

An Exercise in Trust

Luke 22:39-46; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is the second Sunday of our 2019 Faith Questions series—a sermon series where your questions set the agenda.

I'm very aware that as the primary preacher, it's very often *my* agenda, *my* questions, *my* concerns that make their way into the weekly sermons. Of course, I try to preach based on what I think Scripture is telling us and in a way that will resonate with you and in a way that is faithful to the truth of the Gospel.

But at the end of the day, preachers are very often preaching to themselves. We're addressing the questions we bring to the text. We try not to, maybe, but it's hard to avoid.

So, I think it's important to come at the task of preaching from a perspective other than my own every once in a while, and to consider questions that might not even have occurred to me.

This morning's faith question falls squarely into that category.

It's a very specific question about a very specific passage—the passage we just heard from Luke's gospel.

The question is this:

I wonder sometimes how certain events come to be recorded in the Bible. An example: Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. How do we know the words that he spoke, if his disciples were asleep?

This is a question that I *literally* had never thought of until it found its way into my inbox. I asked a number of you this question throughout the week when our paths crossed and, judging by your responses, you hadn't thought of it either!

My first thought was, "I actually don't know. How on earth am I going to answer that question?"

My second thought was, “How on earth am I going to turn that into a whole sermon?”

Well, I’m going to give both a shot.

First, the specific example in the question. Who heard Jesus’ prayer on the Mount of Olives (or “Gethsemane,” in Matthew and Mark? The garden of Gethsemane is just down the valley from the hill).

Well, I did some digging around this week and I found four options. There may be more, but these are the four I encountered:

1. **There was another eye-witness besides Peter, James, and John** (who were asleep). This is possible, I suppose, but it amounts to pure speculation and simply inserts a character into the story to explain the outcome.
2. **Luke was directly told what Jesus prayed by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.** Again, this is possible, in theory, but it amounts to perhaps a less-than-satisfactory answer to the skeptic (oh, so God just magically told Luke?!). Also, this view doesn’t fit with how we think of the inspiration of Scripture, which is a process involving human input at every step of the way. Whatever else the Bible is, I don’t think even the most conservative Christians think that there is a kind of dictation pipeline from God to the human authors. Scripture has the fingerprints of human culture and language all over it.
3. **Jesus explained it to eyewitnesses after the resurrection.** He was around for forty days before the ascension, right? Maybe he sat them all down, filled in a few gaps, corrected a few errors, and made sure the details were all straight before he departed. Again, it’s *possible*, but it’s pure speculation.
4. **Jesus was never beyond hearing distance, and the disciples simply heard him praying before they fell asleep.** Matthew and Mark’s version of this story says that an hour elapsed between Jesus started to pray and when he returned to find his disciples sleeping. This allows a window for the disciples to listen and watch. It’s probably unreasonable to assume that in the first moment of that hour after the command of Jesus the disciples went straight to sleep. There could easily have been period of alertness/attention prior to being overcome with fatigue.

This seems to be the simplest of the four options and it’s the one that makes the most sense to me. But of course, the final answer is that we don’t know for sure.

But let’s move on to a more general question. How did events beyond this *specific* one come to be recorded in the bible?

Well, the first thing to note is that the world in which scripture came to be, functioned, was transmitted and was understood, was *very* different than twenty-first century Canada.

We live in a very text-based culture with high degrees of literacy. Many of us are reading from the time we get up to the time our heads hit the pillow at night, whether it's books or newspapers or laptops or iPads or phones or signs on the road or advertising. We are awash in words. Words are accessible, ubiquitous, and disposable, for us.

When we think of the Bible, we think of reading words on a page (or on a screen), often silently, and in a linear fashion. This is our world.

But this is *not* the ancient world which gave birth to the words of Scripture.

Theirs was an oral culture. Writing things down was prohibitively expensive, and very few could read anyway. Stories were transmitted by word of mouth, across families, tribes, communities, and generations.

Eventually, words were written down on scrolls, but usually only after a long period of gestation, telling, retelling, interpreting.

And the words that would become our Scriptures were first *heard* not *read*.

The stories of Jesus, specifically, would have been first recounted by eyewitnesses and then told and retold and retold by communities that formed around the practices and teachings of Jesus.

Our instinct is to think this means they must be unreliable. We've all played the telephone game, right? We know that by the time a story makes it around the circle it often doesn't bear much resemblance to the original. How do we know the stories were accurate if nobody wrote them down?

Well, in the case of the Jesus stories, the oral traditions that would have been circulating after his death and resurrection were doing so in the context of living witnesses to what had happened. They would have been able to correct any departures or agendas. *Wait a minute, that's not what he said! That's not what happened.*

The early Christian community would have been deeply invested in making sure the story was told properly. It was such an incredible story, after all. So unlikely and so utterly contrary to what they were expecting. The early church was beset with opponents on all sides—they would have had every reason to change the details and make the story more palatable.

Yet they continued to stubbornly tell and live out the Jesus story, in all of the ways that it offended, inspired, liberated, and baffled.

There are variations in how the stories are told in the gospels, of course. John's chronology is different than the other three (his interests are more theological than chronological); Matthew

Mark and Luke have broad overlap, but there are slight differences here and there (e.g., “Gethsemane” vs. “Mount of Olives”).

All in all, the gospels we have are pretty much exactly what we would expect given the process by which they were transmitted.

And it’s worth remembering that the church preceded the bible! My Roman Catholic and Orthodox friends remind me of this at every opportunity.

