

8/14 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl!

Welcome to both those joining us here in person as well as watching on Zoom.

We are glad you are joining us today. We gather as people who share a common faith in Jesus, seek to know Jesus, and seek to hear God speak in Scripture and Creation.

Last week we began looking at the articles of the Mennonite Confession of Faith, starting with the Trinity. The sermon time will continue with the articles about Scripture and Creation.

CALL TO WORSHIP

(Psalm 19:7-8, 10a, 14)

L: The law of the Lord is perfect,

P: refreshing the soul.

L: The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,

P: making wise the simple.

L: The precepts of the Lord are right,

P: giving joy to the heart.

L: The commands of the Lord are radiant,

P: giving light to the eyes.

L: They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

*All: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight,
Our Rock and Redeemer!*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

God, we thank you for the ways that you have spoken to your people in times past and present.

We hear your voice in the stories of the Bible as well as gazing at the starry sky, or the music of a sunset. Help us to hear your voice today.

May the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

I was glad to find the prayer at number 955 in the Voices Together book; we'll close our morning prayer by saying it together, so if you'd like to turn to it now, you'll have it ready when we come to that point. (Delton will also project it on the screen.)

Sovereign God, we thank you for your creativity and all the ways we witness it! You have created the vast expanse of the universe with its stars, planets and mysteries – and you have created the minute species of insects and every growing, living thing. As hard as we try to unpack it all, to explain it, to dissect it, to re-create it... ultimately, we cannot and you remain an amazing mystery of love and creativity. You have inspired humanity from the very beginning to learn of you, to be in relationship with you and with one another, to co-create with you, your

kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven. We pray for wisdom and humility, for grace and understanding, and mostly for love and deep compassion as we use the gifts you've give us to follow you faithfully and to reflect who you to those we work and walk with each day.

O God, we put our friends and loved ones into your care – those whose health struggles have already been long and difficult and they continue on a grueling and difficult daily journey. We take some moments now to quietly bring those to mind whom we are asking for your healing and mercy. (pause) Even as we pray for strength and perseverance, we also offer prayers of thanksgiving for healing that has happened, for medical care, for the loving support and encouragement of friends and family, for small miracles that come to us each day - we thank you, God, for your presence with us through your Holy Spirit.

We thank you for our sister congregation, Luz de Evangelio. Thank you for their faithful discipleship and their ministry in Dallas. Continue to be with them each day, individually and as a congregation. Be with Pastor Juan as he gives leadership.

God, you are the great Teacher and we thank you this morning for opportunities to learn and grow. Thank you for ALL students and those who teach and support them as this new school year begins. We pray especially for those who are embarking on new educational journeys this week – for Caiden, Timothy and Jacob, for Logan and for Brooke. Be with them and their families as they make adjustments to this new chapter of life.

And be with ALL of us as we continue to learn and grow in your love. We offer this prayer together:

Come among us, Holy Spirit, and create a community of learning.
Help us grow in wisdom and understanding, in skill and strength,
in knowledge that honors you.
Teach us to know you, ourselves, and our neighbors more fully,
to see your presence in the world more clearly, to love more deeply –
with heart, soul, mind, and strength.
Form us as doers of justice and lovers of mercy
as we walk humbly with you and one another on this path of learning. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION – PASTOR LOIS

For all that we have and all that we are, we give you thanks, O God. Bless these gifts of money. Bless the giving of our time and energy, our skills and our interests as they are offered in service to you, through your church. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

GOD SPEAKS – PASTOR CALEB

2 Timothy 3:14-17; Psalm 19:1-6

At some point in my early High School years, I began taking my faith very seriously, which meant also that I became an avid reader of the Bible – where else to try to learn about and understand God?

I probably wasn't the typical teenager. I didn't really say anything about this to anyone, but my goal was to read through the entire Bible, and I kind of settled on 3 chapters a day before I fell asleep.

Unfortunately, I got behind on my goal. But I kept track in my head of how many chapters I was behind in order to "catch up." I'd read an extra chapter when I could, but not only was I not caught up, I also couldn't remember for sure exactly how many chapters I was behind. Was it 8? Or 10?

It may have been from reading Romans or something about grace, I'm not sure. But one of the ways I remember God speaking to me, *through the Bible*, was something like, "seriously, Caleb, stop worrying about whether you're reading enough chapters. It's fine, just let it go!"

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Last week, we looked at the first three articles of the Confession of Faith that was created in 1995. It is good to remind ourselves of what we have said we believe and are committed to.

My hope is not that this will answer every question, but that we have a starting point for talking about our common convictions and what they mean for how we live our lives, allowing for some differences.

[SLIDE: ORGANIZATION OF THE CONFESSION]

The first eight articles are common themes among Christian churches, similar in content to what the majority of Christian traditions would say.

Then the Confession moves to the church and its practices, Christian discipleship and our final hope in God's reign. As I said last week, this isn't meant to be any kind of litmus test for who is a better Christian, but a conversation.

