

## Reading Our Bible

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### Palisades Presbyterian Church

A few days ago, as I was clearing the clutter off my desk, to make room to write this sermon, I found the letter Ray sent us in December wishing us a merry Christmas. (You remember; it came with the new church directory.) It's a beautiful letter, and as I read it through again I came across this sentence:

"The course of human history hinges on how we find the God of Wonder, Awe, and Possibility in our lives, whether in Jesus or through other traditions."

History depends on how we find God in our lives!

That is an amazing statement— there is a lot of theology packed into that one sentence! Everything we know about God comes out of life— our lives— and out of history itself; that whatever we know about God is bounded by our experience! But that includes all we've seen, done, heard, felt, read... And, it is not limited to Christian experience or traditions. No one single tradition has a monopoly on God.

Well. That's a sermon in itself! If we can come away from here today with that thought securely filed away— that the place to look for God is in our lives— we will have done our job for today. But I haven't done mine. And I have a few minutes to consider a few more questions: If God is found in our lives, where does the church come in? Especially the Bible? For if the church is the body of believers, the Bible is its spine! Where and how does God as revealed in the Bible impact on our lives? On our experience? I suggest we might find a few answers in a look at our famous Wednesday Noon Bible Study group.

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It's not a large group, but it has a long history as such church programs go.

Back in the early '80s, not long after Laurie Ferguson came here, they got the idea of having a Bible study in the middle of the week, at lunch time, for people who lived and/or worked in the neighborhood. It caught on! Laurie herself was a good draw. People brought their own lunches to the table, and ate, talked, listened, and read. There were usually some fifteen people, including a few from other churches. We began with our joys and concerns, and a prayer. Then Laurie, who came well-prepared, started us off and we began to read.

We would select a Book from the Old or New Testament, and read it chapter by chapter over a period of months. Everyone could take part in the reading and the discussions, and our discussions were lively! They brought energy, and made

our meetings, and the Biblical text itself memorable. When Laurie left, our interim, Bob Chase, kept us going strong, and in Dae's time his teaching skills and enthusiasm served us well, also. Sad to say, Ray has been a disappointment; for some reason he is unwilling to quit his day job... Well, let's face it: nobody's perfect.

However, an interesting thing has happened with our group: The program we follow has evolved somewhat from the original concept: there is no leader. Together we choose the books we'll study. This year we've been reading First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings, much of which is unfamiliar, exciting and, I must say, muscular stuff!

Basically we do what we've always done, taking turns reading a number of a verses, then trading our reactions to the stories. We have always read from our own Bibles plus whatever we find in the children's bookshelves, which exposes us to a wide range of versions and translations, a few that are, shall we say, highly idiomatic. I've always looked down my nose at those modern versions, but recently we've made a rule to read each portion first from a traditional text and then from a contemporary version, so we get it from both viewpoints. Everybody reads, which keeps us all involved. And everyone says what they think about what we've heard, bringing it to life! And, I find, that what those new Bibles contribute is invaluable! These days our attendance numbers seven or eight And the enthusiasm level is as high as it has ever been.

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As I see it, everyone who reads the Bible contributes to it — because it is alive. It was born in Creation; could be glimpsed in the earliest mists of history wherever Love was seen.

When people recognized the presence of God they told each other, spoke about it, told what God looked like — a beast, or a burst of flame, fearful or splendid, a mystery or a revelation. God's voice was heard in the thunder, in the cry of the newborn, and in ancient stories and songs. The Bible was alive long before anyone recorded the things that God did and said. It was born in whispers before there were words, in memories of faces and all the happenings that shaped minds and sent the winds of Meaning across the lands. Throughout the world Holy texts appeared, recording the evidences of God's footprints from the beginning of time to the end.

In our own Bible we can see the work of the Holy Spirit from the beginning; and it is alive here and now in all its forms — translations, manuscripts, printings and music. It could never be held down, has grown relentlessly throughout our time, and will not stop here. It will grow with God's reality as long as there is life,

I truly believe that whenever we read this book we become part of the fabric of its authorship. Just as surely as the authors, editors, counsels, and scholars before us, our lives enter its pages, contribute to its growth.

By our understanding and in our responses we are keeping the Bible alive. It needs our gifts and experience. It requires all the best of us, beyond our faith and love: our honesty, intelligence, and imagination, as well as objectivity, humor, generosity, and even skepticism—all are needed here. God isn't locked behind a church door, any more than we are locked into our religion. And the Bible can never be confined between its covers.

Read the Bible this way, and when we find ourselves falling in love with it we can be sure we're getting it right!

And now I'd like to read a prayer, also from Ray's Christmas letter:

Let us pray; God, help us to listen to the heartbeat within. And to take action on what calls us from the teachings of Jesus, the presence of the holy spirit, or the many other ways that we find God interacting in the creation God knows and loves so well. May we welcome God's embrace now and always. Amen.

Jack Hoffmeister, Dec. 31, 2007