

THE BOOK OF BOOKS

Psalm 119:89-105
II Timothy 3:10-17

Faith Community
September 21, 2008

Introduction

I'd like to do something a little different today. We are giving Bibles to the third graders, so it's a good time to talk about the Bible as a whole. I would like to lift up some things about the Bible that are important. So this won't be a flowing sermon, there will be a little jumping from one topic to another. We will just look at some interesting, and unrelated, realities about the Bible.

We think of the Bible as a book; and say things like, "Did you bring your Bible today?" Actually it is a collection of books, of course – 66 of them altogether – 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. The word Bible comes from the Greek *biblia*, which means "papyrus scrolls," because the originals were written on scrolls.

These books of the Bible were written over a period of about 5000 years. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, except for parts of Daniel and Ezra which were written in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Greek.

The books were written in various parts of the world – mostly in the Middle East but also in Italy, Turkey, and Greece. They were written in all kinds of situations and reflect all kinds of responses. This is best seen in the Psalms, which reflect virtually every human emotion – anger, celebration, fear, sorrow, excitement, doubt, questioning, and joy. If you have felt it, it is probably expressed in the Psalms. But all of the books of the Bible express the variety of circumstances of life.

The Bible contains history, law, personal letters, songs, stories, poetry, and parables – a wide variety of literature. The Bible is a collection of books, written by scores of people from various parts of the world, over thousands of years.

I

The Bible wasn't originally intended to be a personal book that people owned and read by themselves. The Bible began as literature that was read to people when they gathered together. Remember that until fairly recently most people were illiterate. They couldn't read the Bible at home; it had to be read to them.

We got a taste of this when we were in Guatemala last February. Almost all of the women in the Bible study group there were illiterate, so those who could read read passages from the Bible to them. They learned the stories by acting out the events that were taking place.

So when Jesus goes and gets a donkey for the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the women acted out those events. They learned by doing after they had the stories read to them. The Bible was originally written to be read to groups of people.

Hopefully, we are able to see our private devotions as a supplement to the public reading of scripture in worship.

In addition to illiteracy, most people didn't read the Bible at home because very few could afford to have a room full of hand-copied scrolls. It would have been enormously expensive.

So people came together to hear the scriptures. Many of the Psalms were originally songs to be sung in worship. Often when you read them you can sense the rhythm in the words.

Paul's letters were meant to be read in worship. When he wrote to a church, they read his letter in the worship service. Then, because they knew what he had to say applied to other churches too, they passed them on. Lots of churches read Paul's letters and they circulated among the churches.

The Bible was meant to be read aloud in church. So it's important that we continue to read the scriptures when we gather for worship. Let's remember as they are read that we are continuing a tradition in worship that has gone on for thousands of years.

After the invention of the printing press in about 1450, books gradually became cheaper over the next few centuries. Over the 5000 years of the Bible, only in the past couple of hundred years have Bibles been available to everyone. For most of its history the Bible was read aloud to groups of people. That's how it was meant to be.

II

The Bible was not written as science or history in the sense that we understand them in the twenty-first century. Again, remember that history as we know it is a fairly recent development. Historians in the past didn't attempt to be objective and removed from the events they were recording; they were telling the story because they cared about it and they definitely had a point to view.

In the whole sweep of recorded history, the scientific method was just recently developed. The point is that the Bible was never intended to be a scientific explanation of step-by-step how things developed, and its recording of events is not intended to be an academic study of the history of an event.

The Bible tells what God has done and is doing in our world. It doesn't try to say historically or scientifically how events unfolded, but that God is actively at work in the world. The Bible isn't as concerned with the how, as with the why and the meaning behind events. The details are less important than the meaning of the biblical stories.

You can't apply a twenty-first century mindset to a 5000 year old document.

III

Have you ever noticed that the Bible never attempts to prove that God exists? You won't find anywhere in the Old or New Testament proofs for the existence of God. People in the Bible knew that God existed; to prove God's existence would be like trying to prove that your friend exists.

People may be angry with God, or disappointed, or confused, but they know God is real. Job, for example, struggles with what God is doing, but he knows God exists. He knows that all too

well! The Psalms sometimes express confusion or sorrow at not feeling God's presence in their life at a given time, but at the same time they cry out for God to speak or act.

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas tried to set out logical proofs for the existence of God; the Bible never tries to do that. The people of the Bible know that God is real because they interact with God everyday.

The Bible demonstrates the existence of God by showing how God changes people. It doesn't rely on logical proofs; it shows us the effect of God on different people's lives.

Conclusion

The Bible is the Word of God. It is the Word of God not because the pages or the binding are sacred, but because of what God's spirit can do with these words and the stories they tell. The Bible is one of the ways that the Holy Spirit acts in our lives. The book itself is not sacred – that would be bibliolatry – but the message that it brings us can be used by the Holy Spirit to draw us to God.

Someone at church once brought me an old, torn up, falling apart Bible. "I can't just throw this in the waste basket, what should I do with it?" I understood her feeling completely, but the paper, the jacket, the ink and the cover aren't holy.

It is the Holy Bible because through it the Holy Spirit can bring God's calling alive in your life and mine. The message of the Bible is sacred because the Holy Spirit can use it make Christ's presence vividly active in our hearts and minds.

Amen