

**1/17/2021**

**Hebrews 4:12-16**

<sup>12</sup> For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. <sup>13</sup> Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.

<sup>14</sup> So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. <sup>15</sup> This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. <sup>16</sup> So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

**The Word of God**

Last week we celebrated **Epiphany** – the day that we remember and celebrate when the Magi finally found Jesus, the one who they were brought to by God lighting their way to him by a bright star in the sky. And remember from the Gospel of Luke that the Magi **brought gifts** to the young Jesus – not only the material gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (gifts that cost them a lot of money) but also they gave Jesus the gift of their time (traveling for months – maybe even a year, round trip), and then when they finally found Jesus, they gave him the gift of their worship. As they presented their special offerings, they bowed before Jesus to show their respect and honor toward this little boy who they knew would grow into a great king.

And so like the wise-men so long ago, you and I took a good hard look at our own lives last Sunday and asked ourselves the question, “**What will I give Jesus in 2021?**” I hope you have that blue paper we all filled out together somewhere at home that you can see it daily, to remind yourself that every day we have the invitation to give Jesus the gift of our lives. Among the many options of things we could give Jesus on that blue paper from last week, there was one that I have felt particularly drawn to, not only for myself, but also for our community, this year. **It’s in that third**, and last, section of the blue paper, and by the title of this sermon, I think you could guess which one. **The line that** describes the opportunity to study the Bible regularly is the line that has wedged into a place in my heart for us this year.

As you saw from the very first Sunday of 2021, added into our bulletin is a “Reading through the Bible in a year” plan, with convenient little boxes to check off as we read through each day’s readings. (Have I mentioned just how much I love checking off boxes on lists? Oh, it just feels so good). If you sometimes think to yourself, “goodness, I wish I read the Bible more...” or have once before set out to read scripture every day and do it for a few days and then slip back into not reading it daily, I’m here to say to you...*you are NOT alone!* So many Christians say they want to read scripture more and truly do desire to understand the Bible more. But

oftentimes, it's difficult to make those wishes and dreams a reality in our everyday life. That's why I hope that getting that rush of accomplishment when we check off the box next to the readings on the daily plan will help us make reading scripture every day a part of our daily rhythm.

But let's be even more real for a second – how many of us have set out saying, “This year, I'm going to read through the Bible cover to cover” and we're doing great through Genesis and Exodus, but then we get to Leviticus... and reading gets a little slower...and then we hit Deuteronomy...yeah, honestly, without understanding the big picture of what's going on in books of the Bible like those, they're a little tougher to navigate, right?

So...beginning next week through the next 12 weeks, we will be embarking on a new journey through the Bible. I'm calling it, “The Big Picture” sermon series, and friends, I'm so excited about this! You and I are going to take a 30,000 foot view of the Bible, to get a look at the overall story that you and I – today, here and now – are a part of. We'll be using a book called *The Story of God, the Story of Us* as the framework for how we'll break down the overarching story of the *entire Bible!* (I've purchased some copies of this book that will be available next Sunday for anyone who

would like to purchase or even have one free of charge, or if you prefer, you can find your own copy on Amazon.com).

“Alright, alright, pastor,” you’re probably thinking, “that’s all good and well about next week’s sermon...but what about this week. Let’s get back to that scripture Sarah/Betty read earlier.” Fear not, the scripture reading this week from Hebrews 4 is all about the Bible. The verses of our scripture reading remind us of the awe-inspiring, beautiful, powerful, and honestly, *terrifying* nature of the scripture – otherwise known as the Word of God.

*“For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.”* Yikes! These verses are serious stuff.

I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty sure I learned **the first half** of verse 12 in Vacation Bible School or in Sunday school when I was a kid. It really is a great memory verse to help kids know the importance and power of scripture. But the second half of verse 12 and verse 13 take a serious turn, don’t they?

