

## What Is the Bible?

TEXT: 2 Timothy 3:16-17

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on October 9, 2022*

Being a Bible defender in today's world is a daunting task. On the one hand, the general move toward a more secular society means that far fewer people have had any exposure to the Bible at all. Even 20 years ago, I found many new church members didn't know Adam from Abraham from David from Paul, let alone the stories associated with those key figures. The Bible studies that had been staples for me when I began ministry and that supposedly were geared toward beginners were complete failures with these new members because they still assumed far more knowledge than many people actually had.

When I took the position of Executive Director at the Massachusetts Bible Society, my eyes were opened still further. In 2010 we hired a professional company to run some focus groups for us in Boston. We had groups of both church and unchurched groups across all ages, but all participants gave generously to nonprofits.

One of the things we were testing was our name, since it was hard for me to even introduce myself as head of the Massachusetts Bible Society without people running for the exits. One snippet of conversation in one of the younger groups made me sit up and take notice. Everybody hated our name, so the person asking the questions prodded the group to come up with a suggestion for something better.

One young woman, in an unchurched group, said she was stumbling over the word "Society." It sounded exclusive and unwelcoming to her. Another person in the group challenged her by asking, "Do you feel the same way about the American Cancer Society?" She didn't. The group quickly saw that the problematic part of our name was not the word "society," but the word "Bible." Since there was no name that could accurately describe our organization that did not include the offending word, they had literally no suggestions for us about a different name.

After several days of listening behind the glass, it was the consensus of all the groups that the Bible was a problem. That was true for all age groups and for both the church and unchurched groups. Ironically, the group that showed the greatest knowledge of biblical stories and teaching was the unchurched seniors group.

All groups loved our tagline: One Book, Many Voices. But still, knowing almost nothing about our organization beyond the name and tagline, even the groups made up of active church attenders used words like "cult" to describe us and seemed to worry that we might enter the room at some point and steal their children.

Those focus groups resulted in our pivot as an organization to focus on biblical literacy, understanding, and dialogue and led to my creation of a series of Bible studies called *Exploring the Bible* to fill the gap for basic Bible studies I had needed as a pastor, while helping people appreciate what I see as one of the greatest collections of literature in existence, whether they viewed it as sacred text or just engaging literature. It was straight up Bible education, not faith formation or theological interpretation.

I also developed a thesis that a lot of the Bible hate I encountered arose from narrow, literal interpretations of the Bible's content, which is what has dominated in the media since the 1980's. In 2016 we got a grant to test that thesis with The Great Bible Experiment, where I joined a Catholic priest from Springfield and a secular humanist from Yale to host a series of Town Halls about the Bible in places that the Barna Group had identified as America's "Least Bible-minded cities."

Since almost all of the top cities were within a day's drive, we held four—in Albany, New Haven, Providence, and Boston. After opening statements from each of us, we spent an hour and a half just taking questions about the Bible from the audience. With surveys from over 300 participants, given both before and after the Town Halls, my thesis proved correct. Well over half of those who attended had more positive views of the Bible after engaging with the panel than they had coming in.

The headwinds in the years since those 2016 events have only grown stronger. I groan when I see the Bible or other Christian topics trending on Twitter, because I know before I look that they're trending for all the wrong reasons. With the current rise of Christian nationalism and the accompanying use of the Bible as a black-letter

law weapon rather than a narrative and nuanced guide, there is less and less room in public consciousness for recognizing that there are many valid *and biblical* ways to follow Christ and order the life of the Church. Here's why understanding that matters.

For Christians, I think more than for any other world religion, the feelings people have toward our sacred text are inseparable from their feelings about our faith more broadly. I don't believe there will be any sustainable reversal in attitudes about Church and Christianity without a simultaneous change in understanding the Bible. Why? Because Christians behaving badly is the problem; and that bad behavior is encouraged and supported by a simplistic, uninformed, and frequently a deliberately misinformed, view of what the Bible is.

While there are many factors at work in the increasing numbers of churches both shrinking and closing, what I have seen across decades of life in the Bible trenches leads me to believe that the inability to see the Bible apart from the frame set for it by those with the loudest microphones has played and is playing a substantial role in that decline.

