

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service

Session 8 – The Bible is Our Story

*This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.*

**The Bible: that daunting book.** Probably we have one, or once had one: a Bible. Most likely it was bound in black leather, printed on very thick paper with gold leaf edges. Maybe it had our name stamped in gold on it and was given to us to mark an occasion like Confirmation. And, to be honest, mostly we never read it. Its language, while beautiful, was not very accessible. It had a few high spots, like the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes, but it had plenty of dull or incomprehensible sections. Yet when Anglicanism emerged from the English Reformation as one of the great branches of Christianity, the Bible – translated into the language of the people so they could “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, as a Reformation collect in the Prayer Book says – was central to its development.

We are all of us shaped by the stories we hear and tell. Our contemporary society is largely shaped by secular stories in which life centers on us as individuals, our rights, our freedoms, our success, the objects we accumulate to give us pleasure and confirm our self worth. Some years ago St. Andrew's presented an adult formation series on “Where Does God Fit into Your Work Life?” That title said much: “our life,” “my life” is central; we struggle to fit God into it – and more and more we don't even try. But the Bible turns this orientation upside down. The great question it presents, page after page, dull parts and highlights alike, is: Where does our life fit into the life of God. It is the life of God that is central to the Faith of which we are heirs. Our life finds its true meaning only as it fits into the life of God and the people of God.

**The Lectionary.** Readings from Scripture have been part of Christian worship from the very beginning, carrying on the practice of the Jewish synagogues from which the first followers of Jesus came. At first these readings would all have been from the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), but very soon Christian writings were included: what became our New Testament. The three-reading pattern we know today – Old Testament, New Testament, Gospel – was adopted by Anglican churches following Roman Catholic reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Today most liturgical churches – Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran – and many other Protestant churches follow a common cycle of Eucharistic readings, something called the Revised Common Lectionary. (Inevitably there are a few variations from one denomination to another!) This is centered around a three-year cycle, in each year of which the gospel readings generally follow one of the three “synoptic” gospels: Year A = Matthew, Year B = Mark, Year C = Luke. John's gospel gets folded into each year. The first reading in the Eucharist, from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, is selected to complement or go with the gospel reading. The psalm is a response to that reading. The second reading, from the Letters or other books of the New Testament that follow the gospels, does not necessarily match the other lessons but instead moves through these works in blocks of several weeks at a time. But the thing to remember is

that the preacher does not pick the readings. They are being heard by Christians around the world on the same Sunday, and Christians around the world respond to them.

**The primacy of the gospel reading.** The readings of Scripture can if we are not careful blur together. We get a lot of words thrown at us in short order! The use of silence, of thoughtful ceremonial accompaniment, singing rather than just saying the psalm, can help to break up the otherwise wordy sequence, enabling us to better attend to what is being read. Always the gospel reading should stand out. It is given primacy because it recounts the story of Jesus. That is why in a Eucharist the gospel must be read by an ordained person, why it is preceded by an alleluia or other gospel song, and why it is accompanied by ceremonies such as elevating the gospel book, making the sign of the cross and kissing the gospel book. Often, as is our custom at St. Andrew's, the gospel is read from a central place, though it may also be read from the lectern or pulpit. Before reading, the priest or deacon may trace three small crosses – on head, lips and chest – to signify commitment to the Gospel in thought, speech and heart. Members of the congregation may join in this gesture. Everyone stands for the gospel reading to show their respect for the Word.

**Lectors.** It is desirable that the first two readings be read by members of the congregation, who are known in Episcopal-speak as lectors (Latin for reader). The Prayer Book stresses that in liturgy the congregation is never to be a passive audience, but always an active participant. While the readings are printed in the bulletin, it is desirable to listen to them with the heart rather than just reading with the eyes. Reading them over before the service is a great way to prepare to hear them. Printing the readings in the bulletin also makes it easy to take them home for reflection during the week.

**A drone's-eye overview of the Bible.** Listening and responding to the biblical readings on Sunday is greatly enhanced if we spend some time with the Bible at home during the week. Rather than struggling with that King James Version in black leather that we talked about above, it is helpful to get hold of a good, readable modern translation. You can sample translations by going to a website called Bible Gateway. It offers dozens of translations, and you can enter a selected passage (maybe the gospel for the Sunday you most recently heard) and then selected various translations. The one we use at St. Andrew's is the New Revised Standard Version (which now comes in an "updated edition"). It is available in several "study editions" which contain helpful introductions, notes, maps and essays to help you explore the text. If you want a somewhat simpler translation, try the Living Bible. The Message is a paraphrase, not technically a translation, but it is very readable.

The word Bible is actually plural, meaning books. The Bible is a library. It has many types of literature: history, stories, poetry, laws and rules, prophetic messages, wise sayings. Most of its books are actually compendiums of writings and oral accounts assembled by editors. After the opening chapters of Genesis that set forth the great stories establishing our relation to God – Creation, the Fall, Noah, etc. – it moves on to a history that dates back some 4000 years, with three wandering nomadic leaders: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. With them we begin the story of our Jewish spiritual forebears, on whose understanding of God Christianity rests. Here in very approximate form is a chronology of what the Bible covers, down through the century or so that is the subject of the New Testament:

***Biblical Events Timeline\****

2000s BCE	Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob)
1200s BCE	Exodus of Hebrews from Egypt
1100s BCE	Tribal period, led by charismatic leaders referred to as Judges

1000 BCE	King David
950 BCE	King Solomon; first temple built
850 BCE	Prophet Elijah
800 BCE	Prophet Isaiah
586 BCE	Exile in Babylon begins
538 BCE	Exiles begin to return
520 BCE	Second temple built
4 BCE	Jesus born
30 CE	Jesus crucified
40-50s CE	Apostolic missions/St. Paul – earliest epistles
60s CE	Paul martyred in Rome
70 CE	Romans destroy temple
70 CE	Mark's gospel
80 CE	Matthew and Luke
90 CE	John's gospel
100 CE	Latest epistles, Revelation to John

\*BCE = Before Common Era (BC or Before Christ); CE = Common Era (AD or Anno Domine)  
The dating system now commonly used in biblical scholarship.

This time chart does not mean that a book covering some period (e.g. 1000 BCE and King David) was actually written in that period. Some biblical writing was written at the time it describes, but other writing was assembled later from oral accounts or writings now lost to us, just as we may write history well after the fact.

And here is a chart that groups the books of the Bible by type:

### ***Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament***

Torah (also known as Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses)

Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy

Historical Books

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

Poetical and Wisdom Books

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

Prophetic Books

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

### ***New Testament***

Gospels

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

Acts of the Apostles

Letters/Epistles

Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude

Revelation to John

**Helpful questions to keep in mind while reading Scripture.** To avoid getting too lost in the weeds, you might keep in mind as you read a passage in the Bible that it was written by someone trying to fit his or her experience of life into the life of God. Where, who, what, why was God acting for the writer in this passage? How can you relate that view of God's action to your own life and situation? Go slow, take time, ponder, even pray! The Bible was not written for speed reading.