

Sermon Title: *An Invitational Authority*

Hebrews 11:1-34 (selections)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup>Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.<sup>3</sup>By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

<sup>4</sup> **By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's.**

<sup>5</sup>By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death.

<sup>7</sup>**By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household;**

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham and Sarah obeyed when they were called, and went off to the place they were to receive as a heritage; they went forth, moreover, not knowing where they were going.

<sup>9</sup>**By faith, Sarah and Abraham lived in the promised land as resident aliens, dwelling in tents with their children and grandchildren, who were heirs of the same promise.**

By faith, Sarah received the ability to conceive, even though she was past childbearing age, for she thought the One who had made the promise was worthy of trust...

<sup>20</sup>**By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning their future.**

<sup>21</sup>By faith, Jacob, near death, blessed each of Joseph's sons, leaning on the top of his staff as though bowing in worship.

<sup>22</sup>**By faith, Joseph, near the end of his life, recalled the Exodus of the Israelites and made arrangements for his own burial.**

<sup>23</sup>By faith, Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth. They defied the royal edict because they saw he was such a fine child.

<sup>24</sup>**By faith, Moses, now an adult, refused to be identified as the son of the Pharaoh's daughter.** <sup>25</sup>He chose to endure ill-treatment along with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

<sup>27</sup>**By faith, he kept left Egypt, not fearing Pharaoh's rage. He persevered because he saw the Invisible One.**

<sup>29</sup>By faith, the people passed through the Sea of Reeds as though on dry land. When the Egyptians tried the same, they drowned.

<sup>30</sup> **By faith, the walls of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days.**

<sup>31</sup>By faith, Rahab the prostitute didn't perish with those who were disobedient, after she welcomed the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>**And what more should I say?** For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— <sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight.

*Let's pray together: God of love and life – God who is known in many and varying ways, we come before you now...*

Today we begin a series on Scripture, a fundamental piece of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ that we use daily and weekly, but do not often talk about directly. To get us started along these lines this morning, I want to offer a few reference points, a few entry points that might help us think about scripture together – point of entry that I continue to find helpful in my own relationship to the story we call the Holy Bible – perhaps, you will find them helpful as well. This sermon will take on sort of an odd partial lecture/partial sermon quality. But I want to concretely offer the disclaimer that I am not trying to tell you how to view the Bible – I am trying to offer reference points that continue to help me to engage with this story, and that I find helpful in approaching scripture as an individual within a community with diverse views on scripture.

I have just a few slides today.



This man here, Marion Bontrager, in my first semester of college argued that after the Greatest Commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second that is like it – love your neighbor as yourself. **That after that, the next most important commandment was this: to tell the story.** By that he meant to tell the story of scripture, the story of humanity seeking to understand their relationship to God and the world that God had created. He arrived at this belief from multiple sources: from the many scriptures like Hebrews 11 that we read for today, where a Biblical author or character offers some form of a recitation of salvation history – of the story of the Bible. This instruction is given to the people in the Old Testament (Deut 25), they are instructed that each time before they bring their offering, they are suppose to recite a version of salvation history – remembering all that God had done for them as individuals and a people before they laid down their offerings. The first Christian martyr in the Bible, Stephen, before he is stoned to death – the author of Acts tells us that Stephen, on his knees, essentially recounts the entire story of scripture. As well, there is a strand of storytelling in the Old Testament that weaves its way through various historical books, that essentially recounts the circular history of the people of God: begins with that they stop telling the story, they forget the story, they stop worshipping God; they stop doing justice, and

then some crisis happens, they cry out to God to deliver them, God raises up a deliverer, the people are saved...and then the cycle repeats itself, after a time of things going well, the people stop telling the story.

Thus, says Marion Bontrager (and numerous other scholars – he just happens to be the one who taught it to me), after loving God and loving our neighbor, the next most important thing for people of faith is to tell the story of their faith – to tell the story of their life with God, a story that traces back from our lives to this meta-narrative that we call the Holy Bible.

But, for you and I, **we live in a time/an era where we are suspicious of meta-narrative**, when we are uncertain about granting authority to these large stories that we have inherited. This is one the markers of this era in which we live that has been labeled as “post-modernity” – at least, I think we are still in post-modernity. We have a suspicion of institutions, and we have a suspicion of meta-narratives – of these large stories which shape our world, our beliefs, and our worldview. There are of course numerous reasons for the shifting Christian landscape in western world, the decline in the numbers of people who claim Christianity or any faith at all (for that matter). And this is surely one of those reasons, a shifting view of meta-narratives – a shifting view that we should grant authority from just one story; that we should get our worldview from just one source: most in the western world no longer view the world this way.