That manipulation of the Bible is by no means new. Slave masters on plantations regularly brought in preachers to cherry pick Bible verses about slaves obeying their masters and the like. But the very book used to oppress the enslaved became, in different hands, their source of hope and courage. Enslaved Africans found out on their own about the story of Moses and the God who liberated the enslaved of Egypt, took them to a promised land of abundance, and made them a great nation.

The story of the Exodus, which—unlike the lines about slaves obeying masters—captures a theme of liberation that runs throughout the Bible rather than just a verse or two; propelled the enslaved to risk the deadly dangers of resistance and a flight to freedom. Harriet Tubman's nickname was "Moses."

When Paul describes the armor of God in Ephesians 6, he calls the word of God the "sword of the spirit." Some of you, like me, probably had "sword drills" in Sunday School where we held our Bibles aloft and the teacher called out a Bible verse and we raced to be the first to find the passage. We all swallowed without thinking that the "word of God" described as a sword in that passage meant the Bible. Bible-as-weapon was impressed on us from a very young age, ignoring the fact that, in that Bible's very pages, when God's word was made flesh, it looked like a baby in a manger and not a cutting blade.

We also assumed it meant both the Old and New Testaments, even though when Paul wrote those words, only the Hebrew Scriptures were in existence. That same mistake is made day after day with the passage Kim read this morning. "All Scripture is useful..." it says. Not a word of our current New Testament was considered Scripture at that point, and yet I had a number of colleagues in seminary who boasted that they never would preach from the Hebrew Scriptures. It was the Old Testament that was the only Bible for both Jesus and Paul.

Today's abuse of the Bible is not at all new, but the tools available to amplify bad and misleading information is on a scale and at a speed never before available. And it comes at a time when the majority of people in majority Christian countries—even people still engaged in church—know less about the Bible's contents and history than perhaps any generation since the invention of the printing press.

Like with every other issue; those who seek retain power by keeping us divided from one another, are exploiting that ignorance in all channels. Even those with some familiarity with the Bible and its stories are kept like fighters in a boxing ring—coming at each other with literal interpretations of Bible verses to support our different agendas. "Well, the Bible says"—Bam! Pow!—"Oh, yeah? Well, it also says"—Punch! Slam!

I want to throw some additional information into that ring. Consider, for example, the humble hapax legomena. That's a linguistic term that refers to words that appear only once in the entire written record of a language. The King James Version of the Bible has 1500 hapax legomena in the Hebrew Old Testament and 686 in the Greek New Testament.

Biblical Greek and Hebrew are dead languages. They are not the Greek and Hebrew spoken today. The way translators figure out what a word in a dead language means is by looking at the context around it. The translation is better supported the more places the word appears because you have that many more contexts to

prove the idea. But the Bible has 2,186 words in it that appear only there and nowhere else either inside or outside the Bible.

Since the publication of the King James Version in 1611, there have been archeological discoveries of texts that contain some of those words. So more recent translations have corrected initial errors in those cases. But there's one hapax legomenon that we use every Sunday that, to my knowledge, still appears only in Matthew and in the identical repetition of the verse in Luke. It appears in the Lord's Prayer and is the word translated as "daily" in "Give us this day our daily bread."

"Daily" seems like a good guess, but it's not even close to the Greek word used for "daily" elsewhere in the Bible. Even those steeped in the ancient languages don't know if "daily" is the actual meaning. It exists nowhere else in the entire corpus of Classical Greek literature. For all we know Jesus might have taught us to pray, "Give us this day our pumpernickel bread." Now multiply that by over 2,000 words and you might think twice about leaping into the Bible-thumping ring.

So, if there are all these problems and conflicts, why don't we just put the Bible aside? Quite a few churches have. The belief that the Bible can only be read literally has penetrated deeply into progressive congregations as well as into totally secular settings, resulting in a deep aversion to the text.

I've had many an atheist come to fight with me about the Bible, thinking that if they prove to me that the Bible contains contradictions or that the earth is more than 6,000 years old that I will see the errors of my Bible-laden ways. My father always taught me that it was rude to enter a battle of wits with an unarmed man, so I rarely engage those attacks. I've found little difference between debating the Bible with a fundamentalist Christian or a militant atheist. Both misunderstand the Bible in almost exactly the same ways and tend to be equally closed to hearing another perspective.

But when my Bible Society job led to preaching opportunities in progressive congregations, I had a chance to make my uninterrupted case for a different kind of reading. I remember a woman from a UCC church who greeted me in tears after the service. "You gave me my Bible back," she said. One of my proudest achievements was convincing a Buddhist Unitarian congregation near Albany to do my Bible studies. And they loved them.