The four gospels were likely written anywhere between 70-90 AD which means that for around three decades there were worshiping, Jesus-following communities that had no formal gospels. They had story, memory, tradition... and they kept rehearsing these together, preserving and transmitting them to the next generation.

Eventually, of course, they were written down, arranged, put in a certain order. In Greek (and before that, in Hebrew), then later in Latin, the explosion of languages and translations after the Reformation that eventually leads to the present day where you and I can call up hundreds of translations on little computers in our pockets!

(Aside: I’m hardly the first to point this out, but it is rather ironic that we live in a time and place where Scripture has never been more easily accessible, and yet it is hardly read. Our ancestors would have cherished these words in a way that it seems that we increasingly don’t.)

But it all goes back right to a community of faith that carefully told, then recorded, then preserved and transmitted it.

We see this in the very first words Luke’s gospel.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, **just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word**, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

We see here evidence of a worshiping community that evidently instructed Theophilus (Luke’s patron) that *preceded* the recording of the gospel.

We see it also in one of John’s letters. 1 John 1:1-4:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, **what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the**

word of life—this life was revealed, and **we have seen it and testify to it**, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us...

The early Christian community insisted that they were not making this up. They were passing on what they had seen, touched, heard.

The early church was shocked into existence and they were convinced that they had been witnesses to good news that was for the whole world!

I want to transition from a specific question about a specific story and even from broader questions about how the bible has come to us in the forms that we have it today, to the question behind these questions.

Or at least what I think it might be (here I go again, inserting my own agenda! 😊)

Can we trust the bible?

Can we believe the story that it tells us? Does it point us to the truth about God, about the world, and about us? Or is it just a human artifact created to meet our needs?

How do we relate to this bewildering and beautiful book?

Every single person in this room has a relationship with the bible...

- whether you read it or not
- whether it's been a part of your daily life for decades or you're kind of feeding off a few scraps and stories of your childhood
- whether you love it or hate it
- whether you believe it or doubt it
- whether it clarifies or confuses things for you
- whether it inspires or embarrasses you
- whether you have a PhD or a grade 3 education
- whether its words draw you to God or are the part of the worship service where you tend to start dozing off...
- whether you want to defend it or apologize for it

Everyone has a relationship to this book (or, more precisely, to this *collection* of books). Even those who hardly pay the bible a second thought are probably unaware of just how deeply ingrained the bible is in Western culture, from idioms like “the patience of Job” to some of our most deeply held-assumptions about justice, democracy, and human rights. We owe a debt to the

Bible that many of us—even Christians—are probably barely aware of.

But we live in cynical and skeptical times. Many people reject the bible based on simplistic interpretations they encountered in their childhoods or a belief that scripture is in competition with science or whatever.

It can be tempting to either circle the wagons and come out swinging in our defense of the truth of the Bible or pretty much abandon it entirely and treat Scripture as a record of how ancient people (mistakenly, often) thought of God, and just access the inspiring bits at our convenience.

I don't think either of these are good or faithful options.

2 Timothy 3:14-17 is one of the most quoted passages in the Bible when it comes to arguing for the inspiration of Scripture and the central role it ought to play in our faith.

There are two things worth pointing out about this passage.

First, the “all scripture” that Paul was referring to in writing to Timothy almost certainly would have been referring to what we call the Old Testament. It certainly wouldn't have been referring to the sixty-six books we now call the bible (which would include the very words that he was writing!).

Second, it's worth paying attention to what this statement claims and what it doesn't. Paul doesn't say that the bible is “inerrant” or “infallible” or any of the other words that some Christians would later come to apply to it.

He says that all scripture is inspired by God and is *useful* for teaching, correction, and training in righteousness.

Useful. This does not mean that all Scripture is useful in the same way or for the same purposes.

A psalm of lament might be useful in giving language to our pain and training us to leave it before God.

A violent passage of the Old Testament might be useful in laying bare the darkness of the human heart, giving us a window into how people interacted with God in the past, and training us to leave harmful scripts behind to pursue the way of peace.

A passage from one of Paul's letters might be useful in shedding insight into the context of the early church and rebuking some of our individualistic tendencies, and showing us what it looked like for early Christians to try to be faithful to the gospel in their context with their issues.

A gospel text might be useful in bringing us to the very heart of Jesus—describing who he was,

what he did, and what it means for how we are to live.

Scripture does all kinds of things and our task is to interpret each part of the sacred writings we have received from the church down through the ages through the lens of Jesus—through what he taught, what he embodied in his character, and through what his purposes are for all of creation.

As Christians, we read Scripture with Jesus as our interpretive companion.

In the end, reading Scripture is an exercise in trust.

First, trust in the community of faith that has delivered it down through the many centuries, orally, in scrolls, in all kinds of languages, across translations and geography and generations. This is no small thing that God asks of us, for we know how flawed and self-interested all human beings are. Yet God doesn't give us a free-floating divine instructional manual; he binds us to a community across time and demands that we trust each other, from the first eyewitnesses down to the present as we seek to interpret it together.

And second, trust in God, who has never stopped speaking through Scripture, but even more so who speaks finally and most authoritatively through Jesus. Trust that God is ok with the bible that we have; that it is useful for what he intends for it.

So, may we search the Scriptures diligently. May we be curious and generous in our interpretations. May we ask good questions about the things that puzzle us.

May be charitable in our evaluation of those who have come before us, and grateful for their labours in handing down these words to us.

May we be open to being instructed, rebuked, and trained in righteousness as we encounter its words.

Most importantly, may it never be said of us what Jesus said of the Pharisees:

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39-40).

May the word of God written lead us always and only to the Word of God in flesh.

Amen.