Today's topics of Scripture and Creation have a common thread. They answer how God speaks to us.

We believe that the universe has a source and creator, and we choose to address this source as "God." Just as you learn something about a painter by looking at their painting, we expect to learn something about God through God's creation. Romans 1:20 says, "*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*"

Yet in our Christian faith tradition, we also have this collection of sacred writings that we call the "Bible." These are diverse writings, written over centuries that have stood the test of time and historical crises, and were passed on for their usefulness for faith communities through these ages.

We believe God's Spirit was mysteriously at work in the entire process, including when we come to the Scriptures with a heart earnestly seeking God.

I'll spend more time on the topic of Scripture, simply because it looms large in some of our disagreements in the broader church.

[SLIDE: 2 TIMOTHY 3]

In Paul's second letter to the young leader Timothy, we read: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

Other versions say "inspired by God." Do you hear the word "Spirit" inside the word "in-spired"? "Breath" is the root meaning of "Spirit." "God-breathed" gives us the image of God blowing special life into the human words of Scripture just like God breathed the breath of life into the first human.

Though we apply this passage to the whole Christian Bible, it's important to remember that in context it is really referring to what we today call the Old Testament.

It also matters what you expect from Bible. Paul tells Timothy that these writings are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." There's a very specific purpose. The following verse uses language similar to the process of a good education. The sacred writings is how a follower of Jesus is "schooled" to have wisdom for what to do or not to do.

"Wisdom" to me doesn't take away the fact that we have to do our own hard work to think and discern. It seems like many Christians approach the Bible as a book that is supposed to be easy to read and totally straightforward – you just do what you are told and don't think too hard.

I think about starting a new job. At first you might need to ask a supervisor how to do every little thing. As you become "wiser" you learn to solve problems yourself. You see what needs to be done and do it without being told.

You don't bother others for every little thing. On the other hand, you have enough wisdom to know your limitations, and ask for help when you needed.

Those of you who are farmers know there is no manual or YouTube video that will tell you just what to do in every situation that comes up, no effort required.

Just as God has used imperfect human beings in the Bible for God's purpose, and just as God took on flesh in a human being, Scripture itself is human; human writing taken up for the purpose of being God's written word.

Our job is more than just finding the right Bible verse for a situation. In the words of C.S. Lewis, we receive God's word not by using the Bible *"as an encyclopedia... but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message."*

IS THE BIBLE CLEAR?

It's hard enough to do what the Bible says when it is clear. It seems clear enough what "love your enemies" means. Sure, we could spend time analyzing what Jesus meant by "enemies" or "love." But the harder job of just practicing the basic idea.

Sometimes the Bible will be "clearer" than other times. The Bible seems very clearly to call us to some humility.

Jesus said, "let the one who has not sinned cast the first stone." Jesus also said to not offer to pull a speck that is partially obstructing the another's eyesight, when you have a plank in your

own eye. Then there is Jesus' request to the rich young ruler that he first "sell all he had and give to the poor." Again, the idea seems clear enough, but who of us finds that easy to follow?

I'd say, if someone takes that literally and really does sell all they have to give to the poor, that's the person who is qualified to pass judgment on how anyone else reads their Bible.

BIBLE AS A WINDOW [SLIDE: WINDOW]

In her introduction to her book, *The Bible Unwrapped*, Meghan Good compares the Bible to a window in a cabin within a beautiful, wild forest valley.

In her words, "*The cabin... is the world as we know it, the stuff of our ordinary, daily human realities. The forest is the infinite, eternal Life of god, the full Reality of all that truly exists.*"

The cabin has a single glass window that lets you glimpse the world beyond. But it's what you see when you look *through* the glass that is important. It would be silly to be so disappointed with cracks or dirt on the glass that you decide you'd rather turn and face the wall. Or to think the window is really just a two-dimensional painting, instead of a window into the beyond.

The Bible is like a window, Megan says, it is essential, but it is not the real thing. The real thing is Jesus, the Word made flesh.

[SLIDE: CONFESSION SUMMARY SCRIPTURE]

I'll read the shorter summary of our Confession's statement on Scripture:

We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life. Led by the Holy Spirit in the church, we interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ.

This statement echoes 2 Timothy quite a bit. We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God without a particular teaching about exactly how that inspiration happened.

There's no reason to think the Spirit wasn't at work at every stage of the very human and complicated process for how we got the Bible – all the way down to the moment when we turn to the Bible with the genuine intention of seeking God's voice.

The longer version understands that Jesus himself is the "Word of God," yet the Bible serves as God's written word.

Our confession is also clear on the purpose of the Bible – not to answer every question, but to guide us for Christian faith and life. As I would say it, the purpose of the scriptures is to point us to Jesus, and in turn, our best understanding of Jesus is the basis for how we read all of the Bible.

What you get out of the Bible depends on what you seek from it. When people ask the wrong questions of the Bible, they are in danger of conjuring up self-serving beliefs that hurt others all supposedly on the authority of Scripture.

