

2 Timothy 3:14 – 4: 5 “In Case of Emergency” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/29/19

In my freshman year at Northwest Christian College, I took a New Testament class and the first day, the professor asked, “Is the Bible the inspired, infallible Word of God?” Many in the class nodded affirmatively; I sat silent sensing a trap being set, having been raised by too many ministers in my family. “Why?” asked the professor. Some shot up their hands and when called on said, “Because it says so in the Bible,” or “Because God wrote it,” or “God is perfect and doesn’t make mistakes.” Finally, one student cleverly summed it up, “Well, I find that very often the Bible agrees with what I think.” A young woman next to him shot back with, “I don’t think so; the Bible is inspired at precisely those points where it disagrees with what we think.” The class got quiet, some oohing and aahing at her insightfulness. Not to be outdone, the first student retorted, “Really? Like those passages that say women should be silent in the church?”

Our text this morning says, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...”. For some, this has meant that in times of emergency, the Bible is there to give an answer for everything. Believing such, a story is told of a minister who was crossing the Atlantic ocean on one of the first transatlantic flights and heard the scary announcement from the cockpit that the plane was in trouble and likely to crash. Seeking comfort, he opened his New Testament and seized upon the first verse his eyes met, which was the 12<sup>th</sup> verse of the sixth chapter of John’s gospel, which said, “Gather up the fragments that nothing be lost.” Not particularly helpful if you ask me. So if that is not an appropriate use for the Bible, how might we approach it otherwise? Two weeks ago, as I was studying Jeremiah, thinking I was going to preach on the prophet this morning, I was redirected to 2 Timothy and stumbled upon these words. “For the time is coming, (a phrase the prophet Jeremiah often used) when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears,

they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.” What? I thought to myself, I don’t remember this text. Did it get inserted somewhere in the last decade and no one told me? If there was ever a word from God for the living of these days right now, I cannot think of a better one. I began flipping through commentaries and scholars seemed to verify that this passage may be one of the most appropriate texts for our current Christian climate ever.

Our text is a word to all of us who are plagued with “itching ears.” Like a warning message in small print on the back of a cleaning solution bottle, these verses are last-minute instructions for people of faith. In case of emergency, remember these things, do these things, follow these instructions. It is an urgent call to action that not everyone enjoys hearing, as we tend to surround ourselves with teachers and voices who say only the things we want to hear. In these tenuous and historical times, no doubt we have certain sources from which we like to get our daily news. With the rise of the digital culture, with online news sources and that still-strange blogosphere, it is easier than ever before for people to isolate themselves in echo chambers, interacting predominantly with like-minded people over such serious issues as we face today. This becomes particularly hazardous when it gives us excuses to discount other voices. Tragic divisions are heightened as people with the largest platforms pander to expanding audiences and dispense trite solutions. Relationships disintegrate as we find it way too convenient to ignore anyone who doesn’t suit our own desires, as the text says. I tried it this week; intentionally scanning several different and conflicting news reports, trying to pick out the kernels of truth and where things just didn’t seem consistent. I found it helpful in keeping a sound perspective and stepping back to understand we have just begun a process in

our country which is designed to take a long time in order that all facts and information can be evaluated. The author charges Timothy and all of us to not be too hasty; in case of emergency, whether it be personal, communal, or national: "Proclaim the message... be persistent... convince, rebuke, encourage... with the utmost patience in teaching." This is a fine summary of what living ought to be about.

We are a generation that is always on the look-out for the next best thing, but the reality is we have been given, by God's grace, what we most need: A sound doctrine and healthy way of life as reflected in the "God-inspired" stories of the Bible, or as the actual Greek translation says, "God-breathed." God-breathed indicates a strong influence from the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit, who is still speaking today in prophets and leaders of the faith in addition to scripture. We need to understand that the Bible is not the end-all for life and to call it holy, in and of itself, borders on idolatry. It includes contradictions and mistakes because it is a product of human hands over thousands of years. It was never meant to be worshipped or to proof-text every problem, as is depicted in a Peanuts cartoon. Schroeder is sitting by his piano with his Bible splayed open on his lap. Lucy keeps trying to get his attention but he waves her off, saying, "Don't bother me. I'm looking for a verse of scripture to back up one of my preconceived notions." With "itching ears," we do tend to pick and choose our scriptures, don't we?

Likewise, there are certainly some texts that seemed to have no value whatsoever, like what is up with all the begats? Maybe we need to ask ancestry.com or 23andme how well they are doing these days. And what is up with all the violence and torture? Except by their very presence, they remind us of the sorry state humanity can get itself into. Stories which are

messy, broken, miserably lacking in potential and lackluster in performance; stories about leaders who lusted for power and sex, whose feeble faith must have made God or onlookers laugh; stories about misunderstandings and misbehavior; lengthy essays which have become associated with tub-thumping evangelism and dreary piety, with superstition and moralizing, with authoritarianism and literalism. And yet- And yet just because it is a book about both the sublime and the unspeakable, it is also a book about life the way it really is. It is a book about people who at one and the same time can be both believing and unbelieving, innocent and guilty, crusaders and crooks, full of hope and full of despair. In other words, it is a book about us. Within it, we discover fine pearls of wisdom and truth that ring closest to our hearts. For the time is coming, and very possibly are here, when we need to hear the stories about a God that is not powerless but empowering, that is not apathetic but involved and still speaking in our lives. The time is coming when we need to hear a ballad of returning to God, of restoration and rebuilding our world into the realm God intends for all creation.

When he was still a student, Martin Luther King Jr. preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church where his father was a pastor entitled "How the Christian Overcomes Evil." He shared an illustration from mythology. The mythical sirens of the ocean, often equated with mermaids, sang seductive songs that lured sailors towards certain shipwrecks. There were two, though, who managed to navigate those treacherous waters successfully, and King contrasted their techniques. Ulysses stuffed wax into the ears of his rowers and strapped himself to the mast of the ship and by sheer will, managed to steer clear of the shoals and rocks. But Orpheus took an even healthier tactic, one that resembled Christ's choices on earth. He simply pulled out his lyre and played a song more beautiful than that of the mermaids, so his sailors eventually

listened to him over the sirens. In times of crisis, as James Howell notes, the stories of God are not offered as some big fist to pound us into submission or to close us off, isolating us from the world. They are offered us a beautiful tune which speaks to our heart like a wildflower which a child brings to her mother, like an infant whose fingers grasp tightly to our own. Within the stories, we glimpse the very heart and nature of God. Finally, Frederick Buechner explains it this way: "If you look *at* a window, you see dust, dirt, fly-specks, and the crack where Junior's Frisbee hit it. If you look *through* a window, you see the world beyond. Something like this is the difference between those who see the Bible as a useless and holy bore versus those who see it as the God-breathed Word that speaks out of the depths of our unimaginable past into the depths of ourselves." In all cases of life, emergency or not, messy or clean, scripture is a means by which God can breathe life and faith and hope and love and forgiveness and resurrection into you and I. Thanks be to God.