

## *Living Large*

Epiphany Sunday – January 4, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

#### Scripture Passage (NRSV)

*Psalms 119:105-106 (NRSV)*

<sup>105</sup>Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path.

<sup>106</sup>I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,  
to observe your righteous ordinances.

*Romans 8:35-39 (NRSV)*

<sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

#### Instruction

176 verses. Impressive. Imposing. Even intimidating. Once referred to as “a literary monument raised in honor to Yahweh’s revelation . . . to Israel.”<sup>1</sup> This is Psalm 119. Nearly two hundred verses dedicated to *torah*, God’s “law” or “instruction” or “teaching.” For the psalmist, Scripture is God’s instruction for every moment in every place in every situation. As literature, Psalm 119 is meant to overwhelm us. Try reading the whole psalm in one sitting and you’ll see that the psalmist succeeds! The psalm is built around eight words: “*torah*” (used 25 times), “decrees/statutes” (used 23 times), “precepts” (used 21 times), “statutes” (22 times), “commandments” (22 times), “ordinances” (22 times), “word” (22 times), and “promise” (19 times). There are only four verses that don’t contain one of these eight words. [I guess I’ve made my point about the psalm being overwhelming!]

For the psalmist, *torah* is not some list of rules nor is it a book nor is it even the Bible. Rather, *torah* is God’s instruction in how the world truly works. *Torah* is God’s teachings about who God is and what it means to be truly human. The psalmist wants us to grasp that God has done something he had no need to do, namely, to reveal to us how it is that we should live in right relationship with him and with one another. So, in the very first verse, the psalmist writes, “Happy . . . are those who walk in the way of the LORD.” This is not a happiness that comes from successfully navigating a list of arbitrary rules nor does it stem from the

#### Resolutions and a Book Recommendation

Each year, nearly all of us come up with a few New Year’s resolutions. I suspect that many of us, at one time or another, have resolved to begin reading the Bible. Obviously, this is a great resolution to make, but we sometimes go about it the wrong way. Often, we begin with Genesis and then plunge into Exodus. Things go well; the stories hold our interest. But then we run into Leviticus and our momentum slows. If we make it through Leviticus, then Numbers will almost assuredly bring our project to a halt! There is a better way.

I urge people to begin with Mark’s Gospel. It is action-oriented and relatively short (you could read the whole thing in an hour). Mark will give you a fascinating portrait of Jesus and his ministry. But even with as straight-forward a book as Mark’s Gospel, most of us could use some help in making sense of this ancient writing and seeing what it means for us.

My book recommendation for January is Tom Wright’s *Mark for Everyone*. One of the foremost NT scholars working today, Bishop Wright has a real talent for writing in a very warm and approachable manner. In this book, he leads us through Mark’s Gospel, providing us with a very readable translation and some eye-opening reflections on what it means for us. The book is very suitable for daily reading and includes a helpful glossary in the back. If you want to develop a daily Bible reading habit this year, Bishop Wright’s book is a great way to get started.

*Mark for Everyone* is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

<sup>1</sup> From Leslie Allen’s commentary on the Psalms in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Word Publishing, 1983.

pleasures of material blessing. This happiness is deeply rooted in a life lived as we were created to live it. Jesus was a *torah* teacher; the Sermon on the Mount is a body of teaching about God's way. How do we come to know God's teaching? In the pages of Scripture. We read the Bible as a believing community guided by God's Holy Spirit. This is how God's word becomes a lamp for us, lighting the path ahead. This is how we learn what it means to be living large!

Because we hold the Bible up as God's revelation and accord it authority over us and our community, it would be easy to turn the Bible into some sort of idol, proclaiming something like, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That's it." But it just isn't that simple. You don't have to spend

### Using the Whole Bible

We live in a world of sound-bites. Television news rarely gives us more than a five-second comment from newsmakers. The 60-second commercial is an historical artifact. All this makes us even more prone than our predecessors to read the Bible as little more than a collection of inspiring or informational snippets. But such an approach to the Bible can lead us down some damaging paths.

Every phrase in the Bible needs to be read as part of a sentence; each sentence as part of a paragraph, and each paragraph as part of a larger story or other literary unit. Each story needs to be read in the context of the larger book and each book as part of the entire Bible (or canon). I think you get my point. For example, yes, the Bible says "an eye for an eye." But it also says "turn the other cheek" and "forgive seventy times seven." When we turn to the Bible seeking guidance on dealing with our enemies, or homosexuality, or money, or alcohol, or problems in the workplace, or any other topic of the day, we need to resist grabbing a brief phrase from scripture, holding it up as God's single pronouncement from the Bible. The truth is that we can find something in the Bible that would seem to support any belief we might hold or any action we might take. As United Methodists, we read the Bible as part of the believing community, aided by biblical scholarship and personal insights. We understand that there are better and poorer ways to interpret the Bible. Using the *entire* Bible, not just our favorite bits, is an essential part of reading Scripture responsibly.

much time around the Bible (or around Christians) to realize that a Bible verse can be found to support almost anything. So we need a method that can lead us toward better interpretations and away from pitfalls that have beset Christians from the beginning. I find particularly helpful a four-fold process suggested by Richard Hays.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Reading the text carefully* – What is actually on the page matters. The grammar matters. The context matters. If we hope to understand what a scripture passage means for us, we need to understand first what it meant to those for whom it was written. Hays calls this task "descriptive." It is the work of bringing out the meaning in the passage, being careful that we don't read things into the passage that aren't there. The purpose of these Background Studies is to help us all make sense of what is on the page.

2. *Placing the text in the context of the entire Bible* – The accompanying text box talks about the need to bring the entire Bible to bear on our understanding of individual passages.

3. *Bringing the text into our situation* – In time, culture, and language we live a long way from ancient Israel. Bridging the chasm between Abraham's day and our own is not easy. How do we take our moral bearings from these ancient writings? This task requires us to be imaginative and humble. The Bible simply isn't some sort of magic answer book that addresses directly all the difficulties in our professional and personal lives. The Bible gives us a framework, a story, within which we can seek God's guidance.

4. *Living the text* – Of course, this is the really hard part. This is where Bible reading and study transcend an intellectual exercise, instead calling on every part of us to seek transformation and to be willing to put God's way to work in our lives, as a community of God's people. We are called not only to read the Bible; we are called to live it.

This is not a simple, sequential process. These four tasks overlap, weaving back and forth as we put them into practice. Still, keeping these four tasks before me as I study and read Scripture has been enormously helpful. It will help you too.

<sup>2</sup>from Richard Hays' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, HarperCollins, 1996.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(these are five passages from Rev. Farrell's sermon)*

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</b> Begin to live where you are in life (Philippians 4:11), from Phil. 4:10-20</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> Work diligently and patiently at your present task (Hebrews 12:1), from Heb. 12:1-17</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> Don't worry about trouble on the way (2 Corinthians 4:8-9), from 2 Cor 4:7 - 5:10</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> Constantly press forward, always looking to the future (Philippians 3:13-14) from Phil. 3:12 - 4:1</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> Keep faith in the power and love of God (Romans 1:7), from Romans 1:1-17</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

