Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Luke 4:16-22

“Reading Scripture”

I am pretty certain that most of you know some Bible verses by heart, or at least had heard them at one time or another. I remember going to VBS and getting stickers every evening for learning another verse. I did it for a couple of nights but then realized I wasn’t into stickers so I stopped going. Apparently around Lancaster County Bible Quizzing is a big deal in the Mennonite church and hundreds of kids participate to learn the most random passages of Scriptures.

I had a meeting this past week with like minded pastors in our Presbytery, about 8 of us, who love the church but are concerned about its direction. It was our first meeting and we went around the room introducing ourselves. Most of us had been raised from the church, except one. He said, you know all the Bible stories like Noah and Moses and even who Jesus was, I had never once heard that in my life. He had grown up with parents who literally had went out of their way to make sure he wasn’t exposed to Christianity. There are plenty of people out there who don’t know anything at all about the Bible. That is such a foreign concept for most of us because we believe that Scripture provides for us the most complete and extensive glimpse into who God is.

If we prayed and continue praying on Tuesday mornings as a spiritual discipline which is our sermon series for this season of lent, and if we have committed to fast on Maundy Thursday to understand better our calling as a church in the Scriptural mandate to reach out today in social justice, then today we ask the question and wonder how many of us have read Scripture apart from me forcing you to do it on a Sunday morning.

Remember that survey we did and I asked the question how many of us pray during the week? Most of us raised our hands, right? Then I asked how many of us fasted, and less than a handful of us did that. What if I were to ask how many of us actually open our Bibles and read them during the week, I would guess we would find ourselves somewhere between fasting and praying, but not all of us.

What we will find in both of our Scriptures today is not only are we commanded to read and know Scripture, as we are commanded to fast and pray as we have already seen, but both the people of Deuteronomy and Jesus himself used Scripture constantly as a source of rebuttal, also as a means to cultivate hope. Any of us looking for a good defense for our faith or in need of a shot of hope? Then stay with me and let’s read our Gospel lesson.

**READ**

Probably the most popular Old Testament Scripture that we have is Psalm 23 where we hear that the Lord is my shepherd. But for a Jewish person who for them the Toray, and the prophets, basically what we call the OT is their book of faith, for them the best known Scripture would have to be what we read in our First lesson in Deuteronomy. Traditionally a Synagogue service would be composed of the singing of a psalm that changed from week to week, then the recitation of this Scripture. Just like our Lord’s Prayer or our Doxology, or the Apostle’s Creed, this was done on a weekly basis so they knew this Scripture, and know this Scripture by heart.

The reason why this Scripture is so important to the people of Israel is because of its content. It beings, hear O Israel, a call to all the people, Hear Oh First Presbyterianites, or Presbyterians. There is a specific name for this Scripture, it is called the shema. Why? Because in Hebrew the word for Hear is Shema so this verse begins Shema Yishrael.

There verses lay out the foundation that there is only 1 God and that we are to love our neighbor. This Basic truth that Jesus then carries over into the New Testament as the greatest commandment of them all. This basic truth that is reflected in all of our Scripture. You do this you will be alright. But then starting at vs. 6 w hear how important it is to know these words written. Keep these words in your heart. Vs. 7 recite them to your children.

Let’s talk for a moment to those of you who have children still at home. If you sit at the table for dinner and you are together, first that is something that all of us should do anyway, but try before you say grace to read a Scripture, it could be any Scripture, and it could be different every night. It could be Psalm 23, or I Corinthians 13, or just one verse that says God is love, or something altogether different, but it is a great discipline, and it seems that it is commanded here in the Bible in Deuteronomy that our children be raised up with Scripture on the front of their minds.

We find a similar encouragement in Psalm 1 where it states: Happy are those… Again in the Psalms, Psalm 119:105 we read Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. Beginning here in the Old Testament we read that God’s word can be impactful and meaningful for us, if we would just let it be by reading it.

Let’s look at our New Testament Scripture and see how it speaks to us about the importance of making the reading of Scripture not only a priority in our Spiritual Disciplines but commanded to us by our Savior. Let’s look at Luke. We find Jesus our Savior, the hometown boy back in his home church. Vs. 16 tells us he was brought up in that synagogue in Nazareth and as was his custom, he went there frequently and in a disciplined way. This day, again the hero returning home, he was asked to read the Scripture.

