

GOD'S WORD IS A LIGHT

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 15, 2018
based on Psalm 119:103–106; II Timothy 3:14–17; John 1:1–14***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Why Believe.” We have been journeying through the classic “proofs for God,” which are a set of arguments designed to demonstrate the reality of God. The morning we continue with another major argument for God—the argument from Scripture. {prayer}

One of the most important theologians of the twentieth century was Karl Barth. His major theological work, which spelled out his theology, was entitled, *Church Dogmatics*.¹ It had fourteen volumes. In 1962, Barth did a lecture at the University of Chicago, and then offered to answer questions. A student stood up and asked if Barth could summarize his theology in a single sentence. Barth replied, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Sometimes it’s good to get to the heart of the matter.

That little children’s song, which also has a German version, actually is a pretty good summation of Barth’s core point of emphasis, which was—we know the truth of God because God reveals that truth in God’s Word, the Bible, which comes to supreme expression in Jesus.

The five traditional “proofs” of the existence of God, which we have considered over the past five weeks—the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, the moral argument, and the argument from religious experience—all take a philosophical path of arguing from human observation to the conclusion that God exists. The Bible portrays the opposite path—it is God who reveals God’s own self to humanity. In the Biblical story, people do not philosophize their way to God. God comes to people, supremely in Jesus, and shows them the nature of God. The Bible is the record of this self-revelation of God.

In reality, it must be said that the five traditional proofs of God’s existence are also drawing upon a self-revelation of God. The cosmological and teleological arguments are based upon nature; but nature was itself created by God; and indeed theologians have long pointed out that in addition to the book of Scripture God has given to humanity the book of Nature, which likewise reveals God’s glory. The ontological argument draws upon the idea of God, which seems to have been implanted by God in the human mind. The moral argument likewise draws upon a God-implanted sense of morality, while the argument from religious experience is based upon the way that God’s Spirit touches human hearts. Thus all of these classic arguments are building upon some way that God has revealed God’s self to humanity. But certainly the most straightforward and clear revelation of God is what is expressed in the pages of Bible, as God speaks God’s truth to humanity.

But is not the Bible a human book? Many people today wonder whether the Bible

really is inspired by God. The Scripture itself contains the claim that it is inspired, in the passage we heard from II Timothy, which says, “All Scripture is inspired by God.” (II Timothy 3:16) But what does that mean? What sort of book is the Bible?

The extraordinary nature of the Bible begins with the fact that it is not the product of a single human author writing at a particular point in time, as is the case with most every other book. It is the product of thousands of different people across many centuries. The earliest stories in the Bible were passed down by oral tradition—stories were handed by word of mouth from generation to generation. This was not like the “telephone game”—where something whispered around a circle morphs over time, because it is not clearly heard or understood. Ancient oral cultures developed techniques to pass down important memories precisely. This was often done by putting a story in a fixed form, which was memorized and passed along exactly from age to age. The earliest stories in the Bible show evidence of this kind of careful oral tradition. Eventually, the stories were written down and assembled into collections, and then those collections were woven into larger works by editors. Biblical scholars believe that the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—consists of four major strands of such traditions. Even as Israelite society became more literate and began to keep extensive written records—which was certainly the case by the time of the Israelite kings—there were often many people behind the production of each particular Biblical book. The books of Psalms and Proverbs, for example, contain materials from many sources, and the books of the prophets are the result not only of the words of the prophets themselves but the work of their associates to collect and edit the final book. The same pattern of broad authorship continues in the New Testament. There are four gospels; and one of the evangelists, Luke, remarks how he and others consulted many eyewitnesses. (Luke 1:1–4) The letters of the New Testament likewise come from many sources—Paul, Peter, James, John, and anonymous writers such as in the letter of Hebrews. Finally, the books of the canon—those to be considered sacred Scripture—were gradually identified over a long period of time by a large number of spiritual leaders. In the end, there are sixty six books in the Bible, which came together across more than two millennia as the result of the work of countless storytellers, writers, collectors, and editors.

What is amazing is that the end result is one coherent story. From beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of the one God who acts according to a consistently unfolding purpose, and whose nature—though it is not always perfectly perceived by humans—is unchanging. The God of the Old Testament, who creates and who guides history, who is righteous Judge and who at the same time is gracious and merciful, and whose central characteristic is *steadfast love* (Hebrew: *hesed*), appears in the New Testament as exactly the same God. The specific connections between different parts of the Bible are also extraordinary. Prophetic statements in the Old Testament are fulfilled centuries later in the New Testament, and key images—such as *the tree of life* or *healing waters* or *the light* or

the way or *the Word*—appear with the same basic meanings throughout the Bible. The overall message of the Bible is likewise coherent, as people are steadily called to have faith in God, to live in love, and to find hope in God’s promises. In spite of the Bible’s complex origins, it is as though there is one Author over it all.

This divine authorship is what is meant when it is said that “all Scripture is inspired by God.” (II Timothy 3:16) This does not mean that God directly wrote the Bible. The whole Biblical story is the story of God working through numerous human beings; so it makes sense that God would work through many human writers and editors to produce the Bible itself, and that they would use their own language and literary forms. But what is evident, through a careful examination of the Scriptures, is that the Spirit of God was guiding and inspiring the whole process, so that the result is a clear testimony of who God is.

