

## “The Bible: Who’s Got Questions?”

Date: August 28, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 119:1-8; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Occasion: Intro to series on the Bible

Theme: The Bible, questions and problems

On August 8<sup>th</sup> 1964, Rev. Edison Amos presented me with my very first Bible. I still have it. It is a copy of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. When it first came out, there was a good deal of controversy about it, because it *wasn't* the King James Version, originally written in 1611. For many people, the King James Version was *the only* Bible to read; it was what they grew up reading.

The Revised Standard version was first published in 1952 and was attempting to make the Bible more readable and understandable to a new generation of Christian believers. The Old King's English was no longer spoken and all of the Thee's and Thou's and other archaic language made it hard to understand.

Since that time, numerous translations have been published. I've had a number of them over the years. Each one of them tried to make the Bible more readable and more understandable to a new generation of readers, all with some degree of success.

But the truth is the Bible is not an easy book to read. Not because of the grammar or the vocabulary but because it's a perplexing book. If you've ever tried to read the Bible straight through, from Genesis to Revelation, you may have gotten discouraged and quit reading.

You may have gotten bored reading some of the passages that gave long lists of who begat who, and who belonged to which tribe. Quite frankly, for many of us, who cares? It seems boring.

Or maybe you quit reading the Bible because some of what you read didn't make sense to you. The God of the Old Testament seems so angry, ordering the killing of entire villages and cities. But over in the New Testament, God instructs us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek.

Did God change? Does God have a mental disease that causes the holy personality to change? Is God bi-polar? What's going on?

I love this holy book. I've read it multiple times. Each morning I read a portion of it in my personal devotional time. I have studied it; I have taught it; I use it to prepare my sermons each week. I have committed many of the verses to memory.

When I read the pages of this book, I often hear God speaking to me. This book has a call upon my life. As I read and understand the life of Jesus, I hope my life will reflect His. This holy book inspires me to be a better person, the person I believe God wants me to be. I love this book.

And yet, I wrestle with it. There are parts of this book, that if I'm honest, I have questions about. There are some statements in the Bible that I don't believe capture the character and the will of God. I'm guessing, if you're honest, you have questions too.

Do we have to take the Bible literally on every page? Was the earth created, literally, in six days? Do we have to discount all of the scientific knowledge of the past several centuries to take the Bible seriously? Are we supposed to cut off our hands and gouge out our eyes if they cause us to sin? Are we to kill those who curse their parents, who commit adultery, who violate the Sabbath or who are homosexual by nature? The Bible can seem confusing.

One lawyer spoke to his pastor about inconsistencies he observed while reading the four Gospels. He said, “In a courtroom, when witnesses disagree like this, I know there is a problem with their testimony. How can I trust what the Gospels say about Jesus?”

These questions are just the tip of the iceberg. Does everything *really* happen for a reason? Does God will the death of babies, plan untimely automobile or motorcycle deaths or will the death of thousands of people in natural disasters?

What about the fate of people who aren’t Christian? Is everyone who is not a Christian condemned and damned to hell? Some scripture verses say so. But is there another way to understand these statements?

There is no shortage of questions we can ask about what some say is “the clear teaching of scripture.” I’m sure you have your own set of questions. I know that I do. Beginning in September, on the 11<sup>th</sup>, I’m beginning a new sermon and study series entitled “Making Sense of the Bible, Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today.”

I’ll be using Adam Hamilton’s book and study guide as the basis of our time together. I think Adam has done a remarkable job of making complex issues understandable to the average person.

I highly recommend his book to you. I’ll be placing an order at the end of this week. You can sign up to get your copy out in the narthex. Just to let you know, I get no commission for this endorsement.

In his very first chapter, Rev. Hamilton answers the question, “What exactly is the Bible?” He begins by telling us what it is not.

Some people refer to the Bible as the “Owner’s Manual,” like the manual you get for your car.

But the Bible is not as easily organized as my car manual. The stories this book contains are about people who lived in the ancient Near East thousands of years ago. What follows those first stories are books of poetry, followed by fiery words from prophets warning about the wrath of the Assyrian and Babylonian armies.

Next you have the New Testament telling about the stories of Jesus, what he said and what he did, about his death and resurrection. Next are twenty one letters called the epistles, written to early Christians living in the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago.

Finally, where there should be a trouble-shooting guide, like in my car manual, there’s the book of Revelation, with stories of multi-headed beasts and dragons.

The Bible is not as simple as an owner’s manual, although it does have sage advice. Some people treat the Bible as though it were a Magic 8 ball: just ask it a question, flip open the Bible and ta-da, the Bible gives you the answer you need. It doesn’t work like that.

Some people expect the Bible to be a book of systematic theology, with all of the right beliefs and teachings laid out in a neat, orderly fashion. But it’s not. In fact you’ll seldom find our Christian doctrines carefully spelled out in the biblical text.

Wouldn’t it be nice if it were clearly written and spelled out what the correct Christian doctrine about the Trinity is, or about baptism? Wouldn’t it be nice if we had in our Bibles, a chapter explaining how Jesus could be both human and divine?

The Bible is a wonderful, perplexing, disturbing, complex book. Over the next several weeks, we're going to look at it more carefully, so that we can better understand this book that is the basis of our faith. Either in sermons or in our study group, we'll try to answer many of the questions raised today.

For all of our lives we've been told that we should read the Bible. The Bible is the most-sold book in the world, or among the top sellers. And yet if we don't read it, or we don't understand, what good does it do us?

All of us, the pastor included, need a little help in making sense of the Bible. I invite you to join us on this great adventure over the next several weeks, as we have conversation about this holy book of ours. What is it anyway, that makes it holy?

Would you turn in your hymnal to page 602 and join me in prayer?

"Blessed Lord, you have caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen."

This sermon borrows heavily from Adam Hamilton's book *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, HarperCollins Publisher, New York, NY, 2014, pp. 4-10.