

Timothy session 5

Well, I can't say that I'm sad to be finishing old Timothy up today. In a lot of ways, it's a letter that deals with some pretty specific issues Timothy had to contend with in the church he was leading in Ephesus. Some of it is clearly bound to that time and place.

We talked about that with the verse in Timothy about women remaining silent in the church. Whatever the situation was that made it seem like the right thing then, it likely wasn't meant for all times and places eternally.

But if I said that to Christians who read the Bible in a more literal and less contextual way, they'll point to verse 16 in Chapter 3 here: All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

They'll be absolutely convinced that my being up here is wrong.

In that system, this verse has come to mean that all scripture is factually true...that it is all a sort of literal mandate from God. Or its historical or scientific fact.

To read scripture that way flattens it so much it loses much of its power to actually transform people. Instead, the Bible ends up getting used as a weapon.

If we're honest, I'm not sure anybody can completely read it that way unless we just want to pick out verses that prove what we already believe.

The Bible is a compilation of many types of literature. Cold hard fact isn't really the aim for most of it. That makes it harder to read. It makes it less comfortable to read. But it makes it far more powerful... and way more fun.

Jesus himself used parables and metaphors and exaggeration in his teaching.

There are visions and apocalypses that lose all their punch if we try to make them literal. There are ancient stories that arise out of the foggy mists of the past that reveal powerful truths in the form of myths...truths that go way deeper than facts.

There is poetry and song. There are powerful laments that cry out in pain and even anger to God.

There are laws. Some of those are meant for all times and places. But others were specific for a people set apart by God and for God, before Jesus' followers were adopted in and new ways of being faithful had to be learned.

The New Testament letters give us a glimpse of the situations facing the newborn church. Some situations dealt with the nature of people and who Jesus is and always will be. Others are more about navigating the first Century Roman Empire.

So, this gives us a chance to sort of reclaim that verse in a more positive light than I've typically seen it used.

The verse says that all scripture is inspired by God. Literally it is breathed by God.

So maybe it will help to look at some other places in scripture where God's breath is at work.

It starts at the very beginning. In the beginning, when God was creating, a wind from God blew over the waters of chaos and a beautiful universe began to unfold. Remember, the same Hebrew word...ruach...is used for breath and wind. And spirit.

Creation began with the breath of God.

Then, in the second creation story we focus more intimately on that human creature God fashioned out of the earth. And then God breathed life into that human.

On Pentecost another wind from God blew into the disciples gathered and life was breathed into the body of Christ.

In a room where the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, he breathed on them. And they too received life...the life of the Spirit that would lead them out into the world to proclaim God's love for the world, manifested in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Life...if God breathes life, and scripture is God breathed, then scripture is meant to be life-giving.

So, is it? Has it been for you?

I suspect some of us would say a heartfelt yes. Others might say, to be honest, I rarely really even understand it.

And to be honest, I think there are passages that seem to be more human inspired than God inspired.

But the Bible does pack some power.

In the mid 90's, we lived in Rochester, Minnesota where Daryl did a fellowship at Mayo Clinic. I got a job there in the division of Internal Medicine that cared for the international patients.

We saw a lot of patients from the Middle East, so a lot of Muslims. It made me curious about Islam and other religions in general. I decided I wanted to learn more.

So, I went to the bookstore to find a book about Islam. When I got there, I was overwhelmed with the number of books and had no idea where to start.

Then it occurred to me that maybe I didn't really know that much about my own religion. And then I thought, well I already have a Bible. Maybe I should start there.

Over the next three years I read it cover to cover. And somewhere along the line it grabbed hold of me. And it hasn't let go since. I can't say it's why I left medicine for this, but I can say it changed me in a way that made it not only possible but truly life giving.

The stories came alive, but not only that, God did. And ultimately, it truly was life-giving for me.

Now, I can't guarantee everyone would have that experience. And by and large that's perhaps not the best way into scripture – it's for sure not the only one.

But I can be pretty sure that whatever way into scripture works best for you, it will work on you.

Scripture can teach us. It can show us where we're off course and how to get back on. Scripture is both law and gospel. It is life giving, but as law it shows us that in us which needs to die.

Ultimately what scripture really does is make God...the God in Christ Jesus...truly present to us.

Paul suffered for his commitment to the gospel. Timothy is struggling to proclaim the true gospel in his time and place.

We too face challenges and road blocks to sharing a gospel of love. We have our own share of false gospels to contend with. We live in a world more committed to false gospels promised by those who proclaim the gods of power and wealth...and call them by the same name as the God of scripture.

At the other end is the false gospel of what's been called Moral Therapeutic Deism. That is a belief system that says the chief goal of life is to be happy and to be nice rather than to

take up our cross for the sake of the world. It revolves around a God who demands nothing of us.

Timothy has apparently felt like he is failing...that his work to proclaim the gospel is futile. But Paul says keep planting, even if it seems futile. Don't water down the message because it's unpopular.

And it is...Jesus proclaimed a new world...the kingdom of God...a world built on radical love, forgiveness, mercy, and justice. To the people in power, that was a threat. It got Jesus killed. It put Paul in prison.

That gospel is still unpopular. It doesn't always just make us feel good. Paul's words to Timothy are also words to us as we try to find ways to share the good news of Christ in our own time and place.

And so, we hear these words of Paul, or Paul's protégé, as he finishes the letter – the Lord stood by me and gave me strength. God's presence when we meet obstacles is assured. It can be depended on when the response of those we try to reach cannot.

The words of scripture make God present to us. Scripture can inspire us and give us courage. It can convict us but then it brings us to new life. And it works to assure us that the challenges of following Jesus in our time and place will never be something we face alone.