

August 12, 2018  
National Presbyterian Church  
**Can You Know God?**

Psalm 19:1-4, 7-11; John 1:1-14; Romans 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 3:16-17  
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Beginning in September, *for over 30 weeks*, we'll be working our way through the stories in the Bible, from beginning to end, and our Goal is to

- gain a knowledge of Biblical content
- and a sense of the flow of God's work in history
- and hopefully (and more importantly) a deeper sense of the flow of God's work within our own lives today – not just in *their* lives, back then, but in *ours today*.

Of course, some people argue that the Bible is “not really a book worth focusing-on” at all. So Tim Keller – in his book, “The Reason for God,” quotes two successful people in the New York world of finance, like this:

One is a man called Charles, who says: "I see much of the Bible's teaching as historically inaccurate, so we can't be sure that the Bible's account of events is what really happened."

And then a woman called Jaclyn, answers "I'm sure you're right, but *my* biggest problem with the Bible is that it is culturally obsolete. So it is *impossible* to accept the Bible as the authority that Christians think it is."

The Reason for God, p.97

And these kinds of thoughts are common. BUT then, on the other hand, you've got an author like Ann Rice, who after being a devout atheist for 30 years, began reading scholarly books debunking the value of the Bible, and became amazed at *how weak* their arguments were:

She writes:

Some (of these academic) books were no more than assumptions piled on assumptions... Conclusions were reached on the basis of little or no data at all... The whole case for the nondivine Jesus who stumbled into Jerusalem and somehow got crucified...that whole case which had floated around *the liberal circles I frequented* as an atheist for thirty years— was not made.

Not only was it not made, I discovered in this field some of the most biased scholarship I'd ever read.

Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt, pp.313-14

And so the debate can go on and on: about the origins of the Bible, or the interpretation of the Bible, or the accuracy and relevance of the Bible.

And there's a time to enter those debates (*I've spent years of my life doing this; and I'm happy to answer questions wherever possible*)

But, as with most arguments about complex issues, there is no simple answer *that can end the debate forever*, and there comes a point where you realize that you have to *hang your hat* somewhere! And obviously, with respect to the Bible, *I've hung my hat* on the positive side, and wholeheartedly believe the words I affirmed as a PC(USA) pastor, words enshrined in our constitutional “Book of Order,” which every pastor, elder and deacon has to affirm: that

"the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, by the Holy Spirit,  
(1) the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal,

(2) and God's Word to me"

In other words, this Book is "by the inspiration of God's Spirit" – this is God's word to me." It's *not the only word* from God to me, but it's an important one.

In fact, *when it comes to asking "Whether or not we can know God?"* – that is, know *about* God in terms of facts; but more than that, truly KNOW God as if God were personal – like a person – Christian faith has always responded "YES!"

**AND that there are *three* primary ways to do this, ways chosen by God to reveal God's self.**

Three primary ways for God *to be revealed* –

Three primary words or books through which God *chooses to speak about himself* – and *so to become known*.

**I. The ultimate "book," of course, that reveals who God is, is *the person of Jesus* -- the open book of the life of Jesus.**

PAUL HARVEY used to tell a story about *a man who would not go to church on Christmas Eve*, because he simply *didn't believe the story to be true*: that in the birth of Jesus, God became incarnate, God became one of US, taking on flesh and blood. It was just too far-fetched. And so on one Christmas Eve when the family went to church, he stayed home.

As they left for church, Paul Harvey says:

"Snow began to fall, and minutes later the man was startled by a thudding sound...then another, and then another. Sort of a thump or a thud..."

At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front door to investigate he found no snow balls – but instead -- a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow: *they'd been caught in the storm and, in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window.*

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony: that would provide a warm shelter, if he could direct the birds to it. He tried everything he could to get their attention he "shooed" and "cajoled" all he could -- *but nothing worked.*

And then, he realized that *they were afraid of him*. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me ...that I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how? When any move I make, tends to frighten them, or confuse them. They just won't follow. They won't be led, or helped, because they're afraid!

And then it came to him: "*If only I could be a bird, and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them, so they could see, and hear and understand.*"

And it was precisely at that moment – Paul Harvey says – that the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind.

And he sank to his knees in the snow: *Now I see! Now I understand!*

John's Gospel puts it like this:

<sup>1:14</sup> And the Word (the Son of God – Jesus) became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,

the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

<sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,

who is close to the Father's heart,  
who has *made God known*

So in order to help us know *who he is* and *what he wants for us* in order to bring us *into relationship with himself*, God chose to make “face-to-face contact” with us! God came to us as a person – face-to-face, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. *And SO for Christians – Jesus is clearly the “ultimate word of God.” – BUT he's not the only “word”*

What we learn from our Psalm today (Psalm 19) -- written hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, is that God speaks to us in *two other* primary ways as well in *what the late Princeton Theologian, Diogenes Allen (see his “Christian Belief in a Post-Modern World”), calls --*

- The Book of nature or creation
- and the Book of scripture.

Psalm 19 begins by describing the effect of the “The Book of Nature.”

Remember?

The heavens are telling the glory of God  
and the skies proclaim His handiwork  
Day to day pours forth speech.  
And night-to-night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech or words (as such) their voice is not heard.  
BUT (still) their voice goes out through all the earth  
and their words to the end of the world.

Isn't this *an amazing thought?*

– that God designed the universe on purpose

- in its enormousness and its majesty
- its mystery and its beauty;
- in its complexity as well as in its simplicity

God designed the universe to reveal himself (AND this was going on for billions of years before there were any words as such, or pens and paper) – to be a vehicle of His Word -- to you and me so that we could know him.

