

**Sermon for the 143<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly, June 4, 2017 at Kingston, Ontario**

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**Scriptures:** 2 Kings 23:1-3; Psalm 119:9-16 (resp); John 20:30-31

**Post-Sermon Hymn:** “A Mighty Fortress”

**Sermon Title:** “The People’s Book”

**2 Kings 23:1-3** “Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. The king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.”

**Psalm 119:9-16 (responsive)**

How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word.

With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments.

I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.

Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes.

With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth.

I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches.

I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways.

I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

**John 20:30-31** – “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Let me bring you back to Jerusalem, circa 600 BC, for a moment of high comedy. Well, high drama too, but the human element captured in the timeless amber of Scripture never fails to make me smile.

There’s a major renovation underway at the Temple, which had been sadly neglected since Hezekiah breathed his last. Now, under Josiah, badly needed repairs were undertaken, curiously, we are told in 2 Chronicles, under the supervision of

“professional musicians.” Why this made more sense back then than now is lost to history.

What hasn't changed is that reno's cost money, and the priests are put to work going through the nooks and crannies of the treasury and sweeping out every shekel that could be found. In the midst of this, we are told, they found something else. Josiah has sent his secretary Shaphan to check on the progress. Listen to what happens next (2 Kings 22:8-10):

*The high priest Hilkiyah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.” When Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. Then Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, “Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the Lord.” Shaphan the secretary then informed the king, “The priest Hilkiyah has given me a book.” Shaphan then read it aloud to the king.*

I dearly love this passage. I love that only after running through the somewhat dull administrative matters, Shaphan then says, as in passing: *“Oh, and one more thing. The priest Hilkiyah has given me a book.”* Which he then reads – perhaps reluctantly - to the king.

If it is indeed Deuteronomy, as many scholars assume, I can well understand Shaphan's reluctance, demonstrated by his burying the big reveal, Columbo-like, to the last. And if it is Deuteronomy, replete with Moses' grave warnings should the people turn away from their devotion to God, I can just imagine Josiah's face. Well, we don't have to imagine; listen (2 Kings 22:11-13):

*When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded... saying, “Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”*

Inquire they did, and the result of their inquiries was a wholesale revival, and a renewal of commitment to God. As we heard in our earlier reading, *“The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his*

*commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.*” The rediscovery of the Book – the recovery of the Scriptures – brought revival, renewal and recommitment to the whole People of God.

Two hundred years later, a similar event occurred. Returned from captivity, restored to Jerusalem, the people once again gathered, and rediscovered the Book anew. Listen, as Nehemiah tells the story of that day (Nehemiah 8:1-12 passim):

*“All the people gathered together into the square. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. He read from it from early morning until midday; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ... (the Levites) helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ... And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.”*

Once again, the rediscovery of the Book brings understanding, renewal, and rejoicing to the People of God.

The story continues in the New Testament, as Jesus time and again “*opens the people’s ears*” to the Scriptures, leading to faith in him. The fledgling community of faith regularly gathers for the “*apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer (Acts 2:42).*” The people of Berea find faith and new life through the ministry of Silas and Paul, “*for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing (Acts 17:11-12).*” The author of the Gospel of John and his compilers make no bones about their purpose in writing (John 20:30-31): “*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*”

But as happened in Israel before Josiah's day, before Nehemiah's time, before Jesus's day, so it happened in the Western Christian world that the church again lost contact with the Scriptures; impoverished by a lost language, greatly limited accessibility, and a clergy sadly distanced from the source, the People of God no longer had an intimate relationship with the Scriptures; the People of the Book had lost contact with the People's Book. And the church found itself badly in need of revival, renewal and reform.

To quote Randall Zachman in Jennifer Powell McNutt's wonderful The People's Book: The Reformation and the Bible: *"One of Calvin's major criticisms of the Roman Church is that it took Scripture away from the baptized and forced them to listen to whatever those in authority wished to teach. Said Calvin: "Owing to this supine state of the pastors, and the stupidity of the people, every place was filled with pernicious errors, falsehoods, and superstition."*

To counter this, through the determined work of proto-reformers such as Wycliffe and Hus, through the efforts of scholars such as Erasmus, and through the Herculean undertakings of Martin Luther and others, the Reformation had at its foundation the Book. Through a radical re-engagement with – in many ways, through a rediscovery of – the Scriptures, the Christian life was redefined by the Reformers as having at its core the following five foundations, whose 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary we celebrate this year: Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone); Sola Fide (by Faith Alone); Sola Gratia (by Grace Alone); Solus Christus (through Christ Alone); and Soli Deo Gloria (To the Glory of God Alone). And at the foundation of all these Solae was, as in the Old Testament reformations we encountered earlier, the virtual rediscovery of, re-engagement with, and recommitment to, the Scriptures.

