

“Your Words to Me Are Life and Health”

Psalm 19:7-14

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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A sixth grader once shared her vast knowledge of the Bible in an essay. Let me read you portions:

In the beginning, which occurred near the start, there was nothing but God, darkness, and some gas. The Bible says, “The Lord thy God is one,” but I think He must be a lot older than that. Anyway, God said, “Give me a light!” and someone did. Then God made the world.

God split the Adam and made Eve. Adam and Eve were naked, but they weren’t embarrassed because mirrors hadn’t been invented yet.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating one bad apple, so they were driven from the Garden of Eden ... Not sure what they were driven in though, because they didn’t have cars. Adam and Eve had a son, Cain, who hated his brother as long as he was Abel.

One of the next important people was Noah, who was a good guy, but one of his kids was kind of a Ham. Noah built a large boat and put his family and some animals on it. He asked some other people to join him, but they said they would have to take a rain check.

After Noah came Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob was more famous than his brother, Esau, because Esau sold Jacob his birthmark in exchange for some pot roast. Jacob had a son named Joseph who wore a really loud sports coat.

Another important Bible guy is Moses, whose real name was Charlton Heston. Moses led the Israel Lights out of Egypt and away from the evil Pharaoh. . . . God fed the Israel Lights every day with manicotti. Then he gave them His Top Ten Commandments. These include: don’t lie, cheat, smoke, dance, or covet your neighbor’s stuff. Oh, yeah, I just thought of one more: Humor thy father and thy mother.

One of Moses’ best helpers was Joshua who was the first Bible guy to use spies. Joshua fought the battle of Geritol and the fence fell over on the town.

After Joshua came David. He got to be king by killing a giant with a slingshot. He had a son named Solomon who had about 300 wives and 500 porcupines. My teacher says he was wise, but that doesn’t sound very wise to me.

After Solomon, there were a bunch of major league prophets. There were also some minor league prophets, but I guess we don't have to worry about them.

After the Old Testament came the New Testament. Jesus is the star of The New Testament. He was born in Bethlehem in a barn. (I wish I had been born in a barn, too, because my mom is always saying to me, "Close the door! Were you born in a barn?" It would be nice to say, "As a matter of fact, I was.")

During His life, Jesus had many arguments with sinners like the Pharisees and the Republicans. Jesus also had twelve opossums. The worst one was Judas Asparagus. Judas was so evil that they named a terrible vegetable after him.

Jesus was a great man. He healed many leopards and even preached to some Germans on the Mount. But the Democrats and all those other bad guys put Jesus on trial before Pontius the Pilot. The Pilot didn't stick up for Jesus. He just washed his hands instead.

Anyways, Jesus died for our sins, then came back to life again. He went up to Heaven but will be back at the end of the Aluminum. His return is foretold in the book of Revolution.¹

The humorous inaccuracies in this sixth grader's understanding of the Bible are easy for us to spot. If only it were as simple when we hear or read adult interpretations!

The famous Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, Richard Rohr, began his thoughtful book on The Sermon on the Mount with the following provocative declaration: "The Bible is the most controversial book in print. It has done an immense amount of good. At the same time, it probably has caused more damage than any other book in human history."² Some might judge these words to be a shocking, even scandalous statement coming from such a renown spiritual leader as Rohr, but in my estimation, they are spot on, as the English say. You see, the Bible—or more accurately one preacher's interpretation of the Bible—drove me away from the church for many years. Let me tell you my story.

I grew up in a loving, Christian family, and made my profession of faith at a fairly early age. As a child, I participated in Sunday school and worship every week, vacation Bible school every summer, and youth group as I grew older. I thoroughly enjoyed these church activities—probably more than my teachers did because I asked so many questions they had a hard time completing the lessons they had so carefully prepared. I also enjoyed singing hymns in the worship service, but I must admit I tuned out the sermon and read the books my mother always had for me so I wouldn't squirm and fidget like some children did.

At some point in my teen years, however, I began to listen to the sermon—and that's when my impression of church changed. (As a side note, I also began to notice my father

occasionally grimacing during sermons. I found out later that he continued to attend largely for our sake because my brother, sister, and I were involved in the children and youth programs.)