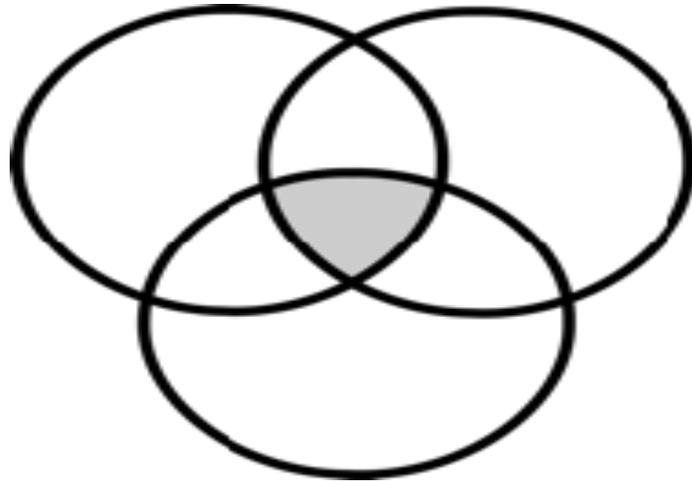
Which brings me to my first reference point for thinking about scripture, **we will never fully agree on the place of scripture or its position of authority – nor should we.** We should not be anxious about the reality of a wide variety of views of scripture within this congregation

or within the Christian church as a whole, because the idea of the authority of scripture is an issue that can never be fully solved.

We must not fear this issue because it is **one that can never be fully resolved**. Walter Brueggemann, one of the great Old Testament scholars of our time, says that for those of us who stake some portion of our lives, the issue of biblical authority will always be an area of dispute – it cannot be otherwise, he claims. When we seek a firm settlement/agreement on our view of scripture, we often end up in unhelpful language which causes polarity, making us feel a false dichotomy between “infallible” (that this book fell from the sky) and “fiction” (that is a complete human creation).

In this room, I am sure we share a wide-range of views of our authority of scripture – of what place it holds in our lives, of how we use scripture, and how our views of scripture have changed over the course of our lives. Next week we are going to hear from 4 people in the church about a part of their life and scripture, in that sharing, I am sure that we will hear 4 different accounts of scripture in one’s life. This should not cause us anxiety, nor should we feel that this is a problem we need to fix – because, says Brueggemann, it cannot be otherwise.

Marion Bontrager, in that same class my first year of college, also offered this view of how we come to our views of interpretation of scripture and sense of the Bible’s place in our lives: **1) tradition, 2) experience, and 3) reason.**



The place where these three pieces intersect, brings us to our personal views of scripture's authority, or its place in our lives: thus, we will all have somewhat different views. We come from different traditions, maybe  $\frac{1}{4}$  of us here grew-up in the Mennonite or Anabaptist tradition. But even within that, the concept of scripture we inherited varied depending on the church and region where that was. Our traditions are wide here. And each pastor or Biblical teacher you have had, this has shaped your sense of that tradition and continues to.

-We all of course have different experiences which have shaped our views of scripture. We live in different bodies, in different neighborhoods, with different jobs – these all shape our view of scripture.

-We all also reason differently. Some of us are more concrete thinkers, others more metaphorical; for some of us emotion plays an important role, for some of us our concept of scripture is more of a scholarly pursuit – and on, and on and on.

And so if this Venn Diagram concept is even partially correct, we see how our different senses of scripture will always not only be unresolved, it will also be a shifting landscape (as our own traditions, experiences, and ways of reasoning shift over time).

When I was in seminary, I did a major paper on the authority of scripture. As one who is not the best academic, as part of this paper I interviewed 15 people about some of their views of scripture. And one of the most unexpected things that I came to find in these interviews was that by and larger, the older people I interviewed believed that a healthy congregation held a wide array of views on scripture. The younger-adults I interviewed believed that a healthy congregation probably needed to hold fairly similar views on scripture. I guess this surprised me culturally – we generally think of younger people being more open, and those with a bit more seasoning starting to become a bit more rigid. This was not the case in these interviews that I did, instead there was a sense that if we all share the same view it can cause a sense of complacency – as well as an unhealthy sense of “the other.” Where, we have group think and we unhelpfully criticize those with different views.

*At this point in my life, said one person in their late seventies, I feel that I know what I believe...if I can't share my views in a loving way, then I need to take stock of my own life.”*<sup>1</sup> So, let us not feel that our view must be the view, let us not think that we must convert others to our way of viewing scripture, nor should we believe that a healthy community will all share the same view of scripture and its authority for us as individuals or as a community.

**My second reference point for us this morning, is that scripture’s authority is invitational for us.** When we think about the concept of authority, many of us think of “authority” as it relates to a professor who determines which grade we will receive, or a CEO who controls our employment status in a very direct manner. This is a concept of enforced “authority” – where

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<sup>1</sup> Fanny Mast, interviewed by author, Goshen, IN, November 19, 2010.

these is an external force or entity or being demanding we grant them authority or allegiance.

