

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

Isaiah 1:16-17

Make It Plain

You may have heard that we don't just read the Bible, but the Bible reads us. I experience this when a lectionary passage speaks to our current situation in surprisingly insightful ways. For instance, last week I shared a passage from the lectionary for October 19, from 2 Timothy 4:3-4, which to me is an uncanny prophecy on our current situation as a nation divided into groups solidified by media that confirms our world views and isolates us from opposing or broadening perspectives, thus leaving us without a common base of knowledge or values, and subject to manipulation by leaders who know how to appeal to our unfulfilled, unspiritual desires:

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

I preached on this passage yesterday, and offered up the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as an analytical framework that might keep us Christians from falling into the trap of following false prophets who tell us what we want to hear. Briefly, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral uses four approaches to help us consider an issue theologically. Here's how I describe the four sides:

1. Scripture, most importantly, which tells us about God and God's will, and also provides a common knowledge base for group discernment;
2. Tradition, which provides the collective wisdom of now thousands of years of spiritual ancestors (this includes our Presbyterian polity, which is the codification of our beliefs about how we are to be church together);
3. Reason, which includes not only using our intelligence to proceed even when taking leaps of faith but also engaging in the world's advances such as technology; and
4. Experience, especially in community, as together we are able to inspire each other with our personal experiences of God's saving and healing love through Jesus Christ.

I suggest that these four approaches, taken together and discerned in community, can help us respond to the complicated and unprecedented issues that arise with alarming regularity these days, from COVID to political violence to the impacts of social media to artificial intelligence.

Going back to the Bible reading us, the passage from 2 Timothy is so strikingly prophetic for our current situation that I told some folks it reminded me of another passage. That passage came during a time when I was consulting with churches in Hawai'i, and the process was so complicated that churches were getting entangled in the steps, so they couldn't get to a clear vision that folks could remember and act on. When I shared that passage, a church elder said, "You're making that up; that isn't really in the Bible!"

As it happens, that passage shows up in the lectionary for this coming Sunday, from Habakkuk 2:2: "Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it." Sort of an ancient version of the "elevator speech" approach to short, pithy mission statements!

Another part of the lectionary for this Sunday comes from Isaiah, and it acts as a corrective for those who find the Wesleyan Quadrilateral just too complicated. If we become paralyzed by theological correctness or overly diligent analysis, it is important to be reminded that God gives very simple, direct instruction repeatedly throughout the Bible, especially “seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.”

Sometimes God’s instruction can be scarily simple. May we have the faith to follow, even when the vision is plain for all to see.

Peace,

Wesley