



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Found in Exile: The Found Word”

Psalm 1, John 1:1-5, 14-18

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How we worship as Presbyterians has a great deal to do with how Exiles came to worship. That is what I said last Sunday, and I hope that I can explain more of what I mean as we explore what is meant by the Word of God.

Before I offer the *Prayer for Illumination*, let's reflect on what we will be doing.

We will ask to hear God's Word. Does that mean hearing scripture read? Yes, but more than that.

We will ask that God will speak through scripture,
the Word read,

but also through the sermon,

the Word proclaimed and interpreted,
and also through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper,
the Word enacted.

More than anything, we are asking that we hear the Living Word of God embodied in the Word-Made-Flesh who is Jesus.

So, let us pray to hear God's Word.

Prayer for Illumination:

Holy God, we ask that in the Word read in scripture, proclaimed in sermon, and enacted in sacrament, that it is the Living Word we know as Jesus that we receive. Amen.



I am going to read our passages, but I also want to reflect on what we are doing when we read scripture and when I preach a sermon.

I'll begin by telling you that *I love this book*. I love studying this book—so much so that a few years after I graduated from seminary, I applied to, and was accepted into, yet another graduate program in biblical studies thinking I might like to spend the rest of my professional life studying this book by teaching it in college or seminary—What stopped me from going back to school was an unplanned and unbudgeted pregnancy.

[How did my telling you how much I love studying the Bible make you feel?](#) Yes, some of you might have been glad to hear it. I am your preacher after all and what a fine mess this church would be in if I didn't have some affection for the book that we look to as the guide for faith and practice. But maybe you are one of those who already feels behind and a bit embarrassed that you don't know the Bible as well as you think others around you do.

If you are one of those, it might make you feel better to know you're not alone. I've lost count of the number of people who have told me that.

Also, it might make you feel better if I told something else about me. When I went to seminary, an assessment was made of the biblical literacy of incoming students. Of the five students who fared the worst in knowing what is in the Bible, four of them were preachers' kids. Then, displaying a mean streak you wouldn't expect at a seminary, they *published* the ranking of the students. Do I really have to say out loud that the fourth child and third son of Rev. James Eade Anderson was one of them?

(Don't judge me! Your former Associate Pastor, Dr. Taylor Todd, was also one of them.

He's a good friend of mine and I feel bad rattin' him out, but I would feel worse being alone in this story)

Growing up, I was one of those who found it hard to read the Bible on its own. I still am someone who if you told me to randomly open this book and read a passage, I can do it. I can read English. I can read every single word, understand what each of those words mean, and all the while I'm reading them, I can think about something that has nothing to do with the passage. My eyes read:

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense...

and thinking while I'm reading,

[“I wonder if I can make time tomorrow to play some pickleball.”](#)

Can some of you relate?

Scripture without understanding means nothing. Scripture without interpretation can mean nothing, and scripture badly interpreted can be dangerous. In fact, I suggest to you that scripture without faith is just a book.



What I mean by that is this: the Bible doesn't create faith. Faith finds articulation, in the Bible. Faith in God finds God in the Bible.

As embarrassing as it was to see my name in the bottom five of that biblical literacy list of incoming seminary students, Taylor and I were in seminary because of our faith. We chose to go to seminary because we loved God, we wanted to serve the church, and carried a faith and a wisdom with us that was passed on to us—given to us by our parents and the churches that helped raise us. We were good students, so believe me when I say our biblical literacy was just fine when we graduated, but our biblical faith was in place before biblical content was memorized. Our faith gained articulation.

Faith finding articulation, that is the story of how the Bible came to be in Exile.

Consider the psalm that many use to promote Bible study, Psalm 1.

Psalm 1:

¹Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
²but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
³They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
⁴The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

The Word of the Lord!

Thanks be to God!

“Happy are those whose delight is in the Word of the Lord.” In saying, “The Word of the Lord,” the psalmist is not speaking of the Bible, for the Bible has not yet been formed. The psalmist is speaking to a living tradition, a faith, that has been passed down from generation to generation. Grandparents tell proverbs, stories are shared, poetry is learned, rules are taught and enforced. So, when the psalm speaks of a river that nourishes the roots of the tree that grows so strong as to withstand gale force winds, the river is this living faith in God passed from one to another.