This is not how scripture works, instead the authority that scripture has for our lives is invitational – we are invited to pick up this story, to grant it a place in shaping our lives – to pick it up to instruct us, to give us hope, to shape how we make meaning. **Scripture does not demand that we find hope and meaning within its pages, rather, it invites us to explore and discover where the Spirit might be moving and speaking.** We are not forced into claiming this story, we are invited to claim it. We are invited to claim it. In our world and culture, it is an increasingly unusual thing to point to any meta-narrative, to point to an ancient writing or an ancient story and say, this story has a place in my life – I want this story of Jesus; I want this story of people wrestling with the questions of life; I want this story of God’s love; I want this story of human life in the presence of God to have a place in my life. Against other forces of our culture, of our time – against the meta-narrative of capitalism, of consumerism, of American exceptionalism: against these stories, I want this story of life with God to have authority.

For myself, I continue to pick up this book and study this story, because it gives me the long view of history – the Bible is unique in that it is a historical book (it is not just wise sayings, it does not claim to have fallen directly out of the sky, nor does it claim to have been written by God/angel). We (humans) have made those claims about the Bible, but it does not claim that of itself. As far as sacred books go, this is unique about the Christian scripture – it offers us a picture of life with God throughout thousands of years. And I will tell you, there is hardly ever a time when I go to prepare for a sermon, and as I read the context of a specific passage or book of the Bible – as I read about what was happening at that time in history, what was life like, who was in power, what questions were the people asking: there is hardly ever a time when I don’t, at

some point, stop and say to myself, “this is just like today – this is the same stuff we are dealing with today!” The details have changed, the names of the countries and kings have changed, the various other gods we worship have changed, but the underlying issues and questions are the same.

And so this is why I continue to pick up this book, because it grounds me in the long-view of history. How do I know that the arc of the moral universe is long and it bends toward justice? Because I find it in this text. When, at a time like this week, when power structures and leaders are changing, this ancient story reminds me of the long view.

I continue to pick-up this story of mystery because it grounds me in hope. As I read the prophets, as I read who Jesus was and what Jesus did – I am grounded in hope. I continue to pick-up this story of human life with God because it instructs me in love; it grounds me in love. I continue to pick-up this story of God’s love coming in many and varying forms because it explores the full range of human emotion: loss, hatred, fear, joy, pain, uncertainty – it is all there.

But it does not demand that we pick it up, it does not demand we explore it or tell the stories in its pages – but we are invited let it shape our lives in these ways.

**Finally, the third reference point I will make is a view that scripture is a place to meet God, a place with the power to transform.**

In that paper where I interviewed fifteen people, all with a wide-range on their view of scripture, one of the questions I asked was, *Do you believe the Bible has the power to transform? How?* To this, no matter the working view of scripture they held, each person answered “yes”, in some way, they did believe that the Bible had power to transform: it had

happened to them, or they had seen it happen in others, or they had seen it in communities that sought to live out the words they found within those pages.

This then, I continue to believe, becomes a key entry point into relationship with one another, the linking point of unity-in-diversity; this text, in some manner, has the power to transform. In these pages we might meet God. Of course, the Christian scripture is not the only place we meet God – God cannot be contained in such a way. The Bible is not God. The Bible is a place where we may hear God, where we may meet God, where God’s Spirit might blow through our lives – where we may be shaped by this story over time. But the Bible is not God.

There are many places we might meet God: in nature, in a sunset, in a poem, in the face of friend or loved one, in the face of our enemy, or in caring for a child. We might meet God in prayer, in silence, in music. There are many places where we might encounter God, and scripture is one of these places. But, of course, we cannot contain God’s Spirit – we cannot guarantee that reading will bring inspiration or answers. But, it does happen on occasion. *It does happen- on occasion- that through the text the Spirit teaches and guides and heals so that the text yields something other than an echo of ourselves... Such newness might have happened without the text, of course, because the wind blows where it will. But it does happen in and through the text - new resolve, new vision, new assurance, renewed hope.*<sup>2</sup>

And so, these are a few entry points for me, and perhaps for us, for this story that we have inherited – a story of love that defies the categories we try to put it in;

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection,” in *Struggling with Scripture*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 24.

We confess that this book has the power to transform, and that it has come to us through faithful and fallible humans. Passed down through the generations of faithful and fallible humans, for us, faithful and fallible humans. And within all that fallibility lies the truths of Jesus Christ, and so, our confession remains that “something grand and glorious is at stake in these stories.”<sup>3</sup>

And so, the Biblical story invites us to pick it up, to give it authority in our lives – to let it speak in us, and through us, and with us. May we be a people who love the Lord our God, who love our neighbor, and who tell the story of this great love.

*Sending Blessing*

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of life go with you –  
opening you to the places where God is still speaking, and empowering us to tell the story of  
God's love with the stories of our lives –  
that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.  
Go in peace. Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> William Stacy Johnson, “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 115.

