

10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

24 July 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Judges 9:1-6, 22-26

So I want to start off this morning with a question: when we use the term “Word of God” in church, what are we talking about?

Our text this morning is one we usually read on Christmas eve or Christmas morning. It is really John’s version of a nativity story, albeit without shepherds or mangers or even Mary and Joseph. But it is a nativity story because it is John telling us about how Jesus came into the world. The “Word” of God became flesh and dwelt among us.

But we also read the Bible in here every Sunday morning and almost

always conclude by saying “the (reading) is the Word of the Lord.” So when we talk about something being the Word of the Lord, right off we have to deal with some ambiguity as to what, exactly, we’re talking about.

As far as the Bible goes, some of the earliest parts were probably written down around 1000 BC – like that poem we read about Deborah a few weeks back. The latest writings are some of the New Testament epistles, which date to early 2nd century AD. So this “Word of the Lord” that we read from every week and that guides so

much of our spiritual lives includes writings that span a little over 1,000 years, and the most recent writing is nearly 2,000 years old.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we read 9 different verses from New Testament epistles representing different voices and ideas. The Bible spans a much, *much* longer period. I mention that just to remind us that over the course of 1,000 years of sacred scripture writings, we shouldn't be surprised that the Bible speaks with more than one voice, from more than one point of view.

So the people that wrote letters to fledgling churches shortly after Jesus' death were writing over 1,000 years later than the people who wrote down the

story of Deborah, for example. And to put that in a modern context, 1,000 years ago we believed that the sun, moon, and stars all revolved around the earth, we were 500 years away from the first colonists arriving in the United States, we were centuries away from things like electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing. If you were writing down stories about the church today, how different would they sound from stories written 1,000 years ago?

Not to mention that our most recent writing is now about 2,000 years old. Can you imagine what people reading our writing 2,000 years from now would think? I mean we've got videos of church functions

from 20 years ago and can't find anything on which to play them.

I share all of this because I think we sometimes forget that the Bible has a history of translation and context and interpretation way, way older than any of us.

Many of you have met my heretic friend Robert Lowry. He is the pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Little Rock. A couple of months ago, Rob was in Cincinnati for a conference, and on an afternoon off, took a short 20 mile trip over to the town of Petersburg, Kentucky. Now Petersburg, Kentucky was in the news a bit last year because it is the home of the recently opened Creation Museum.

If you haven't heard of it, the Creation Museum was built to show how the world was created in 6, quite literal, 24 hour days, roughly 6,000 years ago. They arrived at that by working off of biblical dates we know from other sources, like archaeological evidence that King Saul took the throne around 980 BC, and then working backwards from genealogies to figure out when Adam and Eve were born.

But he took a picture of one of the displays there and shared it with me. It was a picture of Jesus riding a dinosaur. And the explanation for that was that we know that dinosaurs existed, and if the early is only 6,000 years old then dinosaurs and Jesus must

have co-existed, so maybe he rode one. I'm not a scientist, so I can't fill you in on all the technical details, but you can imagine the exhibit, I'm sure.

The museum was opened in 2007 to promote the idea that the Bible as we have it is meant to be interpreted literally, not only as a guide to faith and life, but to science and the universe around us.

But here's the thing: reading the Bible that way, that kind of inerrant literalism, is *not* the predominant history of biblical interpretation. In fact, our Roman Catholic and our Orthodox brothers and sisters do not, as a whole, believe in inerrancy. The first time the words inerrant and infallible were used to describe the Bible

was in a Protestant theology book from the late 1600s.

But the kind of scripture reading that leads to something like the Creation Museum is even more recent, like just within the past 100 years. It was not until a series of books published in 1910 that inerrancy shows up as one of the five "fundamentals" of Christianity.

So a few weeks ago we looked at some sections of the Bible that disagreed with other sections. There are sections, like the book of Exodus, which are very much against slavery. Then there are sections, like 1 Timothy in the New Testament, which seems to endorse slavery. There are sections, such as the one from Judges 3 that we read

about a month ago, which suggest mass genocide and the killing of women and children as a practice of war. Then there are sections that suggest that instead of fighting we should turn the other cheek.

Maybe none of this is new to you, and you always think about the context and history of what you're reading, and are always open to God speaking a new word for today through an ancient text. But this has been a discussion topic coming up in our Sunday school class downstairs on a regular basis for quite a few months now, so I want to offer a couple of thought about how we approach the Bible.

First, and this should come as no surprise to

you, there are many different approaches to reading scripture within the Christian tradition. Literalism is one of those, but that's not the way it's always been done, and it doesn't necessarily offer the best approach for everyone. And I'll speak personally here: that doesn't work for me. I can't read Genesis 1 and come away believing that everything happened in a span of 144 hours.

And so I offer this as my way into reading Scripture. In the first words of the gospel of John, not only is the Bible the Word of God, but he speaks of Jesus as the Word of God. John introduces us to Jesus as a living interpretation of the Word of God.

So when I have been reading through Judges this summer, and think to myself, "God sure looks like a jerk there, is that how God is?" then I go back to these words in John's gospel. Because if Jesus is the living Word of God, and I come across stories in the Bible that seem at odds with Jesus' words and ministry, then I wonder if I have found a section of scripture that might be more of a reflection of the culture 2,000 or 3,000 years ago, or that I'm missing something because I'm reading a text thousands of years after it was written. But for me, every time I read the Bible, every time I approach a text, whether it's one I love and reread over and over again, or if it's a story from

Judges, I always read it with the understanding that the Word of God is first and foremost revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who has come to dwell among us.

Amen.