In other words, God is like a director of a movie or a painter or musician producing an exquisite work of art. Spend enough time with

- The art of Rembrandt or Van Gogh or Monet
- Or the music of Handel or Bach or – Taylor Swift
- Or with the movies of Spielberg, or Scorsese, or Hitchcock and you get to know them – you see inside them. They *may never speak as such* but at the same time, God can use them so that they speak volumes!!

And God Created the Universe in such a way – that without a word, it speaks volumes – pours forth speech – *about who God IS. And Why?* Well, “Because God wants to be known: BY US!” Not only for us to “Know about him” but: to know him! Directly! As a person.

Donald Miller in his book *Blue Like Jazz* describes a time when he came to know God in this way *after hiking* through the Grand Canyon.

He says he was in pain caused by the hike (and I probably would be too) and at the end of the day he simply began to talk to God.

He says

Beneath the billion stars and beside the river I called out to God softly. There's something quite beautiful about the Grand Canyon at night. There is something beautiful about *a billion stars* held steady by a God who knows what He is doing. They hang there *like notes on a page of music free form verse, silent mysteries swirling in the blue -- like jazz.*

And as I lay there it occurred to me that God is up there somewhere.

Of course I'd always known He was. But this time I felt Him.

I realized it -- the way a person realizes they are hungry or thirsty.

*The knowledge of God seeped out of my brain and into my heart.*

I imagined God looking down on this earth half angry because his beloved mankind had cheated on Him and committed adultery  
-- and yet -- hopelessly in love with us, drunk with love for us:  
with love for earth and for her people.

So here is this powerful revelation of God in Creation/Nature

[*and I hope we make the time to get back there, out from the city TO the mountains and the ocean; or to a sky that is truly dark – blue like jazz -- and feel it.*]

So God has given us “**THE BOOK OF NATURE**” --“*The heavens declare the glory of God,*” says Psalm 19.

**But that's only half the psalm:** what Psalm 19 also says is that what God has also given us, is “**THE BOOK OF SCRIPTURE.**”

Look at Psalm 19:7: all of a sudden at v. 7 in Psalm 19, *there is a shift*

- We move from the *Painted Picture* of God in creation
- to the *Wordy/Verbal Picture* of God in Scripture

In v.7, the word for “Scripture or Bible,” is “the Law.” And the word for “Law” in Hebrew is the word “Torah,” and Torah in Hebrew means far more than *laws or rules and regulations* (though it includes those things). To a faithful Jew, *God's Law or Torah* also included all kinds of *stories, instructions and teaching*. And to the Psalmist “the Law” – his Bible -- almost certainly the first 5 books of our Bible:

“*The Law of the Lord*” was “*perfect.*”

-- not as a scientific text book

-- nor as a mechanical manual

-- but *for letting us know Who God Is, and What God wants for us*

- “The Law of the Lord is perfect,” says the Psalmist, in that it revives the soul!  
*Does God want you to live a life filled with energy? Yes! Read about it in the book..*
- The decrees of the Lord are sure making wise and simple.  
*Does God want you to know how best to navigate your way through life? Yes! Read about it in the book.*
- The precepts of the Lord are right rejoicing the heart.  
*Does God want you to experience joy in life? Of course! Learn about it in the book.*
- The commandment of the Lord is clear enlightening the eyes.  
*Does God want you to see the path ahead clearly? Absolutely! Read about it in the book.*

- The fear of the Lord is pure enduring forever.  
*Does God want us to have a relationship with someone who is stronger than all our fears? Absolutely! You can find how this is possible in the book.*
- The ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.  
*Need some true truth in a world of fake news and alternative facts? This is the book to turn to.*
- More to be desired are they (says Psalm 19) than gold.  
*Not feeling particularly wealthy? Need some gold? Well this is where you gain your sense of wealth says the Psalmist: from this book, this treasure that God has given to us.*

Is this how you see the book? Not everybody does – *even within the church!* The twentieth German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, put to death for his part in a plot against Hitler in WWII, had grown up in the church, and had even become a professional theologian, *but* it was not until he was 25 that the Bible *came alive for him* this is what he writes

BUT Something has happened – something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible

(NOTE: not literally, as he goes on to explain)

*I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, and talked and preached about it—but I had not yet become a Christian.*

(What does this mean? I think it means that he'd never entered into a relationship with the God who wants to be known?)

*Also I had never prayed, or prayed only very little. For all my loneliness, I was quite pleased with myself. Then (he writes) “the Bible!” It freed me from that. Since then everything has changed. It was a great liberation.*

And elsewhere he adds:

*We should not forget that every word in Holy Scripture  
-- is a love letter directed very personally -- from God to us*

Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography, 205-205

and *That's the change that did it:* this sense that God is relational; that God is like a lover, desperate both to know us and to be known *by* us – to be revealed too us not just in our head, but in our hearts

AND FOR THIS TO HAPPEN God has given us three key books

- The Book of the *Life of Jesus*
- The Book of Creation/*Nature*
- and The Book of *Scripture*

What a tragedy it would be if we rarely or never picked them up and read.

And on the other hand, how wonderful and transformative it would be if we realized the enormous privilege that is ours: To know the God who made us! And Who in Jesus Christ redeemed us.

God has given us the books. May we – as individuals and as a congregation together this fall and whenever possible, pick them up and read

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