

Advent II

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[0 : 0 0] May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Please be seated. When I was younger and in a different kind of church than St. Philip's, those of us who were in the youth group were counseled by the pastor and the youth pastor that we were supposed to spend time daily with Jesus.

Back then, when I heard that phrase, it was synonymous, it was understood to be synonymous with reading the Bible. Back then, I thought that the way that they described it was a bit cheesy.

But now, I think it is actually more accurate than I thought it was. When we think about reading the Bible, there are several things that may hinder us from doing so.

One thing that often plagues people when it comes to reading the Bible is that it can be hard to understand. For some, almost impossible to understand. We may know some of the stories described in the Old Testament, such as the creation of the world, the great flood, and Noah's Ark, and that bizarre story about that donkey that talked to his rider.

[1 : 1 6] Even the most seasoned Christians can struggle to make sense of how all this fits into the whole picture, to the whole of Scripture, and how it relates to our everyday lives in the world.

But that's just the Old Testament. Even the New Testament, while having some easier concepts to understand, can have some portions that are difficult to follow. The easiest example is the book of Revelation, which has seen more interpretations throughout history than there are snowflakes that fall during the winter.

All these symbols are presented to us, and even though some of them are explained in the book, it can be difficult to keep all of it in mind while you're reading. And the reason why I'm talking about this this morning is because of our collect for the day.

Let me read it again for us. The beginning of our epistle text today tells us that for whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we, through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures, might have hope.

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 5 2] The Apostle Paul believes, in agreement with our collect, that the reading of the Scriptures provides us with the hope of everlasting life. It also provides us with a source of unity for each other.

As each of us becomes conformed in our understanding to the words that have been preserved by God, we grow closer and closer together as we grow closer to Christ. And this is a desirable thing for us, since we have been told elsewhere that we cannot love God and hate our brother.

In fact, whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life within him. In short, the Scriptures were written for our moral learning, or our practical knowledge.

We should compel ourselves to read them, because in them we learn what it means to be righteous, what it means to be human. Not only does reading the Scriptures provide us with our practical knowledge, well, it also provides us with the things that we are to hope for, the specific things.

The practical knowledge that we gain, the way that we can grow in holiness, informs us on how we love God and how we love others. But the things that we hope for are the things that we can expect God to be doing in our own lives, both now and in the future.

[4 : 0 9] Reading the Bible informs us on what things we are to hope for and what things we are not to hope for. Our collect summarizes well what the Scriptures tell us to hope for, the blessed hope of

everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

A beautiful description of the hopes we should have are the given to us in the Beatitudes, the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, because they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and they persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake.

[5 : 17] Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. We learn from these teachings that our hope should not be in the happiness that comes to us from this world, but our hope should be in the blessedness that is given to us by God by being conformed to his standard of holiness, who is Jesus Christ.

We also learn that when we experience hardships, both from our own hearts and the reviling of others, our hope and comfort is to be in the presence of the Lord. The last reason that the scriptures should have a formative influence in our lives is because we experience the presence of Christ, the word of God, when we read the scriptures.

It has been a long-held conviction, present in the early church, and as well with Christians today, that when we read the scriptures, we have direct access to God himself.

The scriptures reveal to us the activity of God in the world, finding its culmination in the Son of God's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

Our minds are enlightened to see eternal truths in the scriptures. We grow in the knowledge of God, but we also experience God for who he is. This is a profound and exciting truth.

[6 : 38] We learn about God in Christ in the scriptures, but we also experience the loving hand of God, enlightening our mind and softening our hearts to become like him.

There is nothing in this world greater than the experience of God himself. As our Lord says in the gospel, heaven and earth will pass away, but his words will never pass away.

His words are always with us. So how do we start our formation in the holy scriptures? Well, lucky for us, our tradition has a wellspring of resources for allowing the scriptures to transform our lives.

The offices of morning and evening prayer is one of the greatest ways to be informed about the scriptures. Why is that? Isn't prayer something different than reading the scriptures?

Well, if we look at the prayer book, we realize that most of the prayers that we pray come directly from the scriptures themselves. Not only do we become better equipped or better acquainted with the knowledge of sacred history, but we learn what it means to read the scriptures prayerfully.

[7 : 46] If we have the opportunity to experience God in the scriptures while praying the offices that have been given to us by our church, we beautifully join together an ancient conception of what it means to be a Christian.

The way of prayer forms the way of belief. Friends, let us all commit to grow in our understanding of scripture and also to grow in our life of prayer.

They do not have to be two separate things. They can come together in a beautiful way, teaching us to love, to hope, and to have faith in what we should. Let us all hold fast to the word, Christ Jesus, in the scriptures.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.