

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, September 19, 2021

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## 2 Timothy 3:16-17

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Of all the pieces of an element of reformed worship that we will explore together over the next few weeks, this perhaps this day is the most complicated for us. Our relationship to holy scripture, and specifically to the bible that sits so central in our worship space, is a nuanced one. It's a complicated one. It's a complex one. It seemingly grows more complex with each passing year, especially as those who call upon the name of Christ.

For some the word of God presents a very clear and resolute understanding of who God is and how God is at work in the world. For others, scripture is rather than a resolute clear message, an invitation into the mystery of God. I think that's where the complexity of our relationship with this book comes from. So many people come at it from different angles, different traditions, different perspectives. We bring, it turns out, our own lens to our reading. Each lens different and unique in the ways that we read and proclaim scripture together. You know, the early followers of the way appreciated the mystery that they were invited into. They didn't expect actually to comprehend or understand with their rational minds all that there was about creation. They didn't expect to know everything they could possibly know about themselves. In fact, they understood that knowing themselves fully was God's business, not even their own. So, for them, these stories that we read now bound together produced in countless translations with different looks and different theological bends had a particular purpose. They invited the reader into the mystery of God. I wonder what it would look like for the modern church to reclaim that purpose for scripture, that understanding of scripture. We would have to be willing, then, to enter the mystery of faith fully without reservation and that is problematic for many of us.

As Flannery O'Connor states the task of the novelist or, for us, perhaps the writer, the task of the novelist is to deepen mystery, but mystery is an embarrassment to the modern mind. Embracing mystery actually becomes essential for us if we are to mine all the depth and breadth that scripture has to offer. If we are to allow ourselves to be changed by this holy book. Mystery, of course, is antithetical to certainty, but humanity seems to have a great need of certainty. So there has been this move, a rather recent move, towards literalism in the arc of Christian history. This happens to be a very new phenomenon. Literally interpreting a library of books that the authors never intended to be literal is at best problematic, and is, at worst, destructive.

As I was thinking about the Bible in this role in my life this week, I was thinking about the time when I stopped going to my home church's youth group and went to another large non-Presbyterian church just down the road. It happened to be one of the most influential churches within its denomination. It was not in the same vein as Presbyterianism. I went there for all sorts

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of reasons, mostly because my friends were going there, and I wanted to be around people that that I got to see during the week. People I had good and deep relationships with. I attended because their youth group was active and vibrant.

It turned out to be the place where I got to wrestle with the meaning and purpose of the Bible for the first time. My friends, you see, at this church would quote this passage from II Timothy often. These verses were quoted with vigor in defense of their belief in the inerrant and infallible nature of the Bible, and to underlie their firmly held belief that for the Bible to be useful for god's purposes in the world it had to be perfect in its composition. For them to question or to doubt any word of scripture was to endanger their faith, and to endanger their salvation. Let alone the salvation of their friend who didn't believe as they believed. There were many reasons that this youth group experience for me were problematic, not just for me, but also for my family. I remember sitting on the gym floor listening to a youth pastor teach us about the Bible, and then I remember learning a song that was really important to this church. It was a song that they taught all of their children as they were reading through scripture together. I'm going to sing it and you're going to know why I'm not up there. Okay. I'm going to sing it, but here's the thing. It is a really short song. It's really straightforward and makes a turn in the middle. It's really subtle. You might not catch it if you're not paying attention so be sure to pay attention.

Revelation. 21 8 .21 8.

And here's the turn, don't miss it.

*Liars go to hell. Liars go to hell. Burn, burn, burn. Burn, burn, burn.*

Yeah, Gene Powers was not happy when I sang that song over dinner after youth group one night. I learned that song, committed it to memory, and every time my sister would tell a not full truth, I would remind her and sing it to her.

I didn't go back to that youth group after I learned that song. It turns out that my mom knew what I would later read from the words of Richard Rohr, that the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. She didn't intend for me to go back into that space and try to convince anybody of thinking or acting or living differently. Instead, she decided to make sure I was well-versed in reformed theology and the way in which we as Presbyterians read and proclaim and interpret scripture together. These ways of understanding scripture stand in stark contrast to other ways. This invitation into mystery is antithetical to the need for certainty.

So, for me over the next few years as an adolescent I would study scripture and learn from it, even in my narrow ways, with my particular lenses.

What happened though was really interesting. The further along in my faith journey I got, the less and less scripture became an important element of my journey with God. I'm not sure if y'all experienced that too. Maybe you grew up in a tradition that didn't emphasize the study of scripture at all, and so for you scripture is complementary to what we do here but not central to what we do here. That could be fine well and good, and yet there is a risk inherent to it. There is a risk within Presbyterianism, or even the reformed tradition, not just to make scripture

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secondary, but to all out abandon it, centering ourselves on something else or on an image of God that perhaps we cultivate that just so happens to look very much like us.

My second year of seminary Walter Bruggeman came into our Old Testament survey course and asked a question of us. Maybe some of y'all know Bruggeman and his work. He holds scripture in high regard. He asked the question of us how is it that you know that God exists? How do you know and trust that God is real? Then he opened the floor, and so there are all sorts of answers. I know that God exists because love cannot be understood and love as beautiful as the love between a parent and a child can't be understood without the belief that there is some higher power at work. I know that God is real because the beauty of the sunrise this morning tells me that no human can create that. I know that God is real, and God is good because I've had a transformational experience in my life. The stories went on for about 15 minutes. Everyone having different apologetical reasons for believing in the existence of the divine.

