

“Living with the Dangerous Bible”
September 24, 2023

II Timothy 3:14-4:2

Our student welcome activities at the beginning of the semester were some reimagined events that allowed us to connect with many students in new ways for these new times.

Over the years, however, I’ve seen that there are several things that happen like clockwork around here at the school year starts. The Newman Center puts out that canoe. Students line up outside of Pancho’s for burritos. And the Gideons stand on the corners handing out Bibles.

They did this for a couple of days about a week ago. Most students just walk by, either looking away or politely waving their hand as if to say, “No thanks.” Maybe they’ve already got a Bible. Maybe they don’t want one.

I did see one young man smiling and talking animatedly—as if he’d just received the best gift ever.

Maybe so.

What they don’t hand out are owner’s manuals. You know, some kind of instructions for how these things should be used.

It seems like everything comes with a warning label and an instruction manual these days. In an effort to reduce legal liability, companies do everything they can to tell consumers how to use their products and avoid possible dangers.

So the packaging of Nytol, the *sleeping* pill, advises: “May cause drowsiness.”

And a bottle of children’s cough syrup—*children’s*—warns: “Do not drive motor vehicles while using.”

Of course, sometimes these warnings and instructions seem to have been written in other languages and then translated into English—which creates other problems.

Like the knife that was labeled: “Do not use in children.”

Or the food processor that cautioned: “Do not use for the other use.”

Almost everything comes with warnings and instructions these days.

But not the Bible.

Gideons give them away. We pass Bibles out to third graders with no warnings or instructions when we should perhaps treat this book with the same caution we would use in distributing, say, switchblades. If, as the Book of Hebrews says, the word of God is

sharper than any two-edged sword, do we really want it in the hands of children? When we present these Bibles maybe a member of the congregation should cry out: “Watch what you’re doing! Someone could get hurt!”

The confirmation class is starting soon. Along with many of my colleagues, over the years, I’ve lamented that youth in confirmation classes don’t know enough about the Bible. Instead, maybe we should be thankful that they have yet to discover that this book contains the story of Jesus, the one who came to set son against father and daughter against mother. Maybe we should keep them in the dark about the radical words of the prophets and the passionate descriptions of sex found in the pages of the Bible. Perhaps we should warn youth who start the confirmation class: “Do not use for the other use.”

What’s happening on *this* corner? We’re living with the dangerous Bible.

On the Jefferson St. side of this building, written in stone is the proclamation: “Thy Word Is Truth.” But how *do* we live with this dangerous Bible?

You know the possibilities:

Some would say the Bible has a high and exalted place. That often means high on top of the book shelf, out of reach, gathering dust.

Some people see the Bible as a book of answers, thinking that they can open the Bible for quick advice. But the guidance the Bible can provide for our lives usually doesn’t jump out at us in that way. And often that Book can seem confusing, or worse, agonizingly silent.

So, if we are going to use the Bible, we must use it for more than answers.

Some see the Bible as a book of facts. And some reject it for the same reasons—what they take as the “facts” in the Bible don’t match their own facts.

Far from being an answer book or a textbook, often tucked away and unopened, much of the Bible is a storybook.

These are the stories of real people.

These are the stories of people who were captive and set free. These are stories of people who enjoyed a great deal of power and fame, whose names and actions have been remembered for thousands of years. And these are stories of people who lived and died unknown, unremembered.

Most of the time the people we read about in the Bible were simply trying to live their own lives in the difficult situations of their own times. They were concerned with work and families, with sickness and death, with the small pleasures of living—much as we are.

They weren't seeking sainthood—and generally didn't achieve it. They weren't seeking greatness. And they were trying to avoid God as much as they were looking for God.

And yet, God found them—as it still happens.

Which means that the Bible is not only the record of the human quest for God, it is also the story of God's search for human beings. From God's walking in the garden asking "Adam, where are you?" to the risen Christ appearing in the midst of those disciples locked away in their fear, the Bible tells of a God who searches for the human race, created in God's image and so often in flight from that burden and that glory.

So those ancient stories are also our story. We can't read the Bible without getting some sense that this book is not just about Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Peter and Paul, Lydia and Dorcas. It is also about you and me, our neighbors, our friends, and our enemies. Time and again it confronts us where we are and seeks to take us someplace else. Time and again it takes our set ideas, calls them and us into question, and gives us new ways of looking at the worlds and at ourselves. Time and again it astonishes us with the wonderful good news that has not changed through all of our changes: that at the center of this story is Jesus of Nazareth, who is also at the center of life.

This, I think, is what we are getting at when we call the Bible God's "living" word. This is what it means to say that this word is "truth."

So, what are we to do with this dangerous Bible?

We are to read it.

Of course, that's often the hardest part. We set down with resolve to "read the Bible" and start with Genesis. And sometimes we can get through Genesis. The stories are pretty good, after all, and the accounts of deception, betrayal, murder, nudity, love, and death keep us turning the pages.

So Genesis holds our attention.

But then comes Exodus and all those commandments, and Leviticus with its strange regulations, and Numbers with oh so many "begats" and . . . Slowly our resolve fades and we are left with the strong suspicion that maybe we were right to leave that book on the shelf for all those years.

But here's something interesting: a few years ago now, a study suggested that reading the Bible on ones own tends to make a person more liberal. The often people pick it up, the more they discover its message of social and economic justice.

So keep at it.

At the same time, remember that the Bible is often best read in connection with hearing it read during worship. People in this congregation know this. When we worship, we are

attentive. We listen for the word of God *speaking to you*. Many take those words home with them and read them again during the week.

In addition to reading the Bible, we study it together.

We can learn from the children here, who show up on Sunday morning and together learn the stories that Jesus told or the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, and they think about what those stories might mean for their lives.

Adults can do this too. Now, I often hear my clergy colleagues complain that church members say they want more Bible studies and then, when they are offered, no one shows up.

It's different here—because this is a different kind of congregation.

In the early throws of the pandemic, what did we do? We turned to scripture. And not just easy, comforting scripture. We turned to Lamentations, one of the most challenging books in the Bible and read it together—twenty, thirty people were a part of that. And then we moved on to other difficult books. What we discovered is that the words of the Bible are living words, changing as our lives change, showing us new meaning as we face new situations. Familiar passages accumulate new meaning as we return to them again and again. The insight of others illumines our own understanding. Which is why we study together.

As the author of II Timothy tells us, all scripture is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training. The usefulness of scripture, however, is only discovered as we question it and allow it to question our lives.

To reading and studying, we might add praying with the Bible. Again, this is something we can do as individuals, but it is also something that takes place when we meet together for worship each week. From the call to worship to the benediction, in the words we speak and the hymns we sing, scripture weaves through all that we do here together.

If we open this book and read, study, and pray, who can say what troubling and challenging and supportive treasures we will find? Reading it, studying it, praying it—this is how we live with the dangerous Bible.

A classic prayer reads: “Eternal God, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: help us to hear them, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, through patience and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast to the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest—and the dangerous Bible becomes a source of life.