The psalmist speaks of what a blessing it is for those Jews who are nourished by this living tradition and draw from it. This is a psalm of Exile—even if it wasn't written during the Exile. We don't really know when it was written or who wrote it. Perhaps it was written by King David in one of his more pious moods. Or perhaps the psalm was attached to King David's name as a reminder to kings and those who follow them what faith in God is really about. But whether this psalm was written before or after the fall of Jerusalem we do know that whenever the psalms were gathered, edited, and finally published during the Exile, this psalm was placed first. Why? One reason had to be that it spoke to the experience of Jews in Exile where some remained strong in their identity and were called by drawing on the living tradition of their faith, and others who faded into the Babylonian world around them.

The living tradition of faith kept them together, but the Living Tradition had to change. How do you carry on a tradition of worship with the Temple destroyed? How do you remain a people of faith with a people scattered about the world? (And I would ask, how do we today find common ground as Christians when we are of different colors, cultures, and nationalities?)

One thing the Holy Spirit led the Jews to do was to create a Bible. Scrolls were gathered and scrolls were written, and some truly inspired theologians (I would say inspired by God)—some inspired theologians and editors put together three groups of writings:

- The **Torah** with its foundational stories and Law, including the Laws commands for justice and to show compassion, with the primary command to keep the Sabbath... no matter where you live.
- The **Prophets** with its morality tales (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the sermons of those who called the kings and people back to Torah, and their reminders to Exiles that what God most wants of them: to pursue shalom and well-being for themselves and for the world.
- and the **Writings**, with its poetry, wisdom literature, short stories, and histories which among other things,
 - a. would help the exiles learn the common sense of Proverbs as to how to live well even when not everyone does,
 - b. and the book of Job which speaks to those who suffered because of the Exile even when they didn't deserve it,
 - c. and the book of Jonah which speaks to those who deserve punishment but are saved by grace instead.

Altogether, these books became the Hebrew Bible. It became the common ground on which the Jews the world over would meet. They called it the *Mikra* which, interestingly means “*What is read.*”

Faith, though, continued to be *what is believed and what is lived*, not what is memorized. The *Word of God* remained the *Living Word* that was before, and is beyond, the written words of Scripture.



We Christians say *Amen* to that and take this realization one step further. Listen for the Living Word of God in John's passage about God's Word.

John 1:1-5, 14-18:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,^[d] full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,^[e] who is close to the Father's heart,^[f] who has made him known.

Again, the Word of the Lord!
Thanks be to God!

The Living Word of the Lord is a living person. Jesus is God's preached Word to the World. The life, ministry and teachings of Jesus is the guide for understanding not only the Bible but recognizing God's presence and will in the world today.

I hope by now you realize that a great way to get to know this living Jesus is to realize that he is the God who we know in Exile. Jesus is the God we can meet at the table in our own homes. The living tradition of God—which is relentlessly about love of God and neighbor as commanded in the Torah, as demanded by the prophets, and as reflected on in the writings—is real only when it becomes faith that is embraced in our hearts and lived in our lives and embodied in community. We give this living Word of God a name. And we find our identity as God's children in knowing him, and our place in the living tradition of justice and grace by following him.

Sacrament of the Lord's Supper:

We have set before us a meal where Jesus, as head of our household, will lead us in a tradition that reminds us who we are. Before we come to the table, let's reflect on what it is we are doing. Before there was this sacrament there was a Passover meal that reminded us that God frees the oppressed. But there were centuries when the Passover meal was primarily a Temple meal where priests accepted the blood of slaughtered lambs and splashed it upon the altar.

But on Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus did not go to the Temple. He went into a home. And he spoke of a sacrifice of love. He took bread in his hands and said, "Take, eat, this is the sacrifice of my life for you. Share this sacrifice with others." Wherever you are, and with whom you live, be sacrifices for the sake of God's love.

We don't have to go anywhere else to share in this meal. This is no longer a meal of a nation but a meal for the nations. Where two or more are gathered to remember what it means to be



followers of Jesus, he is with us as a living presence. Right here in Roanoke, and right in the middle of our lives here, we get to know and follow the living Word whom we believe has a name: Jesus. Even in our Exile, at this table, we find a home with him.