Thus the Bible is, as Karl Barth noted, a key way that human beings can come to know God. The Bible is the story of God revealing God’s self to people through the ages, and at the same time it is a means by which the contemporary reader can hear a message from God. As the Psalmist wrote, “The unfolding of God’s Word gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.” (Psalm 119:130)

But what can be said about the holy books and oral traditions of other religions? Here there is a very significant message in that passage we heard from the beginning of the gospel of John, which proclaims that Christ is the Word and that Christ is “the light that enlightens every person.” (John 1:9) The gospel of John thus connects Christ with God’s creative activity described in Genesis 1, whereby God “spoke” the universe into existence, and flooded it with light. Christ is identified as that aspect of God by which God creates, and by which God speaks; and thus it is Christ the eternal Word who is speaking throughout the Biblical story. But the gospel also says that Christ is the light by which God “enlightens every person.” This means that God has been speaking to all people in every age, enlightening them with the knowledge and truth of God. The idea that God reveals God’s self universally to humanity connects directly with what we have been observing in all the previous “proofs” for God that we have considered. The ontological argument, which focuses on the idea of God in the human mind, suggests that God has implanted in humanity at large the very concept of God. The teleological argument, which lifts up the artistry of nature, argues that it must be God who has given to people the ability to appreciate the artwork, and who awakens in all people a sense of wonder at the glory of what God has made. The cosmological argument, which points to the origin of all things, would argue that God has given to every human being the logic to be able to reason from the existence of the universe to the conclusion that there must be a First Cause behind it all, namely, God. The moral argument, which notes the universal moral sense in human beings, argues that God has imparted to all people the basic principles of morality, which then move people to acknowledge God as the source of all Goodness. The argument from

religious experience notes that whenever people experience God's presence and power this must be because God's Spirit is touching human hearts and minds. All these arguments point to ways that God is revealing God's reality to all human beings and enlightening human minds with God's truth.

Since people are becoming aware of God through all these different avenues, it is to be expected that this broad human awareness of God will become expressed in religion, which will provide ways for people to think about and to respond to God. Thus all religions should contain something of the truth of God and provide a way for people to relate to God. At the same time, human imperfection will likely mean that the various religions will also contain distortions and limited understandings of God.

But if God is seeking to reveal God's self to humanity—if God desires to show God's truth to human beings—it follows that this will finally culminate in some ultimate act of self-revelation, some perfect picture to humanity of who God is; and this is precisely what happens in Jesus. The gospel of John proclaims that the Word of God, which has been speaking through the ages in the hearts of all people, and which has been speaking through the Biblical story, has now become incarnate in Jesus. [*The Word became flesh and dwelled among us. John 1:14*] Thus Jesus is the full, complete, and perfect revelation of God's truth, the apex of the self-revelation of God through history.

With this understanding, the writings and traditions of all religions can be valued as representing something of God's truth; but the Bible is unique, as it contains the trajectory of God's self-revelation which points to and culminates in Jesus Christ. Those who read the Bible encounter the central story of how God reaches to humanity with truth and saving grace. The Bible can thus be a primary vehicle by which people come to know the reality of God.

The Bible is such a powerful testimony that those who wish to deny God must also seek to discredit the Bible. But the Bible can only be disparaged by those who do not know much about it. You can find plenty of disparaging comments about the Bible these days, especially on the internet; whenever I read such comments, I am always struck by how those who ridicule the Bible never really know what they are talking about. The more one knows and understands the Bible—the incredible nature of its origins, together with the integrity and power of its message—the more it becomes clear why this is by far the most published book in the history of humanity. Indeed, the Bible is not only the most published book in all of history; it is the most published book every year, year after year after year. The reason is because the Bible speaks with extraordinary insight and depth and continual relevance, so that those who approach it with open minds will hear the word of God.

Still further, the Bible does much more than all the other arguments for the existence of God. The classic proofs for God are designed to move people to acknowledge the reality of God; but the Bible is designed finally to bring people into connection with God—to recognize God's saving action in Jesus Christ, to respond in faith, and to

experience a life-giving, hope-filled fellowship with God. The tremendous impact of the Bible was well stated in a two hundred year old hymn by John Burton; its language is old-timey, but the truth of these lyrics is ever current —

Holy Bible, book Divine, Precious treasure, thou art mine;
Mine to tell me whence I came; Mine to teach me what I am.
Mine to chide me when I rove; Mine to show a Savior's love;
Mine art thou to guide my feet; Mine to judge, condemn, acquit.
Mine to comfort in distress; If the Holy Spirit bless;
Mine to show, by living faith, Man can triumph over death.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Karl Barth, Kirchliche Dogmatik, 1932–1967. Specifically, this massive series has four “volumes,” with a total of twelve “parts,” one of which is split into two halves, plus an index.

ⁱⁱ John Burton, Sr., Youth's Monitor in Verse, 1803.