

Psalm 119:97-104
II Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

19th Sunday After Pentecost, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 16, 2022

Sweet Words of Life

Introduction to the Psalm

With 176 verses, Psalm 119 is the longest of the 150 chapters in The Psalms; in fact, it's the longest chapter in the whole Bible. This psalm expounds upon "The Glories of the Law." It delights in God's instructions. God's law as revealed in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), is valued, not as a legal document, but as an occasion for the shaping of values, intuitions, and sensitivities—in short, for spiritual formation. It is God's gift to Israel and to us. Listen to verses 97-104 of Psalm 119 . . .

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Written from a Roman prison, II Timothy is one of the pastoral letters of the Apostle Paul. Along with I Timothy and Titus, they are called "Pastoral letters" to distinguish them from other letters of the New Testament, which were written to churches rather than to individual pastors. This letter was written to young Timothy, a beloved friend and co-worker of Paul. While written to a pastor, the letter is not to be ignored by the laity. Listen to these words from II Timothy 3:14 through 4:5 . . .

Sermon

The female pastor of a church in Montreal visited an agitated member in the hospital during the final stages of a terrible disease. Kindly, she sat down in a chair beside the woman, took her hand, and began to read Psalm 21:1, "The Lord is my Light..." but before she could complete the verse, the sick patient finished it for her, "...and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?"

The young minister would read one comforting Scripture after another, only to have the patient take over and complete the verses. But of course, the patient was not actually reading—the words were written on her heart. And it was no surprise that the exercise settled the disturbed woman, like a hungry baby might be stilled at her mother's breast.

Timothy had learned the Scripture, first at Lystra, from his mother Eunice, and his grandmother Lois. So too had the Scripture been instilled in the hospitalized parishioner from her earliest days, almost as if it had been given to her for such a time as this.

In our epistle lesson for today, Paul instructs young Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (II Tim. 3:14-15)

The great apostle wants Timothy to remember Paul's own teachings of the Scriptures and how they have been experienced as true. And Timothy is not to lose touch with those who taught him as a child.

Most of us can remember at least one person who has been instrumental in our faith development. A mother, a father, or a grandparent. A Sunday School teacher, a youth director, or a minister. A spouse, a friend, or a church member. Think of one of those individuals and hold that person's name up in prayer with thanksgiving. They prayed for us, they taught us, they encouraged us. Perhaps you can be that person for someone else.

Not only could Timothy remember his mother and grandmother and Paul, but there were also the elders in the area, and in time, Timothy's faith was confirmed by "many witnesses." All these people had names and were there in Timothy's memory.

No other book is comparable to the sacred writings in making one wise unto salvation. That is their main purpose, to establish a wise trust in God that leads to forgiveness and personal transformation. (Thomas Oden, *Interpretation Commentary on II Timothy*, p. 24)

Sadly, many in our day and time have not learned the Scriptures. They don't know the stories of Joseph and his coat of many colors (Gen. 37), or of baby Moses being placed in a basket in the Nile River (Ex. 1:8-2:10). They don't know the story of a woman being healed when she merely touched the hem of the garment of Jesus (Lk. 8:43-48), or of Saul of Tarsus being changed by a light from heaven on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). And they don't read Scripture on any kind of a regular basis that it might be "a lamp unto their feet, and a light unto their path." (Ps. 119:105)

Following the horrors of World War I, the former Princeton scholar Emile Cailliet, found his rationalistic upbringing had lost its hold. Nothing made sense until he opened a Bible and came to the Beatitudes and discovered that when we read the Bible, the Bible reads us. So that reading the Bible is not an end in itself, but rather a means to heighten our awareness of ourselves in relation to God.

In the Presbyterian Church in order for someone to be ordained or installed as a ruling elder, a deacon, or a minister (teaching elder), the person has to answer nine specific questions that are listed in the Directory for Worship of our Book of Order. (W-4.0404) The second of these nine questions is:

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?

While answering that question is not required of membership in the church, it would surely be advantageous for a member to affirm it for their own spiritual growth. As our

Directory for Worship states:

Through the Scriptures we hear the voice of God and find meaning, direction, comfort, and challenge for our lives. (W-5.0103)

The Psalmist declares that God’s Word makes us wise—wiser than any who ignore it. For true wisdom goes beyond amassing knowledge; it applies knowledge in a life-enhancing way—these sweet words of life.

Many Christians have testified that the Scriptures have been the vehicle through which God has changed their lives. St. Augustine heard the voices of children singing, “Tolle legae! Tolle legae!” or “Take up and read! Take up and read!” He first dismissed the chant as some sort of children’s game but eventually realized that this might instead be a call from God.

Augustine picked up a Bible and read the first passage he saw:

...let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Rm. 13:13-14)

Augustine later said he did not need to read any further, for “all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.

John Krainer was born in Baltimore. Both his parents were heavily involved with drugs and alcohol. When he was young, his mother took him to church, but that soon ended. So did his parents’ marriage. In his words:

After they divorced, I stayed with my mom who constantly changed jobs and boyfriends, moving us from home to home. I never felt grounded or secure. I remember being abused and frequently called worthless.

I began smoking and drinking at age 11, and I continued abusing substances through grade school. I was kicked out of high school my sophomore year and

left home at the age of 16. I spent the nights anywhere other than my mom's place. I ended up living in some very bad places, among the worst kind of people.

By my 21st birthday, I was in Denver, Colorado. My life was reaching the pinnacle of addiction, depression, and violence. I despised myself and any person who appeared to have a better life than I did. Consumed by so much hate and self-loathing, I would often get in fights just to feel something other than my own existence. I tried killing myself on several occasions—always ending in failed attempts. I was out of control.

At a party one night, I shot a full clip of ammunition into the car of someone I thought had stolen from me. I was duly arrested and prosecuted for two counts of attempted murder.

There I was—21 and facing up to 72 years in prison. I had no friends, no family, and no hope. However, there in my jail cell, I saw a Gideon-placed Bible. I had never read a Bible before. As I opened it up to the book of Matthew, I learned about Jesus and his love.

Matthew Chapter 5, verse 4 says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” I had never felt comfort, peace, or true love in my life. So I prayed for the first time and asked God to let me taste these things before my life was over.

In that moment, I felt the Father's arms wrap me up and his love burned so hot through me that I began to weep from my very soul. I was forever changed in one instant. I vowed to follow God and his love and to give my life to him no matter what the rest of my life would bring.

I was incarcerated for nine months. During that time, I went to addictions classes, continued my education, and earned my GED. I awaited my sentencing without an attorney. I only had Jesus. By the grace of God, I was sentenced to four years of probation and released the very next day. I was a free man.

After my release, I completed a year-long intensive program to aid my progress in resolving my addictions. I continued to feed my soul with the knowledge of Christ.

Today, I am a licensed pastor in Colorado with Teen Challenge, and I am newly married. In just a few short years, my life has been transformed from one of pain and suffering to a life of joy and service to the King. I daily thank God and his unrelenting love to call out my name in that jail cell and speak truth to me through his Word.

John Krainer had a dramatic, life-changing experience in prison, through reading the Holy Scripture from a Gideon's Bible. We may not have such a sudden and striking transformation, but I have no doubt that if we meditate daily upon the sacred writings, we will find comfort, strength, and direction in these troubled times. So that we may be equipped for every good work as servants of God. (II Timothy 3:17) Then may we declare with the psalmist:

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.
(Ps. 119:103-104)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.