

# Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word  
February 7, 2010

Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church  
Clarksburg, WV

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"*  
(Isaiah 6:8 N.R.S.V.)

## This Book Is for You

A wise person once noted that our identities are shaped by the stories we listen to. The stories we listen to shape who we are and how we relate to others.

One of the family stories that I grew up listening to involves my mother's Uncle Grant. Uncle Grant was a teenager at the time, and he was eager to prove that he was not a child anymore, he was a man. So when his Dad asked him to go to the neighbors and buy a pig, Uncle Grant jumped at the chance. He had never done anything like this before, but he was a man now.

It was quite a ways to the next farm and by the time Uncle Grant walked over there he was all hot and sweaty. The neighbor suggested he that he sit down in the shade for a moment and have a drink of special home made wine. He was old enough drink wine wasn't he?

Of course he was old enough to drink. He was a man now. He was here on a man's work. So he sat down and had a drink and they talked, then he had another drink and talked some more, then he had another drink- you get the idea. By the time he went down to the barn to pick out his pig, he was drunk.

The helpful neighbor put the little pig in a feed sack, and Uncle Grant carried it home. The whole family gathered around as he arrived home. They wanted to see the new pig. So Uncle Grant upended the sack and out tumbled the littlest, scrawny, runt of a pig any of them had ever seen. The family immediately began to complain. Someone commented that they had seen new born kittens who were bigger than that pig. How could he have been so foolish as to waste the family money on this, this, . . . pitiful excuse for a pig.

Uncle Grant was trying to defend himself, but he was still considerably under the influence. Finally he blurted out, "Well, it was dark in that barn!"

It was such a ridiculous statement that after a moment of stunned looks, the whole family broke out into laughter. Uncle Grant was forgiven, but the story lived on. For years after that whenever a family member was accused of doing something particularly stupid, someone would be sure to say, "Well, it was dark in that barn!"

I like that story because it reminds me that people in my family can make mistakes, even bad mistakes and still not lose their place in the family. I learned that mistakes are not only survivable and forgivable, we can learn to laugh at them.

The stories that we listen to inform us and shape us, they determine who we are and how we relate to others. Every Sunday we stand up here and read from the Bible. That's important. These are not stories of things that happened to people long ago and far away. These are our stories, our Christian family stories.

These are the stories of God's relentless pursuit of his people. They are stories of God's tireless efforts to be in relationship with his children. Here we find stories like our Old Testament text where Isaiah encounters the living, holy God. It was not exactly a pleasant moment for Isaiah, it was a heart stopping, palm sweating, overwhelmed by power and holiness moment. And Isaiah was not only changed, he was driven to respond. "Here am I, Lord, send me."

The Bible has stories of people encountering Jesus. In our New Testament lesson Jesus tells the disciples how to catch fish. They thought they already knew everything there was to know about fishing, but when they followed his command, they caught an unbelievable amount of fish.

Of course this story is not really about catching fish, it is about obeying Christ and spreading the gospel. It is about being used by God to catch people, and introduce them to our risen Lord.

The Bible is an extremely important book. It is not only faith stories, it is God's word to us. God speaks to us through the Bible. God changes us through the Bible. God challenges us and draws us closer to himself.

Christians, this Book is for you. This is God's word to you.

Why then is the Bible so often ignored? It is not because it is so old and we are so modern. Nor is it because the Bible is hard to understand. It is because the Bible is difficult. It is not that the Bible is incomprehensible, it is because the Bible is truth. The Bible is truth and we are a deceitful people. We lie even to ourselves.

The goal in reading the Bible is not information, it is transformation. We don't read the Bible to learn more about God, we read the Bible to encounter God, to be drawn into relationship with God, in short to be changed. And that is what is difficult. We don't like to be changed.

So we have named the problem. It is difficult to read the Bible. It takes time, it takes discipline, and it challenges us in uncomfortable ways. But let's not stop there. Many of the best things we know are difficult, but we keep at them, because we know they are worth the effort. The Bible is one of God's great and wonderful gifts to us, it is well worth the effort.

Let's talk about a few rules for how to read the Bible.