Reflecting this, in the early days of the Reformation, Luther, accused of heresy and of promulgating false doctrine, famously defended himself with these words:

*"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the Pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Therefore, I am neither willing nor able to recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against one's conscience. (To which tradition adds the famous line:) Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God. Amen."*

Desperate for the common folk to have a vibrant and engaging translation of the Scriptures in their mother tongue, Luther revolutionised Germany and the German language with a wonderful vernacular translation of the Scriptures in the common speech, as he claimed, “of the baker, the farmer, the housewife.” Gutenberg’s press made the publishing of Luther’s New Testament a phenomenon, with thousands sold in the first few months alone, an unimaginable number in those early days. Other translations soon followed, and press by press, language by language, the Book was restored to the hands of the people, and the world was forever changed. As was the church, restored to its proper relationship with the Word. Said Luther: *“It is not God’s Word just because the church speaks it; rather, the church comes into being because God’s Word is spoken. The church does not constitute the Word, but is constituted by the Word.”*

Our own John Calvin shared this vision of a church in which the Scriptures were at the centre of the Church’s life, and in the hands of the people; writes Zachman in The People’s Book, Calvin’s ideal was a church *“that everywhere resembles the Jews of Beroea, in which Christians listen to the preaching of their pastors with open and eager minds, while also searching the Scriptures daily to make sure that what they are being taught comes from God and not from the imagination of the human mind... for the Scripture is the true touchstone whereby all doctrines must be tried.”* Over against the Roman claim that Scripture lacks clear meaning without the authority of the church determining it, Calvin claims that Scripture always comes with the enlightenment of the Spirit, who leads us to its true meaning.”

Not only are the Scriptures the source and test of sound doctrine, but they, the word of God, reveal Christ, the Living Word, as no other can. In Erasmus’ phrase, *“These writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself, and thus they render Him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes.”*

With Scriptures in hand, the People’s Book restored to the people, the Reformation swept the Western world, bringing renewal, revival, and giving birth even to our own denomination, the once-mighty Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Why “once-mighty?” Why is our denomination experiencing precipitous decline, troubled by increasing division, edging ever closer to “consumebatur,” its fire flickering dangerously dim? Because somehow, someway, the Book has again slipped from our hands. Academic disciplines with the potential to reveal ever-greater

depths of meaning have instead been employed to undermine any confidence in the veracity of transmission and the clarity of voice. Eager to distance itself from fundamentalist literalists, challenged by a society which regards ancient wisdom with contempt, reeling from the relativism which plagues our universities and public square, we've put our Bibles into storage, only giving them a bit of air on a Sunday morning, where we imagine Matthew, Mark and the rest squinting in the harsh, unaccustomed light of day.

Never has the Bible been available so widely, so inexpensively, in such a variety of translations and forms, where even our cell phones can contain a hundred versions, commentaries and "verses of the day," yet I submit that never in our denomination's history have the man and woman in the pew known it less. And if I add, "man and woman in the pulpit," I do so knowing in all humility that I paint myself with the same sorry brush. As example, many a time I have met with families in preparing for a funeral. They show me "Grandma's Bible" – tattered, pages nearly worn through, verses underlined on every page, testimony to a "person of the Book." Such Bibles – and the devotion they evidence - humble me.

Brothers and sisters in pulpit and pew: we need, as in the days of Josiah, a rediscovery of the Book, a wholesale revival, and a renewal of commitment to God. We need, as in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, for "*the ears of all the people to be attentive to the book,*" that our people might once again "*make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*" We need again, as in the early Jerusalem church, to devote ourselves "*to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).*" We need, as in Berea, to "*examine the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so.*"

Above all we need to remember that the Scriptures are God's incredible gift to us, the foundation stone of our faith and belief "*yesterday, today and forever;*" that "*these words are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*"

My friends – my sisters, my brothers – rend your garments. Renew your commitment. Rediscover the Book. Rekindle the flame. And with the Psalmist declare: "*I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.*" Thanks be to God. Amen.

*(Quotations are from original sources, as well as “The People's Book: The Reformation and the Bible.” Ed. Jennifer Powell McNutt, InterVarsity Press, 2017, which was particularly helpful in the composition of this sermon.)*