Everyone fights about what the Bible says or doesn't say. But that's a surface argument with no resolution—one of the reasons a literal interpretation of the Bible is uniquely suited to keep people divided and in conflict. We can only arrive at the truth the Bible is trying to give us by first understanding the kind of text we're looking at. And we can't understand the kind of text we're looking at without understanding where it came from, and how we got this large collection of ancient writings in the form we now have before us.

I have come the full journey with the Bible. As a teen and in my early twenties, I took it literally. I used the literal words about women not speaking in church or having authority over men as a weapon against my own sense of calling into ministry. I first felt that call at 14 years old; but it took me until my mid-thirties to see how wrong-headed that was and finally get myself to seminary and into a pulpit.

And then others pulled out that sword to use against me. To this day, there are Christian bookstores who won't carry my Bible studies, despite endorsements from internationally-recognized Bible scholars, simply because I'm so clearly sinful by thinking I, as a woman, have a right to write or teach about the Bible without labeling the book as only for women.

Years ago, when I decided to venture onto a Christian dating site, I got hate mail from men on the site telling me I wasn't Christian because I had been ordained. I have tons and tons of stories about being on the receiving end of a weaponized Bible. And I'm a white, heterosexual woman; I haven't experienced the half of it.

But all of that is why I'm going to be spending most of this fall in Bible-teaching mode during worship. When I open up social media and see anything about the Bible or Christianity trending, I will never forgive myself if someone in a congregation I serve is out there spewing nonsense about the Bible or chopping up other children of God with any supposed sword of the spirit.

For those who have been on the receiving end of that chopping, I totally understand why you would want nothing more to do with the Bible and church. People prove every day that there are many who shun the label Christian who live more Christ-like lives than many of us who are faithful to our churches.

But, in case you hadn't noticed, the Christian religion and its Bible are being weaponized by governments here and across Eastern and Western Europe. Now. Today. While it's obvious that professing Christians can't just ignore our sacred text without losing our moorings, just regular citizens of this nation, and of any nation with a majority Christian population, need to develop some biblical knowledge and muscle if we don't want to end up back in the days of the Spanish Inquisition. Those who don't know the language can't see the threat until it's too late.

So, to the best of my ability, I'm going to teach you what I have learned and, most importantly, how to approach and read the Bible in a way that will make you think twice—and maybe three times—before brandishing it to win an argument against anyone other than yourself. I want to help you become more comfortable with questions and less comfortable with prescribed answers.

I also live in the hope of convincing you that, despite millennia of people abusing the Bible, it is absolutely worth reading, learning about, and using to help ourselves grow spiritually, live with integrity, and to help each other get through the enormous challenges of life in a global and diverse community. And maybe even to find joy and some measure of peace in the midst of the unprecedented chaos and divisions of our time.

And even if you don't "believe" the Bible in any of the ways Christians do, I want you to know what it is and what's in it. Even apart from the threat of having one narrow and weaponized interpretation of it filling our school curricula, as is already happening in Florida, or being used to mandate compliance through civil law and government; anyone who wants to consider themselves educated needs to know the Bible and its main stories.

In the West, the Bible rings through our culture and through the English language. So, to close out, instead of a sword drill, we're going to do what I hope will be a fun alternative to kick off our Bible-focused fall.

I'm going to ask Kim to come back up here to the lectern. She's going to read a variety of verses from the Bible and then I want you to tell me what the common English word or phrase grew from each verse. Let her finish the verse and then anyone can just call it out when you catch it. There will be eleven of them.

- Isaiah 40:15 ..... “Drop in the bucket”
- Matthew 5:13 ..... “Salt of the earth”
- Genesis 3:3 ..... “Forbidden fruit”
- Revelation 16:16 ..... “Armageddon”
- Ecclesiastes 10:1 ..... “Fly in the ointment”
- Matthew 12:25 ..... “A house divided against itself cannot stand”
- Matthew 15:14 ..... “The blind leading the blind”
- Job 15:7 ..... “As old as the hills”
- Job 19:20 ..... “By the skin of your teeth”
- 1 Timothy 6:12 ..... “Fight the good fight”
- Matthew 5:41 ..... “Go the extra mile.”

And go the extra mile we will. Stay tuned. Amen.