**FIRST THINK OF READING THE BIBLE AS COMMUNION WITH GOD.** The Bible contains a number of rules, things we should or should not do. Those rules are there to help us, to protect us from

harming ourselves. Yet, the Bible is not primarily a rule book. It is a place where we can go to be more fully with God. In these pages we encounter God, we talk to God and God answers us. In a very real sense reading the Bible is a form of prayer.

Remember here the goal of reading the Bible is not to gain information, rather it is to be transformed, converted.

**SECOND READ THE BIBLE ON A REGULAR BASIS.** Reading the Bible builds our relationship with God and like every relationship, it takes a lot of time. So set aside a regular time each day to read the Bible. Try to read a whole chapter each day, rather than just a few verses. Practice setting aside other concerns and freeing your mind from distractions. Above all be patient.

I remember the first few times that I tried to develop a habit of Bible reading. People had told me about how they really got into the Bible, how they feasted on God's word. So I sat down and expected take in this great spiritual meal. I had in mind steak and potatoes, with hot, apple pie and ice cream ala mode for desert. Imagine my surprise when my Bible reading tasted like saw dust. It was incredibly bland and my mind kept wandering away on different tangents.

I'd like to tell you that it got better soon, but that was not my experience. It did get better but it took a lot longer than I thought it should. Then again I'm the guy who got all excited because I had walked for 30 min. on the treadmill, so I went over to the scales and weighed myself. To my great disappointment I was still fat.

What I discovered after fumbling around for awhile is that I have a much easier time if I use a study Bible or a commentary in my quiet time. It is like having a trusted friend looking over my shoulder and helping me to hear God speaking. That may be an individual thing. My wife, Charla, says that using a commentary in her quiet time is a distraction for her. Do what works for you.

The important thing is to keep at it. I still don't hear God speaking to me every time I read the Bible, or at least it is not some big "wow" every time. But I have learned to be patient and to trust the Holy Spirit to speak to me when the time is right.

One of my more helpful insights along the way is that God wants to spend time with me. It sounds silly to say this, but at some point I realized that I was rushing through my Bible reading and prayer time, because I was afraid that God didn't really want me in his presence. I didn't think I was good enough. Then Jesus reminded me that he died for me, he willing gave up everything just so he could spend time with me. That was a "wow" moment.

So think about reading the Bible as spending time with God- God who wants to spend time with you. Set a regular time for Bible reading and prayer. And then expect change.

**THAT IS THE THIRD RULE - EXPECT CHANGE.** The first rule is to think of Bible reading as spending time with God, the second rule is to make a regular practice of reading the Bible, and the third rule is to expect change.

Remember how I said before that we are shaped by the stories we listen to? As we read God's word, God's story begins to cover our lives and we are changed more and more into the people he created us to be. And that is a wonderful thing, but I warn you, it is also sometimes difficult.

The famous contemporary preacher, Wil Willimon, warns people, "Don't risk reading this book if you are content with your life as it is." Because if you read this book faithfully, your life will change.

This is a good time to remind you that it is all too possible to read the Bible in a selfish way. Many people claim that they are searching the Bible for answers to pressing questions. But what they are really doing is seeking ways to use the Bible to justify the way they have chosen to live their lives.

Did you get that? These are the people who read a Bible passage and then ask, "Do I agree with that?" That is the wrong question. The right question is, "How is this biblical passage asking me to change?"

One of Shakespeare's characters notes that "The devil quotes scripture for his own purposes." And we can do that too. We can search the scriptures for things that further our own selfish purposes. But the point of reading the Bible is to allow it to remake our lives rather than justifying our lives.

Reading the Bible is not easy. It requires a willingness to make the time because we know it is important. Reading the Bible is not easy because it challenges us to change. But when we do accept this great treasure that God has given us- When we gather together to hear God's word, when we set apart time to be alone with God's word, when we strive with the help of the Holy Spirit to align our lives with this word- then we are transformed into the joyful and loving people God created us to be. We know the depth of God's love and the fullness of life in his purpose. We become in truth, people of the book.

As the music plays, reflect upon these words. What is the Lord saying to you today?

Amen.