

August 26, 2018  
National Presbyterian Church  
**Jesus' Summer Reading**

Luke 4:1-30

Dr. David Renwick

Beginning in September, through next May (with a break during Advent), in all our SS classes and our preaching, we'll be working our way through selected stories in the Bible, from beginning to end. And our goal will be to gain a knowledge of Biblical content, and a sense of timeline of the Biblical stories.

We'll spend a lot of time on this! And a legitimate question is WHY? Why so much bother with the Bible? It's an old book: why keep at it?

This is the question I want us to think about today, just as we did a couple of weeks ago. What I said two weeks ago was this: that while the Bible is an old book, what Presbyterians have always believed (along with other Christians) is that it has always been and remains *one of the primary vehicles chosen by God to make himself known*.

Not that we can know everything about God: God is infinite – there is no possible way we can know everything there is to know about God! But what we believe is that God wants to let us know *enough about God's-self* for us to enter into a living and loving relationship with God; to enter into a life-giving relationship with God that lasts for eternity. And that God has chosen three primary vehicles or channels to do this – to make himself known!

1. The first is what we call "**the Book of Nature**": God's creation.

The creation is just like a movie, or a work of art, or music. The creation tells us something about the creator. For example, invest yourself in the art of Van Gogh, Beethoven, Scorsese or Hitchcock, and you'll come to know them.

So God's self-revelation begins with "the Book of Nature"

2. And then goes on to what we call "**the Book of Scripture**."

For all its complexity and humanity, the Bible is God's love letter to us, helping us to know God's will and heart. And if we read it, again and again, just as we might read a love letter, then we'll come to know, see inside, the heart and mind of the One who loves us.

So the Book of Scripture is God's second chosen means of becoming known

3. But, then, God has up his sleeve yet a third way of becoming known, up front and personal: what we call "**the incarnation**."

God chooses to reveal himself to us not just in stuff, and not just in a book, but as a person, becoming one of us – entering our world in the person of Jesus, God incarnate, who makes God known in his living and teaching and suffering and dying and rising; loving us passionately (as Alice Ridgill shared so wonderfully last week).

So, in order to see what God is like, we look ultimately to Jesus, and as we do so, we come round in a full circle:

Because Jesus himself – in order to share what God is like so we can know God – turns to both the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture, and thus confirms their critical importance for his life, and therefore, for our lives too.

So, for example, when it comes to God's revelation in nature – you see Jesus' interest most clearly in the stories he tells that we call “parables.” These are stories in which he speaks about

- Sowing seed in a field (Matthew 13)
- Weeds growing up with wheat (Matthew 13)
- Fruit trees bearing fruit in due season (or not! John 15:8; Mark 11:12-25)
- Branches that need to be pruned (John 15:2)
- Birds of the air and Lilies of the field (Matthew 6:25-34)

In other words: the world of nature is important to Jesus. He sees nature as filled with God-Given stories that reveal “Who God is,” and “What God is like,” and “How God wants us to live.”

So Jesus turns repeatedly to the Book of Nature.

But he also turns to the Book of Scripture to teach about God, and not just to teach others – but to follow the will of God for himself. As the “Son of God” – sure: he knows God intimately. But as the “Son of Man” (human like us) he needs to grow and learn just as we do.

This is something – this human side of Jesus, dependent on Scripture – we see most clearly (especially with respect to Scripture) in our chapter today, in Luke 4, when Jesus leads a service of worship in his home town of Nazareth; and, before that, when we read about Jesus being tested and tempted in the desert.

**I. This tempting and testing** comes right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry at a critical moment. And the purpose of the devil is clear: the stakes are high, since with just one sin, one error, one weakness, and Jesus' ultimate mission is over because Jesus can only die for the sins of others if he himself is not a sinner! He can only die FOR YOU AND ME if he's without sin! Otherwise he has to die for himself, for his own sins.

So everything's at stake when the devil says “turn this stone into bread,” OR “just worship me,” OR “jump down from the pinnacle of the temple.” The devil is trying to tell Jesus how to win the world – which is, of course, what Jesus came to do: to win the world – for God! . . . but only by suffering and dying as the sinless lamb of God. NO other way would work.

But the devil suggests a much easier way. Win the world:

- by providing only economic security – endless bread;
- by engaging in political expediency – cutting corners to achieve your ends;
- by depending on the spectacular – controlling the news by the bizarre! By showmanship.”

It's all so easy. But wrong . . . NOT GOD'S WAY, and Jesus knows it, and resists – is able to resist – because deep within, he knows there really is such a thing as truth; he knows who God is and what God wants; and he knows this from the Book of Scripture.

Did you notice the little phrases repeated in our passage? – “It is written” or “It is said”?? – they are so important.

- It is written, “One does not live by bread alone”
- It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him”
- It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”

These phrases are what we call “Hebrew circumlocutions.” That is, they are “round-about ways” of speaking about God, which was very important for a faithful Jew: you never wanted to speak God’s name directly because it was too holy; So you spoke about God as “Heaven” (in the gospels, the kingdom of heaven is identical to the kingdom of God).

Or – you expressed yourself in the passive voice – to avoid God’s name altogether. So, the passive: “IT is written,” means “God has written”; and the passive: “IT is said,” means “God has said.” And armed with what God has said and written in Scripture, Jesus fights off the devil, and wins the day.

The late Fred Craddock once said that in this story:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, is armed with Scripture. Scripture both generates and sustains faith. If Scripture is set aside, not even miracles will help.

Interpretation Commentary on Luke, p.56

And Professor N.T. Wright adds

Jesus responds to the devil, not by attempting to argue (arguing with temptation is often a way of playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist), but by quoting scripture.

