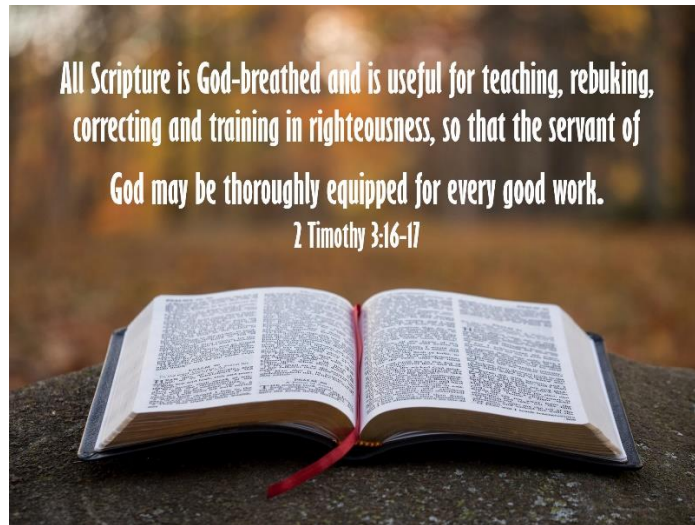


Sermon – October 16, 2022
“Continue in what you have learned and firmly believe”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: 2 Timothy 3:14—4:5

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts anew, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a transforming blessing, conforming us to Christ's image and guiding us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord to you this morning. I am curious if anyone has an experience from using this greeting that they would be willing to share? Let me encourage us to move from “Hey there” to using this greeting as we meet all people, and as we do, to be prepared to testify to the hope within that lies at its source. Thanks to everyone who helped with the blessing of the animals event last Sunday. We enjoyed getting to meet more of our canine family and enjoyed fellowship as they were blessed. I hope that someone will bring a pig, sheep, or alpaca for a blessing. While that might scare a lot of the dogs, their presence would be interesting. I also want to thank everyone who has agreed to participate in the leadership of the church in the coming year and to let everyone know that if your heart is stirred to be involved with a committee, there is an ample room for you to get involved and be part of the ministry of our church. We have room for you. Just let us know where your heart is stirred to serve.

We are nearing the end of Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul continues to remind Timothy of the many aspects of faith needed as he engages false teachers in Ephesus. The focus in this part of the letter is on scripture. Paul begins by assuring Timothy that he should continue in what he has known from childhood and learned from his teachers including his grandmother, mother, and Paul. Paul's statement brings to light a great question that I trust would return many touching stories if we could ask each person where they learned what they now firmly believe. I suspect I would hear stories of people who impacted our lives through their own ministry as workers in the kingdom of God. Think for a moment about where we learned about faith, about salvation through Jesus. Maybe as a child we were taught by our parents, grandparents, or other family members. I am sure that as children many of us were in church most every Sunday. As young adults, maybe there were other peers in our lives who helped us grow in faith as they shared what they were learning. Perhaps we recall a pastor who was used by Holy Spirit and shared the Gospel with us in a manner that enabled us to understand more completely the love of God seen in the love Jesus demonstrates through his suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead. I can find in my own memories many examples of family members, friends, peers, and even radio broadcasters who were part of my own faith journey. Hopefully, we each have a memory of a person who was filled with the love of Christ and let that love overflow into our hearts so that it bore fruit and produced memories of Christ's love that will never be forgotten until that love is renewed in heaven. Many, I think, would point to reading of the scriptures as a source of growing knowledge about Jesus and a help for our growth in faith. In my own story, I would include being part of teams of people that served on mission trips to help others in need and to encourage those in difficult places with the love of Jesus. Perhaps, for some of us, accountability groups have been or are a place where we are being transformed by the love of Christ as demonstrated through other believers whom we are seeking to walk with in faith. Some might mention in their faith journeys times of prayer and other times of listening for the guidance of Holy Spirit and then seeking to obey his guidance. And I am sure some would mention scripture they carry in their hearts as a source of learning about faith.

In this morning's scripture reading, Paul reminds Timothy how he has known the sacred writings from his youth, pointing to the Jewish practice of a mother teaching her children God's word. Paul then writes a reminder to Timothy, telling him that "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.”ⁱ These are a couple of verses we might want to underline in our Bibles and keep on our hearts.

Paul was a Pharisee. Paul, as a young child, would have memorized the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. He would have known the words found there frontwards and backwards. Keep in mind that chapter numbers and verse numbers were not assigned to the scriptures until the 13th century. Paul would have been able to recite any line in response to a request from anywhere in those books without the aid of references. Knowing this helps us understand Paul’s statements such as “somewhere it says” when he references scripture. If that is not enough, as a candidate for becoming a Pharisee, Paul would have learned the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the psalms, judges, prophets and all of the writings by memory. Paul had God’s word in his mind. When Paul refers to scripture in these verses, he is not referring to all of the Old and New Testaments. Paul is in the process of writing the inspired words that he is being given that will make up some two thirds of the New Testament. The second letter to Timothy is an example from that corpus. Throughout Paul’s writing, in the Gospels and throughout all the rest of the New Testament, we will find many references to the Old Testament scriptures and how they instruct us about Jesus. We need to know the Old Testament to better grasp who Jesus is, how he fulfills scripture, and how he reveals God more completely.