He stopped after we were done explaining how we knew that God was real, and he paused and looked a bit dejected. Then he looked at us and he said not one of you said you know God is real because of the Bible, and that's a problem. It's a problem because scripture for us in our tradition is central. It is what shapes us and moves us out into the world. We can have all of those other revelations of the divine, but this is a specific revelation that you as people who will be called pastors one day need to be centered in,

You need to understand its depth and its breadth, and you need to understand its power at work within you and its power in the world.

All of us were pretty embarrassed and maybe even a little upset. We had spent the better part of a year deconstructing whatever beliefs we had about the Bible. When we came into seminary, we had learned the Hebrew and the Greek. We had learned this critical way of reading and breaking down scripture. What we didn't know that was happening within us during that time, and what we didn't know, was that even as we began to parse and more deeply understand the nuances of scripture, we were setting it aside and Bruggeman with one statement drew it back to the center for each of us.

The Bible can be used in all sorts of different ways, he said. It can be used to harm and to exclude and to disenfranchise, but it can also be used to comfort and to include and to welcome. Here's the truth that Bruggeman knew then that I have only recently figured out, and that is that which has the power to bind us also has the power to set us free. If you grew up in a tradition where the Bible was a sword used to harm and to exclude and to cut you out, the Bible also has the ability to invite and to heal. It can be a balm and it can be transformational. Last week after worship I got a text from a dear friend of mine who is a counselor. She had a client who was having issues deconstructing some things within her faith. See her faith had taught her that she had to be deferential in every way to the needs of others. Particularly as a woman in her tradition scripture was used to impress upon her that the only way to be faithful and good was to be deferential, particularly to the men who were preaching and teaching in her tradition. So, she had come into my friend's office and was having a crisis not just of her faith that was already

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ongoing but also in her life trying to reconcile this way in which she had been taught about God and particularly taught about God grounded in scripture.

And she was reconciling that with how she was being called to live now in the world. So, my friend reached out and said, you know that I'm not a Christian. This isn't my thing so I'm coming to you. I wonder if there is a part of her faith tradition that might help to free her, that might help to unbind her from this sense that she has to be second in everything. Is there a way that you could help me understand scripture so that she might know that she is worthwhile and worthy and that caring for herself is something that God also desires?

It didn't take long. Actually, first we talked about Jesus and how Jesus prioritized self-care in his ministry going away time after time for quiet and for prayer. Jesus knew that in order to be kind and loving and good to those who were following him, he needed to have time alone. And it's not so different than this client of hers. And then we went into the greatest commandment where Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment and he says "to love the lord your god with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and the second is like it to love your neighbor as yourself." And i was able to parse that last part of that second great commandment and to say, see. Jesus does something there. He binds together one's ability to love one's neighbor with one's ability to love and care for themselves. We can only love our neighbor so much as we understand that we are beloved.

Your friend, your client, needs to know that loving herself and caring for herself, being balm even to herself, is essential. It's crucial for her to be faithful in the world. I sent that text off the end of this week. I got a text back that said we read every word of your text together in our last session. She has some comfort now and some peace about what she has been called to do. There's some reconciling that's been done that we didn't think could happen.

The important and crucial work of those of us within the reformed tradition, people of faith who call ourselves Presbyterians, is to continue to teach and to live out scripture as central to who we are and to claim that it is not certainty that we seek when we open the pages of this book. It is mystery that we enter into.

God is mystery, and the scriptures invite us into it. But the question remains why should we in this day and age continue to center the Bible in our tradition? Why should it sit there on the communion table? Why should it have hopefully a prominent place in your life and in the world? Here's why. This story, this library of stories, tells us a bit about the story of God and of God's people. It reveals with nuance and mystery and love and insight the very nature of God, and, in so doing, reveals our nature to God this love scripture says.

And we are beloved.

Not only that, but this book, this library of text, testifies to the creative power of God at work in the world. It testifies to the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, a story in which all are included. The power of God and life over death.

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It will continue to be central for us. It will be a forever piece for us because it is in its words that we find out who we are and whose we are.

But for us it's important, in fact, it's crucial to understand the lenses with which we read this text. Rachel Held Evans thoughtfully points out to us that we all go to the text looking for something, and we have the tendency to find it. So, the question that we have to ask ourselves is this. Are we reading with the prejudice of love, which the Christ modeled for us, or are we reading with the prejudices of judgment and power of self-interest and greed? Are we seeking to enslave or to liberate? Are we seeking to burden or to set free? If you are looking for verses within this holy text that supports slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses in this holy text that abolish slavery, you will find them, If you are looking for verses that oppress, you will find them. If you are looking for verses that honor and celebrate and free. you will find them. If you were looking for reasons to wage war, you will find them. There are plenty. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, there are plenty more. If you're looking for an outdated, irrelevant text, that's exactly what you will see. If you are looking for truth that is exactly what you will find. So, the most critical question that we as those who call Idlewild home must ask is what we are looking for in this forever piece.

If you want to do violence in this world, you'll find the weapon. If you want to heal, you'll find the balm.

With scripture, we have been entrusted with some of the most powerful stories ever told. How we harness that power, whether good or evil, to oppress or to liberate, changes everything. We center the Bible not because we believe it to be inerrant, but because we believe it to be true. It is true in the way that only a poem can truly articulate the feeling of love. It is true in the way that only a song can move one's soul. It is true in the way that only allegory can at once disguise and reveal. It is true in the way that only parable can unmask the shallowness of the world and reveal the depth of the divine.

The Bible will forever be a part of who we are because it reveals to us who God is, who we are, and who God is calling each of us to be. So may you know this day that in this great story you are a part, and that the final word of this story is love.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, mother of us all.  
Amen.