

Last week we talked about worshiping together and worshiping individually. Pop quiz time! What does the clenched fist remind us of? If we want an A in worship attendance, how many Sundays can we miss? Now the unclenched hand. How many times a day should we pray?

Today we are going to look at the practice of studying the Bible. Let me start by telling you about Smoochie. Smoochie was our English Bulldog. White with brown spots. 100% bulldog. Snorting, burping, snoring. And he passed gas with pride. If Smoochie started running, you better brace yourself. Running into walls with a thud was a regular occurrence. Another thing about bulldogs, they are stubborn! When they don't want to listen, they don't. Smoochie loved water. He especially loved the pool at our house in Sahuarita. But there's one other thing about bulldogs. They can't swim. Their small legs will not hold up that sexy brutish body. The minute they get into water, they sink like a rock. When we were in the pool, there was nothing we could do or say to keep him from leaning precariously over the edge. He just wanted to be in the water with us. Sure enough, occasionally he'd fall in, and we'd have to rescue him. Not so pleasant when the water was cold.

As a follower of Christ, we are asked to listen for our Master's voice and obey his commands. But we also hear other voices and longings. Tempting voices. Like that water that Smoochie could not swim in, those longings can devour us, leaving us lost and far away from God.

But how does God speak to us today? The word Revelation has been used to describe God's efforts to speak to us and there are two types. General or natural revelation and special revelation.

For general revelation, nature is a perfect place to start. Psalm 19:1-4 gives us a magnificent example of nature telling God's story.

“Heaven is declaring God’s glory. the sky is proclaiming his handiwork. One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known. Of course, there’s no speech, no words—their voices can’t be heard—but their sound extends throughout the world. Their words reach the ends of the earth. God has made a tent in heaven for the sun.”

We feel this psalm when we look up at the night sky. Seeing the Milky Way splashed across the night sky, how could it not declare the glory of God. Paul affirms this revealing power in Romans 1:20, “Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities—God’s eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So, humans are without excuse.” The revelations are there if we pay attention.

Jesus used metaphors of nature to talk about God’s kingdom. Mustard seeds, wheat, weeds, sheep, fish, fig trees, and yeast. Think about the ways the natural world speaks to you, giving you insights into the spiritual world.

God gave us the ability to create art, music, and literature that speak to the human condition and poke at the questions of existence. Think about when you felt moved by a great book, or a powerful movie scene, or an inspiring song. Was that the voice of God?

What about the stories of people. Not just biblical stories. Look around for a moment. Stories are all over this room. Stories of fear and courage, despair, and hope. People who’ve survived terrible tragedies, forgiven seemingly unforgiveable wrongs, and rebounded from terrible failures. God uses people to teach people.

Think about the parables of Jesus about seeking the Kingdom of God? A shepherd searching for a lost sheep, a farmer scattering seed, an errant son welcomed home by a merciful father, the Good Samaritan. There’s the rich young ruler, the prostitute who wept at

Jesus feet, or the woman who gave her last two coins to God. God speaks through our everyday experiences and interactions with other people.

We also have conscience, intuition, and reason. Conscience is our inner sense of right and wrong. Intuition is that sense of knowing. That “gut feeling”. Reason is the gift given to know God, to discern God’s will, to sense right from wrong, to perceive danger or opportunity.

Nature and art can and do show God’s glory. But general revelations can be misunderstood or worse, misused. This is why we also need special revelation. Scripture or the Bible is the most direct way that God reveals himself to us.

It is the best-selling book of all time and 87% of Americans claim to own a bible. But would it surprise you to know that not just most people, but most Christians read little to none of it? A poll found that only 35% of Christians read their bibles even weekly. Walking with God and knowing God’s will for us. How can that happen if reading and studying scriptures isn’t a regular part of our lives.

The Bible is a rich and diverse collection of writings. A collection with 66 documents divided into two “testaments. Christians call them the Old and New Testament. Pick up a bible and join me on a brief tour. Find the Gospel of Matthew and leave your finger there. Everything to the left of your finger is the Old Testament. 75% of the bible. Jews call it the Tanak or the Hebrew bible. The Old Testament is the story of Israel and Israel’s relationship with God. Now back to your finger. Everything to the right is the New Testament. The New testament is the story of Jesus. Jesus came to show us who God is, and who God wants us to be.