And actually, the truth of these verses do exactly what they describe – the truth of these verses does penetrate our hearts to cut straight to our core fear, the common fear of humanity – being completely and utterly *known*. **Just as our foremother** and father, Adam and Eve, hid from God because they felt shame for being naked in the garden after they disobeyed God’s one command, we too carry the shame of our nakedness before God. And we humans have gotten good at hiding from God, haven’t we? We might try to cover ourselves with blankets of *good deeds*. We oftentimes try to dress ourselves up in kindness, or even worse, politeness. We might even try to use Church as our cover, thinking to ourselves, “if I make sure I go to church every Sunday but live Monday to Saturday the way I want, then I just might just fool my family and friends (and maybe even myself) into thinking I’m a good person.” But underneath all those covers and attempts to dress ourselves up, our nakedness before God – our true selves –still makes us want to run and hide.

And it is the Word of God, the Bible, that cuts to our core and is what brings us into the knowledge of our true selves. Paul talks about this strange transformation we all go through as we come to know and understand our sinfulness – **Romans 7:9-10** says, “*Once I was alive apart from the law [the Jewish law: AKA: the Old Testament]; but when the*

*commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.”*

Before Paul became a follower of Jesus, he was a Jewish Pharisee – a person whose *job* was to make sure the commandments and laws were being preached and followed. But here, in Romans 7, Paul says that the law was just not good enough – it brought to light just how sin lived in him.

The New Testament, the New Covenant, the Good News that Jesus brought cuts through the law, through any of our covers and attempts to dress up, it penetrates to our hearts and touches our sinful nature. Jesus proclaimed the Word of God that says, “No amount of good works a part from me, no amount of attempts to hide your sin, will ever take your sin away...but ‘repent and be baptized,’ ‘come to me all who are weary and I will give them rest,’ ‘come and be forgiven,’ And Jesus not only brought this New Covenant, this Good News, this Word of God to us, but he perfectly *embodied* God’s Word. As we read scripture, we see in the Gospel accounts how Jesus himself cut straight to the core of people throughout his earthly ministry – that’s why we read so many stories of Jesus confusing the Jewish people and confounding the Pharisees’ beliefs about God’s Word.

Do you remember that one story from the Gospel of Mark about Jesus and the “rich young man”?

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus went out into the street, a man came running up, greeted him with great reverence, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?” <sup>18-19</sup> **Jesus said**, “Why are you calling me good? No one is good, only God. You know the commandments: Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie, don’t cheat, honor your father and mother.”

<sup>20</sup> He said, “Teacher, I have—from my youth—kept them all!” <sup>21</sup> Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! **He said**, “There’s one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me.”

<sup>22</sup> The man’s face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, **and he walked off with a heavy heart**. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go. (Mark 10:17-22, MSG)

Oh, how easy it is for us to judge this man. “Really, guy? **You’ve got** Jesus, God in the flesh standing in front of you and you turn to your possessions instead of him!? How materialistic.” But what would we have done in his situation? Jesus wasn’t saying, “go home and sort through your

closet and give what you don't want to Goodwill and come follow me.”

Jesus wasn't saying, “go and give those appliances you don't use anymore to the poor and come follow me.” Jesus wasn't saying, “go and give away *most* of your stuff, put what's left in storage, and come and follow me.”

Jesus' told this young man to sell *everything* he had and *give the money he made from it to the poor*. “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” The Word of God cut right to the bone – right to this man's true self. His heart's true intentions were laid bare before Jesus. Even though he *said* he wanted to follow Jesus, and even though he *obeyed all the commandments* of scripture, the truth was that when Jesus – the Word of God in flesh – pushed aside the young man's attempts and coverings, to expose his **deepest desires, his true intentions**.

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**What would** you do if Jesus asked you to...

...quit your job to take care of your spouse's dying parent? Would you do it?

...give your family's second car to the single parent down the street who can't afford to fix the transmission in theirs that blew a week ago?

...move into a neighborhood of people who look and act differently from you in order to become their neighbor so that you could get to know them and understand what Jesus means to love your neighbor?

Where are our treasures stored? In on earth or in heaven? The Word of God is alive and powerful – sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword.

In Romans 7, the chapter where Paul describes how the law brings about the knowledge of our sinfulness, he finishes this chapter with these words: *"For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (vv. 22-25a)

This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks Be to God!**

Thanks be to God, who delivers US through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Let's pray –