

What is it?

Mark 13:1-8

November 15, 2009

Today's sermon is meant especially for Sarah and Laura on this day we have given them each a Bible. But the rest of you may listen in too if you wish!

Do you remember your first Bible? If you don't because you never had a first Bible, please take home the Bible in the pew rack in front of you! I'm serious!

My first Bible was given me by my parents for my seventh birthday. It is a King James Version Bible, a red-letter edition with the words of Jesus printed in red type. The presentation page reads:

To: Our Darling Timmie Boy - on his 7th Birthday - Your First Bible

By: Mommie & Daddy

Date: April 21, 1960

My parents also included a Bible reference, 2 Timothy 1:7-8. In the King James, it reads:

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God ...

Eleven years later, I received another Bible from my parents as I prepared to head off for college. It is a New English Bible, my favorite translation at that time. In the front of the Bible, they wrote:

To our son, Tim, as you go to college

May the Word and Spirit of God revealed in this book ever be your guide through all the experiences of life that lie before you.

Do know that our prayers are with you as you take your first big step into responsible manhood in leaving for college. We hate to let you go -- but would not have it any other way.

*Our love goes with you,
Mother & Dad*

At the bottom of the page were written these verses from Philippians 1:

We thank our God whenever we think of you ... Of one thing we are certain: the One who started the good work in you will bring it to completion by the Day of Christ Jesus.

And twelve years after that, I was given another Bible, a Good News Bible, not by my parents, but by the Cumberland Association of the United Church of Christ on the occasion of my ordination to Christian ministry.

As I look at these these Bibles, I realize they tell the story of my life, marking significant milestones along the way. One Bible marked my parents hopes and prayers for the touch of God on the life of their young son. Another Bible marked my entrance in “adulthood” and the faith I took with me and made my own. And still another Bible marked my acceptance of God’s call to a life of ministry. This book has been a part of my story from the beginning and will be until the end.

Will the Bibles we have given to Sarah and Laura mark similar milestones in their lives? We do give them these Bibles with that expectation!

Will Laura receive another Bible when she is confirmed or when she graduates from high school? From her parents or from us? Maybe she will.

Will Sarah receive another Bible on the day she is ordained as a Christian minister? Maybe she will!

Maybe this book will lead Sarah or Laura into ministry. It is a high calling! It is work that is hard and stressful and very draining, but supremely joyful, a job with unmatched rewards!

We give them Bibles to be part of their stories, not as mementoes, to be carefully dusted off and put on a shelf, but to be opened and used and worn out! My three Bibles do sit on a shelf. I use the Bible, the Good News Bible, we have in the pews. That’s because it is not this or that Bible to which I am attached, but the Bible itself, what it says, what it is.

What is it?

What is this book we have presented to Sarah and Laura? Is it a book of laws, a rule book for right living?

No, it’s not. It does contain law, rules, commandments, exhortations. And what is the most important of these? Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength! And the second most important? Love your neighbor as you love yourself!

The Bible does contain commandments, but it’s not primarily a book that tells us what we are supposed to do. It’s a book that tells us what God does.

Is the Bible an answer book for life's most perplexing problems? Sometimes we use it that way, making lists of verses that deal with depression or loneliness or guilt, with facing temptations or making decisions or healing relationships or managing money.

But the Bible is not an answer book. That's not to say you couldn't live a happier and healthier life by studying it and practicing its principles, but it's no substitute for a good physician or counselor or financial advisor, or a good parent or a good friend. The Bible is not a book of answers, but a book that points you to The Answer.

Is the Bible a map, showing us the way to heaven?

No, it's not. The Bible doesn't tell us how to get to heaven, it tells us how God comes to us from heaven! It is concerned with eternal life, but in a way that has much more to do with quality than quantity, much more to do with this life than the next.

Is the Bible a storybook?

No, at least not in the usual sense, a book of stories. It's not a book of moral fables, iconic stories with a punchline. What is the moral of Moses' story? If you want your baby to grow up to be a prince, float him down a river? Introverted men with bad tempers make good leaders? Moses' story is told not to teach any life lesson, but to show him in all his humanness, to show God working through him and in him, and sometimes, in spite of him.

The Bible is not a book of hero stories, stories of remarkable men and women whose examples we would do well to emulate. Was David a hero? Would you want your son to be like him, just like him? The Bible is not a book of stories, but a book that tells a story.

If the Bible is not a storybook, is it a history book, a book that provides the definitive account of human origins and human history?

No, the Bible makes no attempt to provide a complete and unbiased account of even one people's history -- the Jews -- not to say of all the other peoples of this earth. It is a book written from faith for faith, from a specific point of view for a specific purpose. We do the Bible violence if we try to make it say and do things it never intends to say or do, if we try to make it answer questions of science or disinterested historical fact. It's like trying to paddle a canoe with a laptop: it might work, a little, but it surely ruins the laptop for its intended use!

So what is it?

A testament. The Bible is a testament. I'm not talking about Old and New Testaments, which is unfortunate language anyway, implying that two-thirds of the Bible is outdated and superseded. The Bible is a testament, a single testament, a testimony, a single-minded witness to the presence and activity of the God among us.

A testament is "something that serves as tangible proof or evidence." The Bible is a tangible witness to an intangible God. It provides palpable, visceral evidence of a God we cannot see or hear or touch.

There are other testaments, too, other witnesses. Creation itself is a testament, a witness: *The heavens are telling the glory of God.*

Our sanctuaries are testaments. The Jewish Temple was designed to reflect God's glory, to serve as a reminder both of God's presence in the midst of the people and of God's power pervading the universe.

And the Bible is a testament, a visible sign of the invisible God, an embodiment of God's voice, a revelation of God's will, a book that tells from beginning to end, in all its many forms -- poem and song and parable and law, letters and prophecies and stories and sermons, written over a period of fifteen centuries -- a book that tells, in all its diversity, the story of the relentless grace of God.

The Bible is a testament, but a testament is a sign, not the reality. What did Jesus say when one of his disciples pointed to the Temple?

You see these great buildings? Not a single stone here will be left in its place; every one of them will be thrown down ...

Jesus was speaking of historical fact, of what did eventually become of the Jewish Temple when Rome laid it to waste in 70 AD. But he was also reminding his disciples not to make too much of the sign, not to worship the sign.

A testament is a witness. Its job is to point. But its job is temporary. Its time will come to an end. The stones of the Temple will be thrown down. Creation itself will come to an end. And the Bible? Will it too no longer be needed when it has served its purpose?

When the Temple is torn down, what witness remains? When the Word is taken from us, what witness remains?

The Bible itself declares,

The word of the Lord endures forever!

But in what form? As written word? Or as living word?

And who is the living word? Jesus is the living word, the word made flesh. Jesus is God's word -- God's self -- incarnated. Jesus shows us who God is. Jesus is who God is. Jesus is the final testament, the sign that is the reality.

And Jesus is the head of which we are the body. We are Christ's body. We are meant too to be word made flesh. We are meant too to be living stories, pointing to God.

That's why we're giving Bibles to Sarah and to Laura, because we want them to become living stories! Because we want the word, the word this book contains, the word that is embodied in Jesus, the word that is Jesus, to come to life in them. We want to look at them, and see the unmistakable signs of the presence of God.

Sarah, if that's going to happen, you'll have to read this book and live it!

Laura, if that's going to happen, you'll have to read this book and practice it!

Use the book. Use it well, but don't love it. Love the One to whom it points. Day by day, year by year, learn through this book -- and through God's other witnesses -- to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength. OK? OK!