

Confessions of a Bible Salesman

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, October 20, 2019

Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 119:97-104
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

I have a confession to make. From the time I graduated from seminary until the time I received my first call as a pastor, I worked as a Bible salesman. It's hard to believe, I know! Some of you may have a great deal of difficulty picturing me as a Bible salesman. But before you let your imaginations run wild, let me add that I did not wear a dark suit and carry a brief case, nor did I go door to door hawking my wares. No, actually, I worked in the bookstore of the Massachusetts Bible Society in downtown Boston. It was only a part-time position, and it didn't pay much more than minimum wage, but it was something to do with my time while I sought out my first call to pastoral ministry.

The store sold books on all sorts of subjects related to Christianity: theology, ethics, church history, Bible commentaries, spirituality, prayer, preaching, pastoral care, church administration. But what the Mass. Bible Society Bookstore was most known for was the variety of Bibles it had for sale. We sold a great number of English versions of the Bible: the King James Version and the New King James Version, the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version, The American Standard Version, the New International Version, the Good News Version, the Contemporary English Version. You name it, we had it! We also sold popular paraphrases of the Bible such as The Message, the New Living Translation, and the Amplified Bible. We sold the Bible in various formats as well: hardcover and paperback, leatherbound and vinyl-covered; Bibles for pew and pulpit; Study Bibles and Pocket Bibles. And that was just the English-language Bibles! We also carried Bibles in Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, French, German, Italian -- even Swahili! And if we didn't have it in the language you needed, we did our best to order it for you.

Working at the Mass. Bible Society Bookstore that summer and fall, what I remember most were the unusual requests we received from time to time. Probably the request we received most often was one that we couldn't fulfill. Customers would come into the store looking for a pocket-size, large print Bible. We had pocket-size Bibles, which I gladly showed them, but invariably they objected to the tiny print. We also had large print Bibles, which I also showed them, but then they objected to the Bibles' overall size -- large print Bibles were always too big to fit into one's pocket. It made for a difficult dilemma. They had to choose either a Bible with type large enough for them to read, or a Bible that would fit into their coat pocket. They couldn't have both.

One day a woman came in looking for a Bible. She wanted it to have a black cover. And it was important to her that the edition had the words "Holy Bible" printed on the cover. I asked her what version she wanted, and she said that it didn't matter. I found one for her, but if I remember correctly, it cost more than she wanted to spend. I probed a little deeper. How much was she hoping to spend? Why did the version of the Bible not matter to her? And why was it so important that the words "Holy Bible"

be printed on the cover? It turned out that no one was actually going to be reading this Bible. You see, a dear relative of hers had recently died and the funeral was coming up. She wanted to place the Bible in the coffin next to the body. It was important to her that her relative be buried with the Holy Bible by her side.

This was the first time I realized that for some people the Bible can be a kind of talisman or amulet – an object believed to have the power to ward off evil and bring good fortune.

I remember a taxi driver coming into the store one day with a similar purpose in mind. He wanted a Bible, too. Any Bible would do, as long as it would lie open. He wanted to have an open Bible in the passenger seat of his taxi as he drove around town. I suppose he considered God to be his “co-pilot,” and the open Bible was a symbol of God’s presence.

Presbyterians don’t look upon the Bible as a good luck charm or as an object with supernatural powers. But we do hold it in high esteem. It is a book above all other books. Indeed, we call it the word of God, because its writing was inspired by God, as is our reading and understanding of it today.

The second letter to Timothy tells us that "all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed."

The Bible is our guide for faithful Christian living. We consider its content to be powerful and of great importance in our lives. That’s why the reading and interpretation of scripture is so central to our celebration of worship. Every Sunday we hear one or more passages read from the Bible, and we listen to a sermon based on those Bible passages.

The Bible is our primary source for knowing about God, Jesus, and the early Church. We consider it be "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ." Without it, we would know next to nothing about Jesus, and the Church that began in the first century would probably never have survived to today.

Through the centuries, people have found that in reading the Bible, one can encounter God anew. The Bible points beyond itself to God. It is like a lens through which we are able to see God. As we bring our own unique life experiences to the Bible, we are given new insights as God speaks to us afresh through the scriptures.

The psalmist sings praises to God for the scriptures: "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. . . . How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

In some Jewish households, young children are actually given honey when the scriptures are read so that they will associate the scriptures with sweetness. And sweet they are – here and there. The scriptures aren’t all sweetness and light. Taken as a whole, the stories in the Bible encompass all of life – the good and the bad. It tells about

the real life struggles of people and their relationship to God. As we read about their lives, we gain insights into our own lives and our relationship with God.

Many Christians read and study the Bible on a regular basis. Some choose to look at the lectionary texts for each upcoming Sunday and to reflect on them prior to attending worship. The lectionary texts for each Sunday are published each month in our church newsletter for just that reason. Attending Bible studies here at St. Andrew also can be helpful. Presbyterian Women host a Bible study open to all on the first Tuesday of each month (September through May) from ten to eleven in the morning. This year we're looking at the Ten Commandments. And the Spiritual Formation Group, which meets on the first and third Thursdays of each month beginning at 10:00 a.m., often focuses on Scripture, choosing passages from the lectionary, reading each aloud, and discussing what meanings they find in them. The group also makes use of the excellent Bible study resources in the church library to better understand the original language, context, and meaning of Scripture passages. Reading and studying the Bible with others is almost always more fruitful than doing so alone, because we are enriched by the knowledge and insights of others.

If you are interested in participating in a Bible Study and weekday mornings don't fit your schedule, please come talk to me and we can consider scheduling an additional Bible Study at a more convenient time and/or location.

The Bible is a good book. It's THE good book. And it's worth reading, because it offers us wisdom of the ages and truths that have stood the test of time. So, if you have a Bible at home, I encourage you to pick it up and read it from time to time. If you don't have a Bible at home and want to get one, let me know. I'll be happy to offer some suggestions about what to look for in a good Bible. For as you now know, I once was a Bible Salesman!