Paul tells us in verse 15 that the sacred writings are able to instruct us for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. What Paul is telling us is that when we view the Old Testament words in light of Jesus Christ, they have power to lead us to salvation. Paul sees Jesus as the climax of the story that is given through the Bible as it moves from humanity in relation with God, through the fall, and then the rescue or restoration of humanity by God to God through Jesus. Paul is most likely contrasting the false teaching Timothy is encountering in Ephesus, teaching that may be stressing only a few aspects of scripture and as such is teaching that cannot deliver the promise of salvation.

Let’s spend a few minutes looking at what scripture is and what it is not. In the Old Testament, scripture is the word of God. God either directly speaks His word, as at Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments, or God breathes His word into people He chooses. These are prophets, and they share God’s word or breathe them back out, speaking them to people and often writing them down. Scripture in the New Testament is defined by what I will call the loose criteria of inspired writings by those who saw Jesus (disciples like Matthew and John) or knew

those who saw Jesus (like Mark and Luke) and is consistent with the apostolic teaching. More importantly, when the Church seeks to provide guidance into which documents were considered God-breathed, they looked to see what writings were in use in the church for teaching, reproof, correction, and training. Writings they found in use for these purposes in the church, after much deliberation, they declared as scripture. The Word of God is now the Old Testament and New Testament. When Paul is writing this letter to Timothy, scripture for him would have been the Old Testament, a source he uses often in his letters. But in one of Peter's letters, we find a comment calling Paul's writing "scripture", and that gives us the idea that Paul's letter was already being considered inspired or God-breathed and was in use to teach, reproof, correct, and train the church.

Let's explore for a few minutes the idea of inspired text. Many translations will use the words God-breathed, which is closer to the Greek and I think is closer to what occurs. The idea, as I currently understand it, is God breathes through His Spirit His Word into those He has chosen and they are to in turn to breathe, speak, or write those words for others. They are words from God. We need to pull this idea of inspiration a bit further and realize that breathed words are alive and are able to be breathed into our hearts as we hear, read, or encounter them. As the living word of God, the words we receive have the power to transform us, and as Paul states, they can be used for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. One of the constraints we encounter is that all scripture is breathed by God. That God breathed the scripture means it is all from God and does not leave us the latitude to set aside some parts of scripture as no longer relevant in light of our cultural thoughts and actions. The inspired word was, is, and always will be God's word, truth. God's word is all breathed by God and all of it, even those parts that we struggle with or that negatively impact our own lives or we don't understand, are still breathed by God. Because God's word is inspired, it is truth. When Jesus stands in front of Pilate and is asked what is truth, Jesus does not answer Pilate's question, because the Word of God, the Word made flesh, truth, is standing in front of Pilate, and Pilate cannot grasp the truth he confronts. As Jesus suffered and died, because he was the Word of God made flesh and confronted the world, we also need to understand that as we go into the world with God's word, we also will face persecution. Paul has stressed this to Timothy throughout this letter and we also need to expect persecution as we share God's word.

Let's look at the statement of Paul's about the use of scripture. Scripture is for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. Notice the first and last of these uses are similar; they both are forms of instruction. And the middle two terms are different forms of correction. Remember that Paul has stated that the sacred writings are able to instruct us for salvation through Jesus Christ. The first teaching is teaching about the things of God, teaching that is done with the utmost patience. Here the teaching is to introduce people to the truths found in God's breathed word. This teaching is a truth encounter. John Wesley held that the Law serves the purpose of allowing people to be convicted of their sin. As they are taught God's guidance as to how to live in holiness, they can reject that truth or be reproofed for their behavior. A more familiar term is conviction of sin. As people hear God's word, they can become convicted that what they hold as true is not what God holds as truth. As people encounter God's direction, they may realize they are not living as God asks them to live, and they may become convicted of their sin. As these God-breathed words work in their hearts, they seek correction in their life. A more familiar idea for correction is repentance. In response to the Word of God, they seek to turn from their sin and move towards God. We should recognize grace through faith in Christ at work in their lives. And finally, as they come to salvation, they seek training in righteousness, how to live and grow in holiness, a process we call sanctification. God's breathed word has all of these attributes available to any who will open their hearts to God's word.

Hopefully, right now we are breathing in God's word as we hear it proclaimed. The words I have pulled together for today's sermon are not scripture but are to help us encounter God's word and grow in our understanding of it and live it more fully in our lives. We can have a lively discussion about my effectiveness and the need for Holy Spirit to operate in our lives for that goal to be achieved. More importantly, we are blessed to have God's word written down in a book, the Bible. Let me share John Wesley's words about this book. "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven--how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri [a man of one book]." As Methodists, we too should be people of one book. We should read it by ourselves and in groups sharing what we encounter in its pages and encouraging each other to be people of this one book. We need to get the words of this book into our hearts and let those words teach us, reproof us, correct us, and train us in righteousness. We

can't get God's word into our hearts if our Bibles are collecting dust on a table or shelf. Find the one book, open the one book, read the one book, and seek to become a people of the one book. If you don't have a Bible, let me know and I will get one to you. If you need someone to read with, let me know and I will help you get started and encourage you to gather with others to share what you are learning. If you are already reading God's word, then challenge yourself to go deeper. Look for studies that will stretch your understanding and dare to join them. Ask Holy Spirit to open the words we are reading and bring them to life in our hearts as we read and encounter the word of God. Encourage each other to start reading and continue to read the words of God's book all of the days of our lives. Be a people of this one book.

Pray with me: Father God, we thank you for the words that you have breathed and that have been written down in the Bible for us. Holy Spirit, stir our hearts to love each other enough to read these words together and encourage each other with what we are being taught. Lord, let us be transformed into a people of one book. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.

ⁱ NRSV