Some describe the bible as a love letter or an owner’s manual. An acronym calls it Basic Instructions Before Leaving earth. Church family. It’s more than a love letter, it’s not exactly an

owner's manual and it's far from basic. The Bible is a beautiful, powerful, and complex collection of documents that describe the faith of the writers, their experiences with God, and their insights as they were led by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus sets the example for reading the Bible. He read it, studied it, and memorized it. He quoted scripture regularly. Scripture shaped his life mission, his ethics, his theology, and his spirituality. Jesus challenged the interpretations of Scriptures in his time. He debated the meanings and sometimes he even set aside scripture. He knew enough scripture to say "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind". And "You shall love your neighbor as yourself".

The apostles carried on this deep walk in the Scriptures. How did the early church read scripture? 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says. "Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good." For Paul scripture was pivotal. It was a way to guide, teach, and correct.

How often and How much bible should we read? Let's start with a few simple goals. How often do you think we should read scripture? How about every day? Church family, I am challenging you to make this a holy habit in your life. Before my morning prayers, I take time to read scripture. Not just because I'm a pastor now, but because this became part of my means of grace long before that. I realized how vital this was to keeping my faith strong. Daily reading. I know it's a big challenge. So let's look to our five fingers again to help us set a goal. Start by reading 5 verses a day. One for each finger. As this becomes a habit, up the game a little. Hold up your other hand. This represents the 5 chapters you will grow to be able to read each week. We say 5, but how many days of the week are there? Yes seven. This means you get 2 catchup days each week, in case you get behind.

Now, where to start? Here are some suggestions. Pick a translation that's easy to read. I love me Elizabethan English and the King James Version but it's not the easiest read. Try a translation like the Common English Bible, The English Standard Version, or the New International Version. As for where to start, I personally recommend the Gospel of John. John spends the most time talking about who Jesus really is.

Now let's look at ways to read the bible. There's reading for understanding. Learning about the life of Jesus through the Gospels or the origins of the Passover in Exodus. Reading from different translations will expand your learning. There's reading for formation where we ask simple questions like:

- What does this passage tell me about God?
- What does it tell me about people?
- What does it tell me about myself and God's will for me?

We can pray the scriptures. Take this familiar passage from Matthew 5:14-16. "You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven."

Praying this passage might sound like this. "Lord, help me reflect your light for others to see" or "Lord help me to demonstrate kindness and compassion and love today". Any scripture can be turned into a prayer.

Lectio Divina is one other way to read scriptures. In Latin this means "divine reading". Lectio Divina could be a sermon itself, so let me briefly describe it. You read a passage of scripture four times. Once for "lectio" or reading. The second time slowly for "meditatio" or

meditation. The third time reading is for contemplatio or contemplation. Finally, you read for “oratio” or prayer. For reading, for meditation, for contemplation and for prayer, a rich and powerful way to experience God through scripture.

Finally you can study scriptures with others. Proverbs 27:17 says “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens a friend.” We have several ways here at St. Johns to get sharpened by studying the scriptures with others.

Last week we learned about worship and prayer as a way to walk with God, and now we have something else. We can learn about the people God wants us to be by paying attention to and listening to his word. By learning to do this, our lives are enriched. We learn to hear God speaking to us in ways never imagined. In scripture we hear God’s people talking about God’s deliverance, God’s discipline, God’s grace, and God’s will.

Now, how many verses a day will we start out with? 5 verses a day, one for each finger. As this holy habit grows, look at your other hand and try to read five chapters in a week. Read on you own but also find a small group to study and grow together with. By listening and paying attention you’ll be surprised to find that you will hear God’s voice speaking to you, you will grow deeper in your faith, and you will find yourself in a closer walk with God. Let us pray.

*Lord teach me to listen. Help me to pay attention to the ways you are revealed in the world around me – in my everyday life. But also, dear Lord, help me to read and study the Scriptures, finding in them the words of life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*