Normally if you are the lay reader you read the Scripture that is provided for you and assigned to you for that day. But vs. 17 implies that he opened the scroll and “found the place where it is written”. He chose that Scripture. He knew what he was looking for and he found it and he read it. This was not what the head rabbi of the synagogue had picked out and so he changed the Scripture on the spot.

Now, it wouldn’t surprise any of us to hear that our Savior knew His prophets and so knew his Scripture. He’s supposed to know it, of course he is. But are we fully aware of how often Jesus used Scripture in order to provide him with what he needed for a specific time and a specific season in his life. Our Scripture in Luke follows right after his temptation in the wilderness where he responds to all of the temptations of Satan with Scripture which gives him the strength he needs in a time when he is weak and needs a Word to rid him of the devil’s presence.

You ever have moments, days, seasons in life like that? Where you feel that Satan is oppressive and you just need a word to help you make it through the day? These verses that we have in Luke 4 and the ones that Jesus chose should sound vaguely familiar with Isaiah 58 that we have underlined last week. These are actually from Isaiah 61 and they are well known verses especially for the 1st century Jews. As Jesus reads this Scripture: I have come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, oppressed will go free, each person sitting there in the pew, or standing around Jesus as he read in the synagogue, was able to personalize these words individually.

This is the beauty of Scripture. As they were living under the oppressive rule of the Roman government and Jesus reads the words from Isaiah that were written while their ancestors were in captivity in Babylon, they could say in Palestine, “I am the poor at the bottom of society’s economic structure, I am the captive one under the boot of the Roman soldier, I am the blind that they have just put in prison, I am the oppressed as we have no voice and no freedom.”

What happens with Scripture is that when you become immersed in it you are able to personalize it. You can read a verse and see how clearly God speaks to you about a situation in life that you are facing. I need to confess that I am excited about Pope Francis. When Pope Benedict was elected I was not happy at all. I had met him my second year in ministry outside of Rome when he came to present for us the yearly Vatican position to the Methodist and Waldensian Church. He was not at all open to our churches being seen mutually as colleagues in ministry.

But Francis, I know, we are Protestant so who cares, right? Well, about 1.2 billion people and how foolish it would be of us to disregard the leader of the largest Christian denomination in the world. But his approach to the poor and the powerless, to those picked out by the prophet and make Jesus’ favorite in his own words, well, Scripture tells us to be servants and this pope seems to understand that. I know he has a checkered past, but as I have stated before, a saint is anyone whose past has not been adequately examined. I don’t take death squads lightly, they drove both my brother and my parents out of Honduras, but I am optimistic about this Pope.

So as people today are able to interpret Scripture and see their lives through the prism of Scripture, well, the first century Jews to whom Jesus was writing certainly were able to do that as well. As Jesus finished speaking they were all thinking, boy, I wish God would come soon and fulfill that prophecy, but doesn’t Jesus read well? How in the world does the son of a carpenter read so well?

Once Jesus finishes he sits down where he is, surrounded by everyone. You see in the synagogue you sit down to preach. Now that would be interesting. Jesus then begins speaking and we see his first words as an adult that was not quoting Scripture, and the first word he uses is Today. Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Scripture doesn’t allow our todays to slip into yesterday or evolve into a vague someday. When we read Scripture we can’t think this was good for them years ago, or God was present powerfully back then, but rather Jesus’ today is our today. When we read Scripture we can’t say that we will apply the truths that we read someday in someway, it is either today or it is no way. Jesus says Today.

Jesus fulfills this Scripture and he commands us to be the ones to take action on what he has fulfilled. We read elsewhere in Matthew 5:17 that he came not to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it. Which is why it puzzles me when some want to recreate a Scripture that doesn’t exist. At least have the honesty to say that you don’t see Scripture as authoritative. In fact, what happened with the people in the synagogues is that they were not happy with Jesus saying that he fulfilled the Scripture, because for them it seemed as if nothing had changed. So their admiration turns to animosity as a result of this misunderstanding.

The discipline of reading Scripture requires that we hear God’s word as directed to us today even if the words that it contains go against our modern sensibilities, even if all of society says this is the way it is. If Scripture consistently points in a different direction we are called to follow that path.

Karl Barth was asked what was the most important lesson he had learned as a believer. He answered, Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. May God bless us and keep us as we look to make the discipline of reading Scripture one that we are committed to with fervor.