

**The MESSAGE for Nov. 20 2011****Hebrews 4:12-13*****Reading the Bible for a Change*****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Bill enjoyed working out early in the morning at one of those 24-hour fitness centers, the kind of place where they give you a key card to swipe that opens the door so you can workout whenever it's convenient for you.

One morning Bill was alone in the gym working out when he heard the front door unlock and open. He looked up to see who was going to be joining him, but no one was there. Instead, he saw an SUV pulling out of the parking lot. He didn't think much of it until the same thing happened again a few days later – the sound of the door unlocking, opening, but no one entering the gym, and the same SUV pulling out of the parking lot.

Then Bill realized what must be happening. The owner of the SUV was swiping their card in the door, not to break a sweat but to get a break on their insurance. Certain insurance companies will give you a discount on your premium if you go to the gym a few times a week.

Having a gym membership without stepping into the gym doesn't do much for you. It might get you a discount on your premium, but you miss out on the life-changing health benefits that physical exercise provides, which is so much more important for life than saving a few dollars.

Have you ever done anything like that, maybe not at a gym but in some other area of your life? I have! We probably all have.

Growing up I always wanted to learn how to play the Banjo or so I said I did. Fifteen years ago my parents had a Banjo made for me – just for me – here it is. The beautiful walnut wood is from the same trees that were used for the trim on our music booth in the back of the room. Trees I cut down and hauled to the sawmill. In the frets are symbols of the faith, a cross, a lamp, an angel, a bible, wheat and grapes for communion, stars, hearts, doves... It is in my opinion a beautiful instrument. And in the right hands this Banjo can make beautiful music.

Fourteen years ago I bought a beginners book on how to play the Banjo. Here it is. I looked through it but never put it to practice.

Five years ago I took a free one-hour Banjo class at Marty's Music Store in Lebanon. I haven't done much with this Banjo since then.

The other week I watched a 2 hour TV documentary on the history of the Banjo. I learned a lot so I got mine out and looked at it again, strummed it a few times, dreamed of being able to play it someday like the guys in the documentary, maybe not on stage like they did but I dreamed of playing at least "Amazing Grace."

This Banjo has been sitting in the corner of our living room for the last 6 months. It looks good sitting there. And I look at it every day – Okay – I walk past it everyday and glance at it. I dream about playing it. But 99% of the time this beautiful Banjo is left in the case neatly and safely stored away. Its strings are silent.

I can come up with all kinds of excuses as to why I haven't taken the steps to learn how to play this Banjo, but they all fall short. This is a gift that sadly I have squandered all these years.

Have you every done that with a gift?

For the past seven weeks we've been talking about Making Sense of Scripture. Some of us have been reading the book by David Lose with the same title as part of our LIFE Group experience. This 8-week worship series was designed to give us a framework, a lens, a guide to help us open the Bible and hear God speak to us through it.

The question is, will we?

Do we come to this gym – this church – to exercise our faith and be spiritually fit or do we come here to simply swipe our card at the door? Are you sometimes like me with this Banjo, learning all sorts of information about the Bible but never opening it, never learning how to enjoy the beautiful “music” that it can produce? In the right hands the Bible can make beautiful “music.”

We can come up with all kinds of excuses as to why we don't read the Bible, but they fall short. This is a gift (*hold up the Bible*) from God that we ought not squander. We ought to open the Bible and read it regularly not because we have to, but because we get to.

The Bible is a beautiful collection of 66 different books divided into two sections, Old Testament and New Testament. A testament is a covenant, an agreement. The OT is an agreement between God and God's people based on Moses and God's Law. The NT is an agreement between God and God's people based on Jesus and God's Grace. It's a book of books, a library of books. And each book speaks to us in a different way.

The book of Jonah is entertaining and exciting to read, causing the reader to wonder what's going to happen next.

The book of Proverbs offers insights and confidence for daily living.

The book of Romans is filled with theology teachings that can shape and sharpen our Christ-like thinking and behavior.

The book of Psalms is filled with poetry that inspires the reader for a life of faith.

On the one the one hand, the Bible is great literature full of history and drama. And yet, for me, reading the genealogies and legal codes in the OT is less than inspiring and entertaining. I don't get much out of those sections. I'm just not that law oriented.

So feel free to do what I do. I skip over those parts and I read them when I'm ready to read them. When you are ready, dive in with an open heart and mind, because even in those seemingly dreary passages of the Bible, they can teach us about the faith.

On the other hand, the Bible does for us and in us what other great books cannot do. It connects us with God in a powerful life-changing way. The Bible does more than inform or entertain us. It changes us. It transforms us. It connects us with God.

Reading the Bible with a Lutheran understanding means that we read every verse as law and gospel. Two sides of the same coin. We believe that the Bible points out the hard truth about ourselves, AND it reveals the good news about God in Christ Jesus. Our reading from Hebrews is a great example. Listen to Hebrews 4:12-13... (*Read Text*)

What if we took these words seriously? What if we actually believed what the Bible says and put it into practice?

The "word" isn't just ink on a page. It's alive with the Spirit of God, and it cuts us open at the deepest level. It exposes us for who we are and what we are. It puts a mirror in front of us. It probes our hearts and minds, laying us bare before God, before the one to whom we must give an account of our lives. I don't know about you but that makes me a little nervous, a bit uncomfortable, in a good way...

For example:

- The story of Jonah is entertaining. I love reading about Jonah, but it also confronts me with the many ways in which I run from God.
- The book of Proverbs is filled with wisdom, but that wisdom reminds me of how unwise I can be at times.
- I love the story of the Good Samaritan and yet I think of the many times I have, literally and figuratively, left needy people at the side of the road.
- I love hearing Jesus proclaim forgiveness from the cross, and yet I am reminded of the many grudges I hold onto.

This is the law side of the Bible. It peels away our veneer. It destroys any illusion that - we've got it all together. It's like a surgeon's scalpel that opens us up to reveal the disease of sin within us. That's what God does through the Bible and the law.

But God doesn't leave us there, open and exposed on the operating table. Once our sin is revealed God offers us a cure. Like a surgeon cutting away the cancer of sin, God's word of grace does that for us. The gospel of Christ Jesus is the medication for what ails us. Practicing the faith with Jesus is our spiritual therapy.

Why read the Bible? Because over and over again and again, it confronts us with the truth about ourselves, but, more importantly, it points us to the One in whom we find love and life and grace and hope and our reason for being.

I hope this “Making Sense of Scripture” series has equipped and inspired you to open the Bible and read it, to exercise your spiritual faith; otherwise we’re simply swiping our card at the church door or leaving the Banjo in the case.

So I made a 40-day reading plan available for you this morning. It’s called *Keeping the Holy in the Holidays...(hold it up)*. I invite you to use this resource to read the Bible and listen for God to speak to you over the next 6 weeks.

We’re entering into an incredibly busy and important time of the year. Spending time with God and God’s word a few minutes each day can change us in good ways and change the way we experience these holy holidays in good ways. So I urge you to use this reading plan. And as you do I am convinced that a lot is going to happen in your life these next 40 days. May we not squander them... Amen.