

In the 1960s I attended with my family the First Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville. Like most good Presbyterians, we were studying the Covenant Life Curriculum. This was a series that gave us many great resources: Shirley Guthrie's book, Christian Doctrine and A.A. Rhodes book, The Mighty Acts of God which was a survey of the Bible. In those days in the Junior High classes we were studying material that told us "the Bible is your story." I remember thinking that it was not my story. I asked secretly the question, "How could it ever become my story?" I laughed, no... I made fun of the idea. As I grew into my late teens, I began to have questions. I never suspected my questions would lead to some lifelong convictions. I never imagined I would someday stand up somewhere and say, "We Are People of the Book."

I heard a seminary president use these words in 1985. Literally, Randy Taylor was on his way to San Francisco to become President of San Francisco Theological Seminary. He had been for years the pastor at the Myers Park church in Charlotte. He had just ended his time of service as Moderator of the General Assembly of our new denomination. This was 1985 and I was quite a bit intimidated by who he was. After all, he came to the Shelby church to baptize one of his grandsons. His daughter and son-in-law were active members. It was only appropriate to invite Dr. Randy Taylor not only to baptize his grandson but to preach as well. He preached that Sunday a sermon entitled, "With a Name Like Presbyterian, It's Got to Be Good!" As he spoke about the faith of Presbyterians, he made clear one of the essential realities. "Presbyterians are people of the Book." The Bible is vital for our life as believers.

This morning we have read from the prophet Jeremiah and from Paul's letter to Timothy. Here are two pieces of evidence that call out to you and me and remind us "we are people of the book." By this I mean, we are held together by a faith-relationship with God. The Bible is the sourcebook of this faith relationship. Someone has called the Bible "God's love story with the world." It is a collection of many stories and letters and good news about the God who loves the world and even you and me.

We need this reading from Jeremiah because we need its promise. For 300 years, the prophets had announced there would be consequences for the behavior of God's people. Tiny Israel was a buffer between Persia and Egypt. God seemed to use these great powers to bring about his judgment on Israel. The covenant God had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had gotten so heavy and vague. It had gotten to be all about doing what the religious leaders said to do. The memory of God's deliverance out of Egypt was fading. That story was a long time ago. How it relates to Jeremiah's day and age was not clear. Religions give people certain duties and responsibilities. Sometimes people who try to be religious wonder why they are doing what they are doing. They dress up their faithfulness and drag themselves back into the religious place where they hope someone can help them make sense of life. What was needed was God holding on to these new people and offering them hope. God had not forgotten them. So he spoke of a new covenant, a new agreement, a new thing God was going to do with his people.

We need this reading from Timothy because we need its affirmation. Paul, the Apostle, believes with all his heart and soul in the grace and gospel of Jesus Christ. He used to be out there dragging Christians into prison. Now he is preaching their good news. Now he wants to go to every person and share with them the good news about Jesus Christ. He even uses prison time as ways to talk to inmates and guards and wardens about the unique thing God is doing in Jesus Christ. Imagine if you are a protégé of Paul, the Apostle and your name is Timothy. I wonder if one of Timothy's issues is timidity.

Whatever Timothy's need, Paul wrote him and challenged him to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

There were going to be some rough times in the church. If anyone would have known, Paul would have. He helped create churches from Antioch in Syria all the way to the port city of Corinth in Greece. Some believe he wanted to plant churches in Spain and that is why he wrote a letter to the church in Rome explaining the gospel so elaborately.

So...he encourages Timothy to continue in what he has been taught. He ties these lessons to scripture. He explains the importance of scripture by saying this.

“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.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

We need promises. We need affirmations. We need God’s Word around which we can build the story of our own lives.

In 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was brought to this country by Reinhold Niebuhr. Things were looking bad in Germany. To preserve this amazing Lutheran theologian, Niebuhr pulled strings to get him as a special lecturer at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Bonhoeffer came very reluctantly. When he got to Union Seminary, he constantly thought about what was happening back in his homeland. He knew there were difficult days ahead. He knew he should be part of that struggle. The question arose where he would attend church. Harry Emerson Fosdick had become the great liberal prince of the American pulpit at the Riverside Church. Every Sunday, he would preach what some have called sermons that provided psychological counseling for worshippers. For all Fosdick’s popularity and eloquence, Bonhoeffer realized he did not need liberal eloquence. He wanted the word of God. Instead of attending Fosdick’s Riverside worship, he went to the Broadway Presbyterian Church where he heard Dr. McCombs preach from the Bible. Bonhoeffer lasted only 26 days in New York. His heart and soul led him to return to Germany to be part of a struggle that would demand his own life. (333, Metaxas)

A Christian woman was in an automobile accident. Her back was broken and she was paralyzed from her neck down. For six weeks, she lay in the hospital, alternating between periods of total and partial consciousness. Fully aware of the gravity of her injury, she died with Christian fortitude and resignation. In the last tragic days her only concern was for her three boys—her husband and her two sons. “Who will look after my three boys?” she asked. And her three boys wondered the same thing for the heart went out of them when she died. But the following Sunday they were in church, and Dr. William E. Hill, their pastor, preached from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him Who is the help of my countenance and my God.” The word of God came to my uncle Ben and my father and my grandfather. They were her three boys. (123, Rose)

You see we are people of the book. By faith, by the Spirit of God, this loving God continues to speak to us about the lives we live. We need God’s promises. We need God’s affirmations. We need all that the scriptures hold for us.

So continue in your devotional readings. Continue in your circles and Sunday school classes. Continue reading the Bible on your own. Continue coming to worship knowing that this Bible is the word of God made real through our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Almighty and Eternal God, we thank you this day for your truth. We thank you for the word that we hear and read and seek to digest. We give you thanks and praise for your Word, who we know as Jesus Christ. Keep reminding us that this Bible is our story. Keep reminding us that we are indeed people of this book, the Bible. Speak to us through it and by it. Grant us release and relief and hope and direction and joy in all the ways we need it most. Empower us with your word for living life so that we may be a city set on a hill, so that we may be a light not under a bushel basket. Empower this church to be the spiritual home continually that it**

**has been for years. Guide this congregation and continue building its people...reminding them who they are. Use them to share you good news with the world. Use them to share your compassion and your love through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior who teaches us to pray...Our Father who art in heaven...**

Metaxas, Eric, Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2010.  
Rose, Ben L, On Our Way Rejoicing.