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Matthew 4:1-11  
Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7  
Psalm 32  
Romans 5:12-19

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The First Sunday in Lent

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Let's challenge ourselves this morning. I want you to consider an important question. How do you understand scripture? Does its meaning change over time or is scripture set in stone?

Maybe even more interesting...who decides how we should understand it? Do the Baptists decide? Or the Catholics? How about the Pentecostals or the Presbyterians? The Evangelicals or Episcopalians?

And if we go back through history...what about the early Christians during the Roman Empire or the Crusaders? What about the European Settlers to the Americas? Or, more currently, people fighting against segregation or fighting for marriage equality?

When we look beyond our individual time and circumstance, experiences and opinions, the answer to the question gets a little more complicated. I would be hard pressed to say that all of the folks in the examples I just gave understood scripture in the same way. How we understand scripture is critical. How we use it matters. And, if you look at history or even if you look in your own backyard, scripture tends to take on a wide range of applications.

One commentator describes scripture as God's pallet. An artist's pallet that continues to be mixed and interpreted in the making of God's creation.

But I might suggest that scripture is our pallet...for better or worse. God's Word is God's Word after all. We don't get a new and improved Bible every generation. But how we use it, how history has used it, has indeed been mixed and interpreted over and over again. And, it seems that there are a lot of opinions about what that interpretation should be.

It's interesting...often times, folks are especially vocal about an interpretation of scripture when it's good for them, when it benefits and affirms them.

However...here's the problem...Give me an issue and I can find countless different ways that religious leaders and theologians have interpreted that issue through scripture. The range of biblical interpretation is fascinating and at the same time, absolutely frustrating. Because, whose interpretation is right?

I want to propose two things to you this morning when it comes to how we interpret scripture.

The first is the dilemma. Unfortunately, scripture isn't always used for the betterment of God's kingdom. You don't have to look very hard to find examples of scripture used as a tool of judgement, condemnation, oppression, and even hate and violence...all in the name of God.

The second thing I would like to propose is a solution to the dilemma. It's the statement our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says over and over again. That is...if it's not about love, it's not about God.

Our Gospel reading this morning is a perfect example of conflicting interpretations of scripture. One interpretation is based on division and disdain. The other is based on love.

In Matthew, Jesus has just been baptized and now he is in the wilderness for 40 days where he is tempted by the devil. And, these temptations are grounded in a particular interpretation of scripture with a specific motive.

Verse 3...the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus replies, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Both Jesus and the devil are interpreting scripture. Which one is used for division? Which one is used for love?

The devil uses one of Jesus' title from scripture, the Son of God, to tempt Jesus to use his power for his own benefit. By doing so, the devil wants to make Jesus feel entitled to getting what he wants, when he wants it, for his own satisfaction. The devil's motive isn't to encourage Jesus to help others with his power. He isn't building up love. He's encouraging Jesus to turn from God and selfishly help himself.

In response, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy. One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Jesus uses scripture to turn to God and trust in God's love for him. To not be tempted by scarcity but to be reassured by God's provision.

Then, the devil takes Jesus up to the top of the temple and says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

What's his motive here? The devil's motive is to use scripture to create a litmus test for God's love. If God loves you then God will save you. If your God is so great, let's see what he can do. Maybe, just maybe, you are putting your faith in the wrong place. Maybe God doesn't love you so much after all.

For the devil, scripture is the perfect fuel to flame fear and doubt. To divide. To control. He uses it to chip away at Jesus very foundation of faith.

His final temptation shows us exactly what's a stake. If we let go of our trust in God's love, if we let go of goodness and kindness and compassion (all of the things the devil hates) we can be powerful beyond our wildest imaginations. And scripture can be our tool to get there. The devil can justify almost anything with words. And, so can we.

We fall prey to these temptations more times than we would like to admit. We fall prey when we think we have God on our side at the expense of others we disagree with. We fall prey when we stop respecting other people's opinions and forget their dignity. We fall prey when we box God's love in for only a select few who have met our criteria of good Christian living.

Scripture is all too often humanity's pallet to mold the world in a way that makes us comfortable, that affirms our beliefs, and builds a wall of security that we can put ourselves inside. But, is that about love? Is that about God?

As we move into our Lenten season of self-reflection and penitence, I encourage you to start with God's Word. Are you using it to bring more love and compassion and understanding into the world? Or are you using it to justify your actions and opinions? To shame, condemn, and blame? Are you using it to bring others' closer to God and to one another? To reconcile? To heal?

Take a look at your pallet. What does it look like? How might your understanding of scripture grow in love and compassion this Lenten season? Amen.