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| A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard | Prepared for the congregation of<br>Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania |
| To be delivered on July 18, 2010        | On the occasion of the Eighth<br>Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11C       |

### The Living Word

This is now part two of a five part series of sermons that I am giving on the subject of Spiritual Growth. The five things I identified as important to anyone's spiritual growth are: 1) Worship and prayer, both public and private; 2) Learning, especially the regular study of Holy Scripture, as well as other spiritually edifying material; 3) Active engagement in Christian stewardship, including working toward a personal tithe; 4) A commitment to Christian community, meaning a willingness to be held spiritually accountable; and 5) Living out your special calling of ministry, using the gifts God has given you to glorify God and to serve God's people.

Today I will be talking about number two, learning, and concentrating on the Holy Scriptures. My previous three sermons are available on the parish website, as this one will be probably sometime tomorrow. Unfortunately this series of five has been split up already and will be split again before I am done.

Has your understanding of the world and your perspective on life in general changed at all since you were in sixth grade? Have you matured in your thinking and in your relationships since you were twelve or thirteen? I ask that because that is the age when most people's Christian education ended, when they stopped participating in Sunday School, usually after their Confirmation. If you have changed at all since your early adolescence, then I would guess that your understanding of God has probably changed since then. So how have you informed your understanding of God, and of how God works in your life, in the world, and throughout history, since you were in sixth grade?

Now, I know that there are many in this congregation who can answer that question by pointing to extensive formal and informal education that they have received in their adult life. We have people who are very well informed, well read, and up to date on their religious education. In a sense, I may be *preaching to the choir* again as I did two weeks ago when I told attendants at a Sunday morning worship service how important it is to participate regularly in public worship, but I will take this opportunity to make an argument for life-long commitment to study and formation in your spiritual life. As the keystone of this argument, I would say that the most important source for your study and for your personal formation is the Bible.

When I was ordained I made the following declaration verbally, and then signed it in writing, "...I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation..." (BCP 526) Obviously, that understanding sees great value in the Bible. But it is not, what I would call, a fundamentalist approach to the Bible. In other words, the Bible contains all things necessary to salvation, but not everything contained in the Bible is necessary to salvation.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, saw it like this. He understood the Bible to be like the manger into which Mary laid the baby Jesus after his birth in Bethlehem. It contains the living Word of God. But that manger also contained other stuff: hay or other animal feed or straw, for instance. Obviously we are not to worship the straw, nor the manger itself. We bow before it, as the shepherds did that night, acknowledging the presence God's Word, but also distinguishing it from all the rest. In order to distinguish, we must be committed to reading, studying, and interpreting the Bible.

The Bible is one of the three sources of authority identified by classical Anglican theology. The three are: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. Richard Hooker called these the

“three legged stool” on which authority rests. I prefer, however, the updated image of a candelabra with three candles, the three *lights* of authority. I prefer this image because I don’t see those three sources of authority as being equal. Scripture stands above the other two as a constant corrective and normative authority. If you imagine a candelabra with one candle in the middle, higher than the other two, that one is the Bible. Of the three it is the one that is ancient and unchanging. Tradition is indeed the ongoing revelation of God through the work of the Holy Spirit, which means that it is by nature changing. As Tradition changes and evolves, it needs to be constantly compared to the Scriptures, and it cannot be counter to them. And yet, God gave us brains to think with. Reason is the final filter in our understanding of God’s Word. From its beginning Christian theology has been a reasoned attempt to make sense of God’s self-revelation. This attempt has sought to be logically consistent and sound, systematic in its approach, and in harmony with common human experience. Both Tradition and Reason are important in the interpretation of Scripture.

I have stated that the Holy Scriptures are the Word God. Jesus himself is the most perfect expression of the Word of God. Therefore we could say that the Scriptures reveal God’s Word to us in as much as they reveal the person of Jesus. Now, does that mean that the Old Testament isn’t important because Jesus doesn’t show up until the New Testament? Certainly not! Without the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, the revelation of God in Jesus of the New Testament has no context, no means by which to understand him. Most of the writers of the New Testament were so completely steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures that their whole consciousness of God was shaped by it. Jesus himself often quotes and comments on the Hebrew Scriptures. The sayings of the prophets were reinterpreted in light of him. The drama of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion is told with especial appeal not only to the prophets but the Psalms as well. Without the whole

weight of the ancient Torah of Moses behind it, and the centuries of its interpretation, Jesus' summary of the Law, to love God and your neighbor as yourself, risks sounding tinny and flat. Indeed one of the most powerful statements Jesus makes is that he does not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. The Word of God is richly revealed in the Old Testament too. That is why Murray Newman, one of my Old Testament professors from seminary, would call the New Testament the "addendum to the Bible".

God's Word is eternal. And yet God's Word is a living Word. It is dynamic. That doesn't mean that God's Word is changing, as in becoming something else. Still the Holy Spirit continues to reveal God's Word to us, and to guide us. Each generation re-interprets the Word for their times. Our understanding of the Bible has changed a lot over the years. In light of the New Testament, there is much of the Old Testament we happily ignore. Anything that has to do with the practice of the religion of the ancient Hebrews we simply don't see as pertaining to us – particularly the Levitical holiness code (Leviticus 17-26) with its dietary laws, references to obscure cultic practices, and strict definitions of what, or who, is considered unclean.

Many of the social and cultural norms that were present in the Bible have changed. The Bible isn't explicitly pro slavery, but it certainly tolerates it as a fact of life. Paul specifically taught that slaves ought to obey their masters and not seek freedom. The Bible was in fact used for centuries as a primary argument for the moral rightness and indeed the naturalness of the condition of one human being owning another. Not only that but the role of women in society and the Church has changed greatly. If we listened to some of Paul's teaching, we would not have women priests and bishops. The point is that though the Scriptures do not change, often our understanding and interpretation of them does.

Understanding and interpreting the Bible is one of the primary challenges of being a follower of Christ. Before the Reformation it was solely the job of the clergy to read and interpret the Bible. Now we must all take that responsibility, trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us. None of us reads the Bible alone. The long history of interpretation that we have inherited informs us. We can all join that conversation which has been going on for centuries. We can all be part of this messy, meandering process of discernment of God's Word.

I end with my own story of discovering. When I went to seminary I was very excited to study theology. Frankly I wasn't really interested in the Bible. I didn't have anything against it, but I was an Episcopalian, and had grown up hearing the Bible read in church every Sunday. I figured I already knew everything I needed to know about it. I couldn't have been more wrong. In fact I ended up not liking systematic theology so much but falling in love with the Bible. I found in reading and studying this ancient text beauty and poetry, wisdom and moral teaching, as well as profound characters engaged with life just as I was, struggling to do the right thing, often failing, trying to know and follow what God would have them do, people that did not have super powers, people with character flaws, people that I could identify with, have compassion for, and it was in the pages of the Bible that I came to know my savior like I had never known him before. It was, and is, in reading and studying the Bible that God challenges me constantly to be a better preacher, a better person, a better Christian. It is in the Bible that God speaks to us all; the eternal, living Word of God mysteriously speaks to us and calls us deeper and deeper into love with the divine Self and with one another.

Amen.