

Sermon: July 5, 2020 – Psalm 119: 105-112

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Watch at https://youtu.be/_RYEaGU0IYo

Walking in the dark can be a dangerous endeavour. Not so much at home, where I am familiar with where the furnishings are and can easily find my way around even in the middle of night, but when I am not at home, a flashlight or candle or the “flashlight app” on my cell phone are most welcome in avoiding things I don’t want to discover with my feet or my forehead. People in Biblical times also understood the importance of seeing the path before you, whether by an oil lamp, or by the light of the sun and the moon and the stars.

The practical assistance of illuminating your path so that you may find your way, is a beautiful metaphor for God’s presence in our lives. This is expressed in this morning’s reading from the 119th Psalm: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”. (Ps.119:105) When the path is hard to find, or when it’s root-bound or has other hidden dangers, we don’t necessarily need advice or problem-solving, we just need to see clearly what is in front of us, and holy scripture is one of the ways we gain clarity.

Coming from a progressive main-line denomination, which might not appear to be particularly “Biblical,” at least in a traditional sense of how that plays out in Church life, it’s important to pause now and then, and ask: what role does the Bible play in who I am as a person and who we are as a congregation and denomination. In the overall scheme of things – the way I interact with others and my surroundings, the choices and decisions I make, the hopes I have for my life and the life of the world - what impact does the Bible make? A lot? A little? None? A whole lot at one point in my life, and very little since then? It’s a fair question to ask oneself, and a fair question for us to consider together.

For those who answered “little to no impact” and are getting ready to make yourself another cup of coffee, or to fast-forward to the next song, a note from our heritage may be of use. When the United Church of Canada was formed in 1925, it was the joining of local union Churches, the small Congregationalist denomination, about 2/3 of the Canadian Presbyterians, and the entirety of the Canadian Methodist Church. One of the gifts that the Methodists brought with them, is a decision-making tool known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Just trips off the tongue, doesn’t it: “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” What it is, is the assertion that our beliefs are mostly shaped by four sources: Reason, Experience, Scripture, and Tradition. While John Wesley, founding leader of the Methodist movement didn’t put it in such a codified form, later scholars (such as Albert Outler) looked at the way Wesley approached theology, and kept finding these four inputs interacting with one another. The website of the United Methodist Church in the USA puts it this way. For Methodists,

- “Scripture is considered the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine.
- Tradition is experience and the witness of development and growth of the faith through the past centuries and in many nations and cultures.
- Experience is the individual's understanding and appropriating of the faith in the light of his or her own life.

- through Reason the individual Christian brings to bear on the Christian faith discerning and cogent thought.”

The UMC website then concludes by saying, “these four elements taken together bring the individual Christian to a mature and fulfilling understanding of the Christian faith and the required response of worship and service”.

This four-fold model has proven to be helpful for me, since I first learned about it some 35 years ago. Reason more or less led me back to the Church in my teens, once I learned that it was OK to ask questions of God and even express doubts. Adulthood has taught me to highly value experience – my life experience, my experience with God, personal stories of faith shared by friends and parishioners. A bit harder to grasp at first, was tradition, because I thought that always meant rewinding to about 1890 or perhaps 1590 and conserving those attitudes and ideas, but then I came to understand tradition as the lived faith, as expressed in many different cultures and contexts, as well as the lessons – positive and cautionary – learned from history.

And then, completing the quadrilateral, there is scripture... ah, scripture. Varied, troublesome, misinterpreted and used far too often as a weapon or as an excuse for racism, misogyny and xenophobia, and yet this sacred text gives me the privilege of stepping into a meeting place between the God of the Universe, and this one strand of people seeking relationship with God. It's the place where I read of my ancestors in the faith working out their beliefs, with God. I hear their laments, I hear their false boasting and God's unimpressed response to that, I hear their imaginings about how this world came to be, as an expression of Divine Love, and their worries about whatever political force was running roughshod over them in that time.

And the Bible, is where I first met Jesus, and not just in a sentimental way. In the gospels, I read about how engaged God is in our human journey, even when that journey runs afoul of the power-brokers of the day. The Bible, as retold to me by my parents and Sunday School teachers, taught me of Jesus who honoured children, who helped people to be healthy, who told memorable parables. Later readings of the Bible have given me glimpses of who Jesus invited to dine with him at table, how we should forgive even our enemies and not judge others, unless we want that same measure applied to ourselves. The Bible introduces me to a community who experienced the hopeful and powerful presence of Jesus even after he had died, and even when they were huddled behind closed doors, much as we were this Eastertime. And I have to say, needing to engage scripture each week in order to have a sermon ready for Sunday, has been a particular Godsend in these days of social distancing – and I know that for some of you at least, having some “apart time” to go a bit deeper in your spiritual disciplines, has been an unexpected gift. Especially when there's a lot of chaos around and the lighting is murky, when I open myself to the Spirit's prodding through the Bible, light is shone on my path.

In our tradition, we honour the gifts of intellect, we pay attention to our experience and others' experiences, we open ourselves to the lived reality of people of faith, past and present...and... we allow this sacred text we call the Bible to question our motives, to help speed us up or calm us down, to make us joyful or make us angry, to give us a different approach angle. With that in mind, I invite you at some point in this coming week – perhaps right now – to take some time, considering how the Bible has shaped

who you are and how you see the world. Are there key stories or verses, things that you learned when you were young, or things encountered later on, that have walked with you through the highs and lows of life? Are there key principles you live by that you would identify as Biblical? Can you recall instances, where the Word has been a lamp to your feet and a light to your path? I'll post these questions again at the end of today's service, if you care to revisit them later.

I would be remiss if I did not draw one connection that bridges this Hebrew Scripture, with the words of the gospels. In the gospel of John, Jesus is referred to, both as the Light of the World (John 8:12) and as the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Jesus, for the early Church, was the one who lit the way, the embodiment of what God's word really means when lived out. And while I'm pretty sure the author of Psalm 119 was talking about the Hebrew Scriptures when he spoke of the lamp to his feet and the light to his path – when I read these words, in addition to solemnly thanking God for the gift of scripture, it also draws me back to Jesus, the person of Jesus, the words of Jesus, the healing ministry of Jesus, the inclusive ethos of Jesus, the courageous advocacy of Jesus, the resilience of Jesus even when the world did its best to silence him. All these things about Jesus, which I encounter in the Word, bring light to my path. All these things of Jesus, help me to see the obstacles and dangers ahead. I am so thankful, for the power of the words of our faith and for the Word Made Flesh, and for the gifts of reason and experience and tradition, all of which help us to see where we are going, even in the dusk.

With gratitude for the journey, and prayers for the illumination needed as we seek God's path, together: we bring our thanks to God. Amen.

References cited:

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