
Turn to Scripture

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A sermon by the Rev. Canon Wallace Marsh

After graduating from Sewanee, I returned to my alma mater to serve as Lay Chaplain at All Saints' Chapel. I served in that position for three years to discern whether seminary and the ordained ministry were in my future.

My first year as Lay Chaplain was a year of transitioning from the senior frat guy to college chaplain. The lines sometime seemed blurry and confusing, but in hindsight that is what made being Lay Chaplain such a unique ministry. Students would call me for reasons that they wouldn't necessarily call one of the ordained chaplains. I remember getting one of those calls in my first year.

My office phone rang early one afternoon; it was a senior girl who was dating one of my close fraternity brothers. Because she was a senior, she and a few of her sorority sisters were allowed to live in off-campus housing. As you can imagine there are numerous perks to living in off-campus housing, and I will refrain from listing all of those perks. Undoubtedly, the greatest thing about living off-campus is that you are allowed to have pets! The first thing this group of girls decided to do was get a cat, and that is why I was getting the phone call.

Unfortunately, the sorority girls lived a ranch house very close to Hwy 41 and their new kitty, Fluffy, decided to venture in that direction. All I need to say is that the highway is well traveled, the mountain roads are very foggy and poor Fluffy didn't stand a chance! The girls were upset and wondered if I come say some prayers over Fluffy's grave. I agreed to visit on my way home from the office.

As I pulled into the driveway, I noticed some flowers covering a patch of dirt in the yard. I stepped out of my pick-up with Bible and Book of Common Prayer in hand, and as I made my way to the house, the front door opened and I will never forget what happened next.

At some point in the afternoon, in the midst of grief, the sorority sisters decided to send Fluffy off in style, and they did just that! They spent the next few hours doing their hair and make-up and each was wearing their finest black dress! As they walked down the front steps, it looked like the set of a James Bond movie.

We gathered around the grave, read some scripture, offered some prayers and they each took turns offering a eulogy, revealing that Fluffy had a lover on the other side of HWY 41.

When the liturgy concluded, it was clear that my job was done and it was time to leave. "No," they said, "you can't go, we have food and drinks on the porch. Stay and toast Fluffy with us."

At 22 years old, there was no way I was going to decline that invitation. As I stood on that back porch surrounded by four beautiful women, with a ham biscuit in one hand and a cold beer in the other, I thought to myself if this is what ordained ministry is like sign me up! (Yea, I was pretty naïve back then.)

After an hour of socializing, it felt like an appropriate time to leave, so I thanked them for their hospitality and tried to make my exit. "No," they said, "We still need to toast Fluffy." At that moment two of the girls rushed into the house. One came out with champagne flutes, and Jane, the blonde, stepped onto the porch with a bottle of champagne and a 4-foot sword!

I had the feeling something bad was going to happen. I started thinking about how I was going to explain to the university chaplain (my boss) how pet prayers evolved into emergency room prayers. Sure enough, Jane held the sword to the neck of the bottle and slowly turned it; you could here the sword etching into the glass. She drew the sword back and made a quick and clean blow to the glass and the champagne flowed forth.

One of my favorite verses of scripture is Hebrews 4:12. Every time I hear it my mind goes back to that afternoon: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

The Word of God as sharper than any two-edged sword penetrating and cutting isn't a passage that we are naturally drawn toward. It sounds like a painful visit at the doctor's office! That Hebrews text is similar to the passage from 2 Timothy that we have before us today. It is a passage that talks about scripture as helpful for teaching, correction and reproof.

Let's be honest. No one in here enjoys spending time with a spouse or parent who provides continually teaching, correction and reproof. Who would?

When we hear about scripture penetrating and cutting in Hebrews, or we hear about it teaching, correcting and providing reproof in 2 Timothy, we are inclined to keep our distance. Yet, this avoidance is keeping us from experiencing the "good news." The writer of Hebrews says that The Word of God is "living and active," and 2 Timothy says, "all scripture is inspired by God."

How many of us pray to be "inspired by God" in our lives? How many us have asked God to be more "living and active" in our lives? Today, we are faced with the possibility there might be correlation between our engagement with scripture and the awareness of God's inspiration and presence in our daily lives.

We must ask ourselves "How often do we turn to scripture?"

I raise that question fully realizing there are people in this room who have been abused by scripture. There are people in this room who have fled denominations that use scripture to provide "teaching, correction and reproof" to support their particular understanding of what it means to live a Christian life. Sadly, you have experienced the Word of God as a double edge sword, penetrating and leaving emotional and spiritual wounds. You want to keep a safe distance from scripture.

That is why what I am about to say might be difficult to hear "turn to scripture."

Turn to scripture and see that those wounds can be redeemed. Turn to scripture and see when Jesus was pierced by the centurion's sword blood and water flowed forth, signs of forgiveness and love. Jesus used the wound from that sword to further reveal His message of forgiveness and love. Doubting Thomas looks at those wounds and says "My Lord and My God."

Turn to scripture and see it is inspired, living and active because it reveals the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, who on the cross reveals a message of forgiveness and love. And the reason scripture is necessary for teaching, correction and reproof is because we live in a culture stripped of forgiveness and love; a culture where our lives, relationships and work are in need of forgiveness and love.

To that end, we all stand in need of scripture penetrating our hearts like a double-edged sword. We all stand in need of scripture teaching, correcting and equipping us with the faith to forgive and love others, as Christ has forgiven and loved us.

Turn to scripture, make it a part of your daily or weekly routine, read and see that it is inspired because it is about a God

who opens His arms of love on the cross, so that we might be inspired to live a new way[™] to make the way of the cross our way of life. AMEN.

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