If Jesus is the goal, then we very much need the writings of the Bible. The Gospels are the most obvious – telling us about Jesus’ life and teaching. The rest of the New Testament gives us a window into the earliest stage of the movement that Jesus created.

The Hebrew Bible also remains essential. Jesus was a unique Jewish teacher. He was deeply grounded in his Jewish faith tradition. The Old Testament was Jesus’ Bible, and Jesus had a unique way of reading and living out the Old Testament– prioritizing matters of justice and mercy.

Before we move on to the topic of God’s creation, I want to emphasize these following thoughts for how we read the Bible together in the church.

[SLIDE: SEEKING GOD THROUGH SCRIPTURE]

The first is the point I’ve already been making: the goal of reading the Bible is to know Jesus.

The second is similar: A good interpretation of the Bible leads us to practice the love of Jesus. That is a simple test for whether we are reading the Bible well – does this lead to love? (even as we need Jesus to help us know what true love looks like).

The last two points are that we need each other as well as other communities.

Our life experience and view of the world matter for how we read the Bible. The Bible was largely written by people who were poor, oppressed, and at the margins of great empires. People in precarious positions today have much to teach us about the biblical message, versus those of us who live very comfortable lives.

That's why it's not really enough to only consider how people like ourselves read the Bible. How have African Americans read the Bible? Or Latin Americans, Africans or Asians?

Black slaves in the United States found great inspiration in the story of the Exodus. Unlike the way white people read the Bible to justify slavery, they knew that the God who rescued the Israelites from slavery would also lead them on a path of liberation too.

You may also remember the story of Jesus speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel of John. This Bible study was repeated in reading groups from many world cultures.

You might have assumed this is a wayward, promiscuous woman, having lived with 5 men. Maybe. But African women reading this story could think of a whole host of reasons the woman was in this situation from their standpoint. Maybe some of these husbands died or disowned her... She was poor and had no other choice to survive but live with this man who refused to marry her to avoid damaging his own social standing.

Know there's always more to the story. Don't let that discourage you. What you take from a passage as encouragement and guidance for your life is valid. But don't think your way is the only valid way. There's always more to the story, and we can never know everything. And that's OK.

Some of the hardest conflicts in the church are about the Bible. Let's remember our purpose – to know and follow Jesus. Let's remember that being "right" is less important than our seeking to know how to understand and to love with a genuine heart.

Let's commit to taking the Bible seriously. To learning something new that might not fit how you already view life. And to understanding where the person you disagree with is coming from – and that they may have as deep a faith commitment as you do.

[SLIDE: PSALM 19]

More briefly, I want to reflect a bit on the second theme, which is God's creation.

Psalms 19 is a wonderful psalm that begins with poetry expressing the praise of creation before moving to praising God's law. The psalmist says that the skies are already praising God their creator. They speak, though not in words. They have a voice, though not one that is audible.

"Their voice goes out into all the earth." – while this is the most likely translation of this line, there's a possibility that the writer intended to use the word for string or cord. It wouldn't make sense to say "Their string goes out into all the earth," unless this is a musical string or chord, giving the word-picture of a creation singing an everlasting silent song. Some of the sunsets in Kansas certainly seem like silent symphonies to me.

Even the voice of creation has to be interpreted much like Scripture. Do we interpret the world as an expression of God's love and freedom, as our confession says -- taken in by the beauty, the miracle of life, the cooperation of species, the incredible intricacy and complexity?

Or do we despair at the realities of competition, predation, death and sheer struggle to survive in a sometimes-hostile world? Whether the world testifies to a loving God depends on your vantage point.

[SLIDE: ARTICLE 5]

The summary belief statement on creation says:

We believe that God has created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, and that God preserves and renews what has been made. All creation has its source outside itself and belongs to the Creator. The world has been created good because God is good and provides all that is needed for life.

Today I'm emphasizing how God speaks, though this article focuses on the fact that God is the creator, God continually renews creation, and that God is provider.

The longer version calls us to "respect the natural order of creation." When we hear much in the news about climate change, it seems that our present moment calls us to go beyond affirming God's creation and care, to recognize that we do not truly trust in God's care unless we live in harmony with the created world.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Let's listen for God to speak to us, knowing this is no simple or easy task.

Let's experience the wonder of God's love when we appreciate and care for God's creation.
Let's seek to encounter God in Scripture and in creation.

The creator speaks to us in a variety of ways. We can never own God's voice, only open up our hearts to it.

Let's listen to one another, with the expectancy of encountering God. Let's listen, always testing everything with the ancient words of Scripture, read in harmony with Jesus.

Let's listen.

BENEDICTION

Go with the readiness to listen for God's voice:

In the writings of scriptures, and in the encouragement of one another,

In words that challenge us and words that console,

In the glorious outdoors and as well as in our hurried, busy days.

In moments of contentment as well as moments of disappointment and anxiety.

Go in the peace of Christ.