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St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Some bible verses
stick in your memory.
You may have learned them
as a child
or come across them more recently.
You might know them by heart
or simply recognize them when you hear them.

But sometimes,
we know the words
but don't think deeply about what they mean,
and what is implied by it.

“All scripture is inspired by God,” writes Paul, “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.”

“All scripture,” it begins. Most of us assume
that when we talk about scripture,
we think about the bibles
that we read in church and have at home.

But when this letter was written,
the bible as we know it
didn't exist.
What we regarded as Holy Scripture
is something that developed over time.

For the Jews,
it all began with the Torah,
the first five books of our bible,
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
They were written in Hebrew, and were the foundation of Jewish identity and life.

Then what they called the Nevi'im, the prophets, were added.
The former prophets
were most of the books that we tend to think of as history,
Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

Then there were the latter prophets,
Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets.
All of these were written in Hebrew
and regarded as scripture by about a hundred and fifty years
before Jesus was born.

But then it gets a lot more fuzzy.
The rest of what we call the Old Testament, the Ketuvim,
the Psalms and wisdom writings, Ruth and Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah,
written mostly in Hebrew but with some parts in Aramaic,
we gradually accepted as Jewish Scripture over a period of a couple of hundred years,
and weren't formally accepted until the year ninety at the earliest. Although some of them were
probably written
long before the Torah.

And to complicate things even further,
the Hebrews scriptures began to be translated into Greek
in the third century before Christ,
and that translation, which is known as the Septuagint,
included many of the books that we have in our apocrypha
and was done by 132BC.

Confused yet?

You don't have to remember all the detail.
What's most important
is that when Paul
talks about all Scripture,
he's talking about the Torah,
and the prophets, and probably the writings,
and since he's writing to Timothy who was half Greek,
he probably means the Septuagint as well.

But that's not all.
Because by the time of this letter to Timothy,
there were other holy writings,
the gospel of Mark,
and perhaps drafts of the other gospels, and certainly stories about Jesus were circulating,
and there were all the letters that Paul had written,
and they had probably become revered as holy as well.

It wasn't until the fourth century
that Christians formally agreed on the canon,

the collection of books
that are included in the bible to this day,
although they'd been reading them for years in worship.
And that Canon
was translated into Latin by Jerome and known as the Vulgate,
and became the standard translation for Christians
all the way up to the Reformation,
though in the thirteenth century
books were divided into chapters.
It wasn't until the sixteenth century
that it began to be translated into ordinary languages,
German and French and English,
and while they were at it, the chapters were divided into verses,
and printing presses made it possible
for copies of the whole bible
to be placed in churches
and even for individuals like us
to own and read their own bibles
in the languages that they spoke
every day.

And of course,
it was in 1604 that about fifty scholars in England
began the monumental task of a new English translation of the bible
that was published in 1611 as what we now call
the King James Version.

That became the most common English bible
until the twentieth century
when major archaeological discoveries of early biblical texts
led to corrections in translation.

And then people began to remember
the reason for all the translations in the first place,
so that people could read the bible in their own language,
and they realized that people didn't speak Elizabethan English any more,
and that unless you had a good education
you might not even understand it that well,
and they began to make contemporary translations
like Good News for Modern Man,
and the Good News Bible,
the Living Bible,
and the New International Version,

and the Message,
 and the version we read in the Episcopal Church,
 the New Revised Standard Version.
 And some of them
 focussed more on making it understandable,
 like the Living Bible and the Message,
 and others on a closer translation of the original text,
 like the NRSV.

And our bibles include the Old Testament and the New Testament as Holy Scripture, and the Apocrypha, as the Anglican tradition says, for “example of life and instruction of manners; but...not...to establish any doctrine.”

And that’s where we are today.
 “All scripture,” at least to Paul and Timothy, means at the very least
 most of the Old Testament,
 and probably many of the other writings including Paul’s letters and the gospels..

“All Scripture,” says Paul, “is inspired by God.”
 Or as the Greek text puts it,
 all Scripture is God-breathed.

So now we come to the next thorny question.
 What does it mean
 for Scripture
 to be inspired by God?

And there are many different answers to that.
 The first, and most conservative one
 is that every word of the bible is inspired by God,
 in effect,
 that God dictated the bible.
 You hear some people say it like this:
 “God said it, and so I believe it.”

But there are two problems with this.
 The first is practical.
 We don’t read the original words.
 We read translations.
 And some words can be translated in more than one way.
 So for example, the word that we most often read as church in the New Testament, ekklesia,
 literally means those who are called out, and so it can mean the assembly, or gathering, or
 congregation, or church.

So which one
did God actually say?

And the other problem with this approach
is that it suggests that the human authors had no part in it.
So what do we do with the differences in style?
How do we account for the times when people in the bible
express doubt?
And how do we distinguish between things that are intended literally,
and things that are metaphorical?

At the other extreme,
some people think that the authors just had a high degree of religious insight. In other words,
inspired
just means exceptional or excellent.
But that, of course, ignores the original Greek meaning of inspired, God-breathed.

Between those two extremes,
that God effectively dictated the bible
and that human beings who happened to be naturally spiritual wrote it on their own,
are a whole range of theories.
And as usual,
we Episcopalians
are somewhere in the middle.

And there are two parts to our understanding, as the Catechism reminds us:
“We call [the Scriptures] the Word of God
because God inspired their human authors
and because God still speaks to us through the Bible.”

First, human authors did the writing.
They wrote about what they knew,
but the Holy Spirit was working in them,
giving them insight and understanding,
helping them to reflect on the work of God
in human life.
But the human perspective is never lost, and with that,
the context in time and space,
so that,
and this is the second part,
we need the Holy Spirit
to understand and interpret the words,
to see what God is saying to us

in this time
and space.

Another way of thinking about it
is to go back to that original word inspired.
Scripture is God-breathed.
In the beginning of creation,
God breathed life
into everything that was made.
In the same way,
God has breathed life into Scripture,
into its writing
and into its reading,
so that the words on the pages are not simply ink,
but the living voice of God.

And as the living voice of God, when we read scripture
we are invited into a conversation with God.
A conversation where the spirit of God is active and alive in us
inviting us into truth.
We may discover that we need to disagree with the Scriptures,
to argue with God
just as Abraham did in the book of Genesis,
or to shout at God
just as the psalms so often shout lament and scream.

We may find contradictions in Scripture, because God needed to have different conversations
with the people at different times,
we may find principles that we then need to apply in different ways today.
We may find commands that Jesus ignored,
and new ways of living that he commanded.
We may find things that turn our stomachs, and things that fill us with joy.

But when we read these living, breathing, scriptures, we are able to join a conversation with our
living and breathing God,
and be encouraged and equipped
for the life of faith.

And that's the final part of this famous verse.

“All scripture is inspired by God,” writes Paul, “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.”

Scripture is useful.

It's not just to be read for enjoyment - though reading the bible is often entertaining.

It's not even just to be read as a way of having a conversation with God.

Scripture is useful,

because it shapes us.

When we pay attention, Scripture tells us how to live our lives

as the people of God.

And it equips us, it trains us, it educates us, with the essentials of what we need to do the work God has called us to do.

Or, as we'll pray in a few weeks,

“Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”