

Summary of Bible Study “Rediscovering the Book of Faith,” Session 2, 2/10/21

Due to copyright rules, we can't record these three sessions of Bible study. Here is a summary of what we would have talked about today (we had some technical difficulties). Please join in next week on the Zoom Bible study at 10:00 am on Wednesday, February 17th. You can participate even if you don't have a Zoom account; even if you don't have a camera on your computer; even if you just call in over the phone. We'd love to have you there!

- A quick recap – last week we talked about how the Hebrew Bible – also known as the Old Testament – came to be in the form we have it today. Our discussions and our “homework” ideas had a lot to do with stories – the stories behind your own family histories and albums. The stories of your congregation and towns. The idea was to get in the mindset of the stories that shape your family or your community; the stories you have received from generations past; and the stories you'd like to pass on to future generations. That's how the stories of the Old Testament were originally passed down, orally, from generation to generation, eventually being put into writing. They tell the story of God and God's people. And we are a part of that story still today.

- This week we're talking about the New Testament. And while the New Testament is also filled with stories of God and God's people, today we'll be talking a little bit more about *conversations*. The story of Jesus was something new and powerful. And a lot of the New Testament consists of conversations about that story – what it meant for people's lives, what it meant for the world. The New Testament shows a community that is centered on the story, and the impact, of the good news of what God did in and through Jesus.

Are you a part of a community or group that's centered on stories? When your family gathers, what are the stories that get told every time, every holiday? How do those stories shape you? How do new generations join the conversation and the tradition of those stories? Do you and your friends talk about the latest episode of a TV show, or the latest video posted by your favorite online personality, each time a new one comes out? How do those conversations form a community?

- Let's pray: Gracious God, as you gathered the first believers into communities led by the Spirit, gather us now as a living community to share and understand your living Word. Be with us in our discussion and grant us insight. Touch our hearts and minds so we can see and feel your promises at work in our lives and our world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

- From Matthew 16:13-16: ¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus really got people talking. There was a buzz and large crowds wherever he went. His teachings, his miracles, his healings, and even his confrontations with other leaders always caused a stir. Then he was crucified; and then he was raised from the dead. And people kept saying, “Who is this?” The answer? The Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior. But there were lots of other names and titles, too: Christ, Anointed One, King, Son of David, Son of Man, Chosen One, High Priest, and more.

The earliest believers in Christ did what the Old Testament folks did – they repeated the stories, the eyewitness accounts, and passed them on. People expected Jesus to return at any moment. But when the first generation of believers started to die, they started to write things down right away. The first writings were not the Gospels; they were letters, like Paul’s – one side of conversations he was having with young congregations about who Jesus was and what his death and resurrection meant for their lives. Later on, the Gospels were written down, and the four most popular – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – shared a lot of stories in common. Some later interpreters found this frustrating, and wanted to just pick one or blend the four together. But, in the end, all four were kept as witness, in conversation: slightly different, but together telling a fuller story.

- When it came time, over the next generations and centuries, to “solidify” the canon of the New Testament, and the Bible, there were debates. Should the letters be considered scripture? That’s not how they were originally intended; but believers found the conversations that Paul and others were having to be formative and holy for their lives of faith, too; they wanted to join in and continue the conversation. The four Gospels were included, as well as Acts (kind of a sequel to Luke). One book in the style of “apocalypse” (which means “hidden”), was included – Revelation. And should the Hebrew Bible be included or not, as the Old Testament?

In the end, the Old Testament was included – the conversation of the New Testament doesn’t make any sense without the stories and promises of the Old. And as for which writings would be included in the New, three criteria ended up making the determination as to the twenty-seven books we have collected today. First, apostolicity: was the writing associated with or traced back to one of the apostles? Second, orthodoxy: how well did the writing reflect the community’s beliefs about who Jesus was and is, at least at that stage in the ongoing conversation? Third, universality: Christian communities were scattered all around the eastern region of the Mediterranean; was the writing commonly used and well-known to a wide swath of Christian churches?

- From the leader’s guide: “This session compares the New Testament to a lengthy discussion... Christians had to wrestle with the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The debate continued for a few hundred years. This is a much shorter time span than it took for the development of the Old Testament, but it was not a quick and easy process.” Keep in mind that the conversation isn’t always quick and easy; the Bible is a living Word, still speaking to us today, new with each encounter, just like anyone else in your life. Sometimes you’ll have to wrestle; sometimes there will be conflict, just like in the congregations Paul was writing to, about the Bible is trying to teach us; but that’s ok. Our “family stories” are not the same as “family history”; they’ll mean different things to each of us. Part of being a part of the conversation is listening to one another and navigating the rough patches, in love.

- Here’s an exercise to try: Make a Venn diagram (two overlapping circles). In one circle, write “Past.” In the other, write “Today.” In the Past circle, write some things that the early church struggled with, like dietary laws, circumcision, and how to understand Jesus. In the “Today” circle, write some things that we as the church struggle with today, like the fading interest in religion, how faith and politics interact, and maintaining buildings. What things fall into the overlap, like how to respond to “outsiders”? In what ways has our shared conversation of faith changed over the years; and what things are we still talking about, two thousand years later? Try not to get bogged down on the issues or debates; but use this exercise to see that the conversation is still going, and we struggle no less than our forebears.

- Another thing to try is continuing the conversation from the different types of writing in the New Testament. First, read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. It's an answer to a question that believers in Thessalonica asked Paul. What do you think the question was? Do you have any follow up questions for God today? In other words, what would your return letter/email/message look like? Second, read the crucifixion scene in the four Gospels (Matthew 27:32-55; Mark 15:21-39; Luke 23:32-47; John 19:16-30). Join the conversation between these four witnesses; what do *you* think is the most important part of the story? Third, read Revelation 14:14-20, 19:11-21, and 21:1-27. Then look up the lyrics to the hymn "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." This hymn is a response to Revelation; now you join the conversation – who do *you* say Jesus is? Would verse would you add to the song?
- Before we get to the last activities, circle back to the original question that Jesus asked: "Who do you say that I am?" We are a part of an ongoing conversation, and we have been charged with inviting more folks to join it and listening to what they have to say. How would you answer this question? Which parts of God's story would you lift up? How are you a part of God's story still unfolding today?
- What is your "personal canon"? What sources do you turn to (biblical or otherwise) when you need inspiration, feel down, or have questions about God or your faith?
- If you're more of a visual person than a words person, do an image search on artists' depictions of Jesus or a certain scene from the Gospels, like the Last Supper. Compare and contrast the artists' works; what gets highlighted? What does it say about Jesus? How do you react to the different styles and outlooks? You could also do this with various movies based on Jesus, or songs.
- There are lots of voices in our sacred scriptures; the Holy Spirit inspires and speaks through them all. But it isn't a single narrative in a single style by a single person in a single point in time; it's a conversation, both within the pages and one we're still invited into today. That can be confusing at times, even frustrating; but it's a living Word. We are a community shaped and supported by these stories of God and God's people, and our faithful conversations keep the pages of the story turning, and invite others in.

That's the short version of this week's material. I hope you can join us next week in the Zoom meeting. Here is the information for next week. There is a link for those on the internet, and call-in information for those who aren't.

Messiah Lutheran is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Messiah Lutheran's Zoom Meeting

Time: Feb 17, 2021 10:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

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