

**Wesley United Methodist Church**  
**March 7, 2021**  
**Listening to God**  
To Find God's Word  
So I Can Learn God's Word for Me  
Scripture: Psalm 19:1-4, 7-11, 14  
John 1:1-5

When I was moving from Maine back to Rhode Island almost 5 years ago, my son and his family came up to help me pack. While Mandy worked on packing fragile items, Tom headed to the numerous bookcases in my office. After a while he asked me the \$100,000 question. "Mom, how many Bibles do you have?" He figured that he had already packed about a dozen but was still finding more Bibles to pack.

I didn't have an answer for him, other than "a lot". As I was writing this I looked over at the bookcase in my office and counted about 19 and there are quite a few more at home. I have a Bible given to me by Thomson Church Sunday School in 1957 and an almost identical one given a year later in 1958. Maybe they thought I didn't get the message when I was 7, and hoped that by the ripe old age of 8 I might pay more attention.

Seriously though, through the years, I have accumulated a lot of Bibles of various translations for a variety of reasons. That said, owning that many Bibles and a whole bunch of commentaries, does not make me an expert on God's Word.

There are two basic ways to approach the scripture. Through the years, I've become pretty good at one of them. As a pastor, I have learned how to study the scripture, how to compare translations, read the commentaries and articles. I've become good at asking myself the question, "How would I use this in a sermon?" With that question there are many others that go with it. It's important to study God's word but it can also be a trap for many of us and especially for pastors. It becomes a trap when studying is the only way we approach scripture or think about God's Word.

The Psalm that we heard this morning reminds us that God's word is important. "The Lord's instruction is perfect, ... The Lord's laws are faithful ... The Lord's regulations are right, ... The Lord's commands are pure." The psalmist says that they are more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey. But why? I think that has to do

with the effect of those words which the psalmist says, “revive one’s very being, ... make naïve people wise, gladden the heart, ... (and) give light to the eyes.”

And that’s because God’s Word is more than just words. The first words of the psalm are beautiful, “Heaven is declaring God’s glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork. One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known.” And then, “Of course, there’s no speech, no words – their voices can’t be heard – but their sound extends throughout the world, their words reach the ends of the earth.” God’s Word is more than just words.

In John’s Gospel, we read that, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word and without the Word, nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.” (John 1:1-5 CEB)

Jesus was God’s Word made flesh, sent to live, breath, and move among us, to teach us. But in and through Jesus, we learn something else, God’s Word is not only something for us to study, but it is also something for us to experience. The Psalmist reminds us of this as well when he concludes by saying, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14 CEB) We are to not only study God’s Word, but we are to meditate on it, to experience it, to live in it and let it live in us.

Some years ago, I went on a retreat. I can’t tell you when, where, or who led it, but I remember one thing about it, and for me it was a turning point. The retreat leader reminded us that as pastors most of us were good at studying the Bible. We were good at reading a passage and thinking about how we would preach it. (Clearly, she knew us well, and I realized I was not alone in that.) But her challenge to us was to read the Bible and let it soak into us, let it become part of us, let it get up and walk around in us, let our hearts rest in it and put away for a time, the idea of studying the words and understanding the context, and the content and the need to learn information.

She introduced me to Lectio Divina which literally means “Divine reading” or as many would say today, “Sacred reading.” She reminded us that first and foremost the

Psalms were Jesus' prayer book and that while it is important to study scripture, it is also important to experience scripture, to let it inspire us, to let it be our prayer book.

As part of our Lenten experience, we are being intentional about trying to pay attention to God in different ways. I've invited us to find a space that helps us to be still and focus on God. I'm offered a way of using a labyrinth to help us be open. I suggested a way of prayer that uses the fingers of our hand as a guide, or using our breath as a prayer. In a little bit I'm going to suggest to all of us, but especially to the children that we can also use our big voices and shout a prayer.

But I also want to invite us to be intentional about experiencing the Bible as part of our prayer life, not just as something to be studied. There are many different guides for how to do this. Some make a point of using Latin words to describe the various stages and there is no right or wrong way to do this. The only wrong way, if you will, is to never let the Bible have a chance to walk around inside you and seep into you.

So, I want to share with you a simple way to read the Bible prayerfully. Doing this, we approach a passage of the Bible with one question, "God, What do you want me to hear?" You start by finding a place where you can focus. I find it helpful to have a notebook or a piece of paper available in case I want to write something. I say a simple brief prayer asking God to open my heart to whatever God wants me to hear.

Do you remember learning the "3 R's" in school: Reading, Writing, and 'Rithmetic? Well, what I want to offer you is the "4 R's": Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest. First you read the passage through just to get an idea of what it says. Then you read it again, but this time, see if a word or a phrase speaks to you, or gets your attention. If so, stop there and make note of the word or phrase.

Then "Reflect" – just allow the word or phrase to sit in your mind and your heart. This is the place where you do need to be a little careful, because it can be tempting to start to go down the rabbit hole of studying the passage. Studying is good, but this isn't the time for it. This is the time for experiencing the Bible. Just allow the word or phrase to sit in your mind and seep into your heart.

For example, when I read the psalm for today, the words that caught my attention were, "Of course, there's no speech, no words – their voices can't be heard – but their sound extends throughout the world, their words reach the ends of the earth." As I sat

with it a little bit longer, I focused more on “no speech, but their sound extends.” For me, God was reminding me not to get lost in words and sounds, but to pay attention to the ways that God speaks through creation, through trees, and sky; through clean white snow, and through grass trying to peek through, through ocean waves that pound the shore even when no one is there to see them.

For you, the word or phrase might be completely different, and, if you noticed the same phrase, it might have spoken to you in a completely different way than it spoke to me. This isn't about right or wrong. It is about simply being open to what God might be trying to say to you.

After you have given yourself some time to reflect, it is time to RESPOND. Often for me, this means writing in my journal. Sometimes what I write is a prayer. Sometimes it's a thought about what God might want me to do. Maybe I need to change something I'm doing, or the way I'm thinking about something. Maybe, I simply need to say, “Thank you” to God.

Finally, REST, simply rest in God's presence. Sit quietly, and let God work. You don't need to do anything, just sit and be with God. No words necessary.

By the way, my journal has a verse of scripture on the front from Isaiah 40:31. “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they should mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” At various times, different words or phrases from that one verse have grabbed my attention. Sometimes, it's “wait upon the Lord”. Sometimes it's “Walk, and not faint”. Other times it **might** be “renew their strength” or “run and not be weary”.

It's amazing, isn't it, how one small verse can have so many different things to say at different times? This is one reason why Lectio Divina, or Sacred Reading, or whatever you want to call it can be so important and so powerful. We call the Bible, God's Living Word and, indeed, it is. Passages that are familiar to us, may suddenly speak to us in a different way. Words we have never noticed suddenly jump out and demand attention.

I invite you, this week, to give this way of approaching the Bible a chance. Be open to listening to God, letting God speak to you. Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest.

Let us pray:

Pastor Wesley 3/4/2021 9:22 PM  
Comment [1]:

Our loving God, we are so grateful that you speak to us in so many different ways. Open our hearts and minds to what you want us to hear knowing that the message for each of us will not be the same. Help us to sit with you, sit with your word, and listen to you. Amen.

