in the writings that don't seem to be stories, like Paul's letters to Timothy, we can probably hear God more truly when we listen for the underlying narrative.

### Navigators

Even though the Bible is "God-breathed," it is still not always easy to read, understand, and interpret. Thus, Christians have always held that the Bible is Scripture for the believing community. We read and interpret the Bible with the help of Christians living now and those who have come before. In our trip metaphor, it is as if the car is full of sincere, knowledgeable, caring people who want to help us reach our destination with as few miscues as possible. None of us are on this journey alone. Not only is God's Spirit guiding us forward, opening the meaning of Scripture to our minds and hearts, but we are also blessed to be accompanied by many other Christians, such as all the wonderful people here at St. Andrew. They are along as my navigators; I am along as theirs. This is part of the reason that having a relationship to the church, to a church somewhere, is necessary, not merely optional. God knows that the journey of our lives, this journey to the abundant life that is in Christ, is fraught with difficulties and peril. By his grace, God has given us not only a compass and a map, but a carload of fellow navigators.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more on the Bible as the light to our path & Timothy's journey toward the good life)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Psalm 119:73-80 We love God's instruction because it comes from he who made us</b></p>	<p><b>Day 2 Psalm 119:105-112 We never stand beyond the need for help</b></p>
<p><b>Day 3 1 Timothy 1 Timothy's mission in Ephesus; contrasting portraits of faith and faithlessness</b></p>	<p><b>Day 4 2 Timothy 1 &amp; 2 Timothy' suffering for the gospel and his combat with false teachers</b></p>
<p><b>Day 5 2 Timothy 3 &amp; 4 Life in the last days; Paul's reflections on his own impending death</b></p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### April Book Recommendation

*The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse,*  
by Gregg Easterbrook

This is the book I discuss in the page one text box of today's study. Easterbrook is an accomplished writer and researcher with a reputation for evenhandedness and accuracy. His survey of the American culture is heavily footnoted and well-indexed. I think you'll find it very thought-provoking, especially as you read through his insights into the anxieties that characterize much of our lives. As a Christian, I'm sure that you will anticipate some of his conclusions about the place of kindness and gratitude in our search for happiness.

**A New Six-Week Teaching Series with Scott Engle continues at 9:30  
in Wesley Hall – Join Us!**

*The Good Life: Biblical Perspectives on Abundant Living*

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus as a compass. The Bible as a map. The church as a community of fellow navigators. You might begin by discussing these three metaphors. What are their strengths and weaknesses?
2. The Bible is a book of stories. We may not always know what to make of a story, but they are not just stories about people in biblical times. Rather, they are stories about what God did to and through these people. God could have given us a very different sort of book, so why do you think God gave us the book he did?
3. The Bible is a collection of ancient writings from times and places far different from our own. Most Christians acknowledge the importance of the Bible, by many fewer actually read it. Why do you think this is so? Is it the Bible's *strangeness*? Or its *silence*? Or is it something else? How is the Bible actually relevant to our lives? Why do you think the Bible and its study were so long neglected in the UMC? How can we go about making the Bible an important part of our lives?
4. Our lives are composed of countless choices, some of which can be very difficult to make. Sometimes we're not sure what is "right." Other times, we know what we ought to do but we fear we lack the strength to follow through. The church has always held that *somehow* the Bible must be the primary source and guide in our moral life – but how? Discuss how you've gone about applying the Bible to your own life. How do we find truth and guidance in these ancient stories? Can we? Simply put, how can the Bible shape us and the choices we make? More to the point, will we let it?
5. How can we help each other on this trip toward life? How important is the help of others? What is the role of the Holy Spirit on this trip?