- What God says is that physical needs and wants are important, but loyalty to God is more important still.
- What God says is that Jesus is indeed to become the world’s true lord, but the path to that status is humble service (and finally death), not a devilish seeking after status and power.
- What God says is that the power that Jesus has, which he will shortly display, does not mean acting stupidly to force God into doing cheap stunts or the spectacular. but for restoring life and strength to others.

Luke for Everyone, p. 44 (slightly adapted)

SO Jesus resists the devil, and stays on course with God’s mission for his life, by turning to what he knows about God – God’s self-revelation and will made known in Scripture.

But what’s even more fascinating (to me at least), is that the Scripture he uses is not in his hand (he has no pocket Bible with him: there’s no such thing, of course, in his day!), but it’s in his head!! AND THE QUESTION IS: How did it get there? How?

To which the answer is straightforward – and unspectacular!

- It got into his head in the summer-time of his life, when he wasn’t being tested or tempted, or suffering or dying, or facing some awful crisis of faith
- It got into his head week by week as he went to the synagogue in Nazareth, with others. And there he read (or heard) the book, again, and again, and again until it was a part of him; until the one to whom the book pointed, his Father, was a part of him.
- So that when the winter of life came – testing and trial and temptation and death – he was ready: his relationship with God was strong! Not just God’s Word, but God’s Life was in him: in his mind, and in his conscience; in his heart and in his will

Listen again to Luke 4: at v.14

<sup>14</sup>Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

<sup>15</sup>He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

<sup>16</sup>When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.

Simple really: small words, unspectacular. You learn a language, a skill, a trade, a level of expertise; you develop a relationship by constant attention over the long haul – “as was his custom.” In other words: sabbath by sabbath, week after week, and maybe more.

Some people might say – “Well, if only I had gone to seminary, or studied the Bible in college, I would know the book.” Maybe so!

But let me share that, for me, it was neither at college or seminary that I learned the book! In fact, at seminary I tested out of basic Bible when I arrived! Not because I learned the Bible in college (all I did was Math). No! I tested out because I’d read a small portion of Scripture almost every day from age 13, as a child. If I could do it; well, any and all of us can do it.

<sup>16</sup>When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

<sup>17</sup>and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: (he knew where to look)

<sup>18</sup>“*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,* <sup>19</sup>*to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*”

<sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus knew where to look! He knew the book! He’d read it again and again in the summer time of his life, so that God, His father in heaven could give him the power and wisdom he needed for the winter-time:

- Not only to resist the devil when he came
- But to set the whole direction for his life, for his mission and character.

And if this was the case for him; if that’s how God revealed himself to Jesus, and if we call ourselves his followers; if he is our pattern and mentor, then that’s how it ought to be for us too.

Jack Wellman – wrote this:

I never knew my real father. My mother had many husbands and I was dumped at my aunt and uncle’s to live with when I was very young.

My aunt and uncle already had a house full of their own children.

They had seven children plus me and my bigger brother – so along with my aunt and uncle, this made eleven in one house.

I ended up claiming the closet as my own bedroom (DR: like Harry Potter!). When my mother finally did come for my brother and me, even if it was for a short time, we had a new step-father. In all those years and in all my mother’s different marriages, I never heard the phrase, “I love you,” but I did remember being screamed at, spit on, shouted at, and cussed out more than once.

What an arrogant young boy I was when I left home at 16. I had such hostility that I often got into fights with men who were much older than I was. I couldn’t stand even the slightest

insult. I flew off the handle at just about anything. If it could be smoked, I smoked it, if it could be shot up, I did it. If it was drinkable, I drank it, and if it was of value, I stole it. I ended up homeless, impoverished, no family, no money and finally in prison.

After serving for about two years, I knew that I was getting ready to get out. None of my actual relatives wanted to have anything to do with me. I remember nearing my release realizing that I had no home, no car, no job (not likely to find one either being a convicted felon), and no family.

I was so down that the only way I could look was up: I attempted a feeble prayer but thought, who was I? One day a trustee brought us books, and at the very bottom of the stack there was a torn and tattered Bible.

I asked him for it and signed to check it out.

Irony of ironies I found (right there in prison, about to be given my freedom) that the God of the Bible was the only true source of freedom.

I opened the Bible up and read Psalm 22.

(he had no clue that this was the passage Jesus had in his memory and quoted from, on the cross, in the deepest winter of his life)

Imagine what I felt when I read some of these verses. I thought that they were written for me!

*<sup>1</sup>God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? <sup>19</sup>But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me.*

It was a fearful thing getting out, because, as most people might not realize, there was a strange comfort in prison: I was going from something that I knew well to an outside world that had rejected me. I had no idea what I would do after I got out.

But here – in reading the Bible -- I felt so connected, and as if God were speaking to me. I cried and poured out my heart and asked God to provide a way for me out in the world

All of the self-sufficiency disappeared, all of the pride of life was gone,

The former alcoholic, the former drug addict, and after prison, the former homeless man had reached the end of his rope. I came to the end of myself. And there was God...waiting all the time.

<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/how-i-was-set-free-in-prison/>

[Jack Wellman – left prison, obtained two degrees, and is now a pastor]

God is passionate to be known

and to give us life through a relationship with our maker that never ends.

God has made himself known

- In the Book of Nature (creation)
- and in the Book of Scripture (inspiration)
- and in the Person of Jesus (incarnation) who listened for God's word, and depended on God's word in both the Book of Nature and Scripture

If we are his followers, surely this must be our summer reading too?

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2017 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>  
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800