I didn't have the vocabulary for it at the time, but the minister had become a "fundamentalist." Fundamentalism had not yet taken over the Southern Baptist denomination, but the minister of the church of my childhood joined their ranks early on. His unhealthy interpretation of the Bible caused me to leave the church during my junior year of high school. Now, I didn't stop believing in God because I couldn't deny my personal spiritual experiences, but it was very clear to me that the God the fundamentalist minister proclaimed was not the same God I experienced in my life, and perceived in the realm of nature, and felt in the loving relationships among my family and friends.

I spent five long years away from the church. And let me be clear: I did not go back to the church because I had changed; on the contrary, I went back to church because the church had changed. The old minister retired, and the congregation called a new minister with very different beliefs that arose from the healthy way he interpreted the Bible. This new minister reached out to the disenchanted young people in the community. As you can imagine, I had many questions for him, and they mainly centered on how one should go about interpreting the Bible. This quest for a satisfying interpretative method led me to seminary and then on to my doctoral studies. The question, "How should one interpret the Bible?" has served as the focus of my teaching and writing career at three universities, as well as has undergirded my preaching and teaching in numerous churches over the past 35 years. For you see, there are unhealthy and well as healthy ways to interpret the Bible. One quick way to distinguish between these interpretations is to apply the "test" found in Psalm 19 to any proposed interpretation.

Psalm 19 abounds with praise for the revelation of God disclosed to humanity in "the two books." And what are these two books? The Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture.

Last week we examined the first six verses of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God." Through Nature, God reveals aspects of the divine character and nature. This revelation is not unambiguous or comprehensive; it is not highly nuanced or specific; but the revelation is there for us to discern nonetheless. Because it is available to all people, theologians have labeled it General Revelation.

This week we examine the remainder of Psalm 19. Verses 7-10 poetically praise God's life-giving instruction through Scripture. Because the various biblical writings were revealed to specific individuals at specific times living in specific circumstances, theologians have labeled it Special Revelation. The final verses of Psalm 19, verses 11-14, depict the Psalmist's response to the revelation of God through the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture, that is, through General Revelation and Special Revelation.

This morning, we will focus on verses 7-10, noting four literary aspects of this beautiful poetic passage. First, the Psalmist uses six different terms to refer to Scripture: Torah or instruction, decrees, precepts, commandments, fear or reverence, and ordinances. Second, the

Psalmist uses seven terms to describe the character of Scripture: it is perfect, sure, right, clear, pure, true, and righteous. Third, the Psalmist describes five effects of Scripture: it revives the soul, it makes wise the simple, it rejoices the heart, it enlightens the eyes, and it endures forever. Fourth, the Psalmist declares that God's words are more to be desired than fine gold; moreover, they are sweeter than the best honey.

One way to distinguish between unhealthy interpretations of Scripture and healthy interpretations is to keep in mind the third literary aspect of verses 7-10, the effect of Scripture: it revives the soul; it makes wise the simple; it rejoices the heart; it enlightens the eyes; and it endures forever. To be candid with you, I experienced the exact opposite of these things when I listened to the fundamentalist preacher's sermons. Instead of being revived, my soul was crushed. Instead of growing wiser by pondering the words of the sermon, the sermon struck me as nonsense. Instead of rejoicing, I felt depressed. Instead of being enlightened, I was more confused than ever. Instead of the message remaining with me long after the service, I dismissed his sermons immediately.

Although I did not know it at the time, intuitively I was applying the "test" suggested by Psalm 19 to interpretations of the Bible proposed by that fundamentalist preacher. His unhealthy interpretations failed the test, and that spurred me on to learn how to create healthy interpretations. This has been my life's goal for over four decades. And like so many other preachers and teachers, I frequently pray the words with which the Psalmist concluded this psalm: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

We can learn how to create healthy interpretations of the Bible. We can produce interpretations that pass the test suggested by Psalm 19. And when we do, we will find ourselves testifying to the truth found in the opening line of today's invitation hymn: "Your words to me are life and health."

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ "Judas Asparagus and Other Fractured Bible Tales," (web).

² Richard Rohr with John Feister, *Jesus' Plan for a New World* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 1996), vii.