

# *A Light to Our Path*

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 18, 2003

Sermon Background Study

## *Scripture Passages*

*Psalm 119:105*

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

*2 Timothy 3:14-17*

<sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

*Today, we begin a nine-week sermon series on all the symbols in our glorious Rose Window. Our first symbol is the Bible, especially appropriate for Graduation Sunday.*

*“A lamp to my feet”*

Psalm 119 is the longest of the 150 psalms in the Bible, running 176 verses. This psalm is an extended reflection on the glories of God’s law; i.e. God’s instruction for his people. The psalmist writes, “I will find delight in your commandments, because I love them. . . . Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. . . Your word is a lamp to my feet.” The psalmist desires to live a righteous life and understands that God’s word lights his path as he seeks to walk according to God’s way. From the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament), the psalmist would learn about God and what it meant to be one of his people. Centuries later, Jesus would extend the metaphor of the lamp, reminding his disciples that they were to be lamps for others “. . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

*Timothy*

Timothy was a trusted co-worker of Paul’s, of whom Paul once wrote, “I have no one like him . . . like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (Philippians 2:20-22). Paul had sent Timothy to Ephesus to deal with false teaching in the churches there. Evidently, some Christians in Ephesus were occupying themselves with “myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations [and] meaningless talk” (1 Timothy 1:4-6).

In the letter from which today’s passage is taken, Paul urges Timothy to remember what he has learned 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 to in these verses is not the entire Bible, but only the Old Testament. Though some of the New Testament writings existed and were circulating among the churches, they had not been collected and canonized. Nonetheless, the message of salvation begun in the OT had been fulfilled in the gospel, and that is what Timothy is to preach (2 Tim 4:2). Moreover, just as



The Bible

The depiction of the Holy Bible in the Rose Window incorporates the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. These letters signify that God’s Word is complete and whole, it is a unity. Nothing need be added. Nothing can be taken away. As we proclaim in our Articles of Religion, the Bible “containeth all things necessary to salvation.”

The symbol also points us to Jesus Christ, who is the “Word” (John 1:1), the “Alpha and Omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13; also Rev 1:8). “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3).

the Jews had a tradition of sacred and inspired writings, so would the Christians, who came to understand that the writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament 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,<sup>1</sup> God is the source of these writings. When we read the pages of scripture, we hear God speak.

### *The Usefulness of Scripture*

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. Truly, the Bible is the light to our path!

But this is no intellectual exercise. We do not study the Bible so we can become biblical scholars. Instead, we read and study the Bible because, like Timothy, in its pages we learn of the salvation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible also equips us for good works that serve God and

#### **The UMC and the Bible**

Despite the scriptural roots of the Methodist church, in recent decades the UMC undervalued the Bible, failing in many congregations to teach even the basics. But this is changing. The General Conference, the governing body of the UMC, has reaffirmed the place of Scripture in Methodism.

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, 2000

neighbor, build up the body of Christ, and are a good witness to others. We study the Bible so that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2), enabling us to become true disciples of Jesus Christ.

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! Sometimes, we try to turn it into some sort of rule book, as if it is no more than a list of do’s and don’ts. Or, we try rearranging the Bible into a systematic book of right beliefs. But instead, in his wisdom, God has given us a book of stories about God’s relationship with his people. 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. It is from these stories that we learn what it means to be God’s people.

#### *Our Commitment to Learning at St. Andrew*

Today, we honor the 2003 spring graduates, marking their accomplishments and looking forward to the continuation of their studies. It is a fitting occasion to mark St. Andrew’s commitment to Christian learning. We embrace life-long learning as essential to growing in our relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. Our Center for Christian Learning supports programs such as the Bible Academy, lecture series and seminars, Sunday School classes, and these Sermon Background Studies as important means by which we can gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the Bible so that, like Timothy, we might be proficient and equipped for every good work.

Next week, we’ll consider the Rose Window symbol of the “loaves and fishes.” Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the multitude is the only miracle story told in all four gospels!

<sup>1</sup>Christians do not hold that God dictated the Bible in the same way that Muslims believe God dictated the Koran in Arabic. We believe the Bible is God’s word for his people, yet preserves the genuineness of its human authors.

## Daily Bible Readings

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; trust and complaint!</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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## *2003 St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series*

This summer, St. Andrew's Center for Christian Learning will again offer a series of three lectures by Scott Engle, the Center's Director. The 90-minute lectures will be at 7pm on the second Tuesdays of June, July, and August: June 10, July 8, and August 12. We'll gather at 6:45 in the new Piro Hall on the garden level. The subjects for the lectures will be **Faith** (June 10), **Hope** (July 8), and **Love** (August 12). By looking at some familiar and not-so-familiar characters from the Bible, we'll seek to understand better how faith, hope, and love are foundational to our lives as disciples of Jesus.

Registration is not required. Childcare will be available by reservation.

For more info go to [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org).

1. 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? How is the Bible different for us than it would be if it were a book of commands or philosophies? What does the narrative nature of the Bible reveal about God and about us? What might Christians mean when they refer to God as a God of history?
2. 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 United Methodist Church? How can we go about making the Bible an important part of our lives?
3. 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?