

Today begins our journey for the next 7 weeks reading and learning about the first half of the Old Testament through the book of 1 Samuel. Has anyone here ever read through the whole Old Testament before? Good job! That's tough! I really want everyone to read and study the Bible, I wouldn't ever ask you to do that. Just reading through it, without studying and trying to understand what to take from it CAN be confusing, even discouraging to faith and relationship with God. That's why I'm bringing this second Bible study to you - Introducing the Old Testament Part 1 - and this sermon series to go along with it, so we can take something away from this very important text and make a difference in our lives today.

This Wednesday starts the second study in a series of studies. The first was called "What is the Bible?" - an overview of the whole Bible. I led that study last January and we had 48 people who participated. In our congregation of 193 members and over 100 constituents, including our Scouting families, that's pretty good participation results! So far for this second part we have 28 registered and it's become an international study - as we have people joining our Thursday morning zoom class from Washington state, Florida and Canada!

I'm leading the second study about the Old Testament, but Janet Puzon has very graciously agreed to lead the first study again - What is the Bible? - for those who missed it. Again - that's an overview of the Bible and how to interpret it and a great way to start understanding the Bible better. That study will be in person on Thursdays here starting this week at 9:30 a.m.

You don't have to take them in order, so anyone is welcome to join either the Old Testament study or What is the Bible, but I do recommend starting with "What is the Bible?". The classes start this week - also a six week class - so please sign up if you haven't already by emailing me to register and order your book. It's not too late. You also have the information as an insert in your bulletin.

I don't remember if I've told you this story before - about how Bible study changed my life. It only happened 18 years ago - I'm 50 now - I had already been a pastor for 7 years. The short version of the story is that although I had been a Christian all

my life - having been born and raised in the United Methodist Church - baptized and confirmed in my faith as a young teen - there was still something missing for me in my faith development. Yes, I had been through seminary, but as they say, seminary frequently challenges your faith much more than establishing it.

I had just given birth to my second child, Mara, and took family leave from ministry to focus my attention on being a Mom for a year, since my husband's travel schedule frequently took him out of town on very short notice and I didn't have family close by to help watch my kids to get to work.

I'd been working about 50 hours a week at the church, so I knew I wanted to keep connected to the church and to God. For me, I knew joining a Christian small group - specifically a Bible study - would help me do that. The church I'd been pastoring before my leave - Chula Vista Fist UMC, had been trying to establish a group called Community Bible Study - close to Bible Study Fellowship, BSF. I liked the premise of the study - to read portions of the Bible for myself every day, asking the Holy Spirit to inspire my understanding of it, and then there were a series of questions to answer about what I read - but I had to answer them directly from the words in the Bible. Not what I REMEMBERED them saying, or even my own words about what I read, but going back to answer questions with the words that were written there.

That experience helped me know God even more personally as a living being deeply involved in my everyday life. Literally a best friend who is with me in every trouble and every pleasure. Knowing God this way gave me such peace and assurance and hope - which I really needed then and still need every day.

To this day, I still open the Bible and read a portion of it daily, asking the Holy Spirit to open my mind and heart to its words. My experience is that God speaks to me like a friend who knows - every part of me - every mess up and every victory. In this way - God shows me how to help make this life better- for myself and those around me. This kind of relationship is what I desire for everyone. Bible reading and study is the best way I know to guide someone toward it. Bible reading and study is NOT

the only way. I know that, but it's the best way I, Susan Juergensen, can guide you.

With that, for those of you interested & willing, I invite you to pick up your Bible or one next to you and look with me to Genesis chapter 4 again - the words of our lesson for today. Sometimes just looking at the words for ourselves unlock something we didn't hear or see before.

I don't know about you, but I had a LOT of questions as I read again this story about Cain and Abel again this past week. At least eight separate questions, wonderings, things that didn't quite make sense I wanted to look into more.

This story is a great start to say something again about how we interpret the Bible. Because the first question might be - do I take this story literally?

I've taken a lot of time the past five years to think about this question for myself. How do I interpret the Bible? Part of the reason why I chose to bring this study to you, is that I really appreciate the perspective of the author of this study.

Even before we get to page number one in the study, there's a Welcome in the introductory pages. For me, the words of the author, Ann Robertson - hit home about one perspective on the Old Testament and how to interpret it. This is what she writes:

"I have run into so many people, including some of my clergy colleagues, who say they don't like the Old Testament. Some clergy actually refuse to preach from it and many Christians seem to think that the Old Testament plays second fiddle to the New Testament, or that the New Testament has rendered the Old obsolete. I love the Old Testament. I love the glimpse of an ancient world and the peek into the origins of all things. I love the stories - stories that give us insights into human nature in both its glory and its shadow. I love the eternal themes of relationship through thick and thin, sin and forgiveness, wilderness and promised land, exile and return. I love the poetry, the images and the characters that spring to life in its pages. Once I learned to read the Bible seriously but not literally; once I learned that myth and story can often teach "truth" much more effectively than a mere presentation of facts, I found that the Old Testament was as alive and vivid as any of the Hollywood

presentations of its contents. Although these primitive texts can sometimes be as baffling as they are beautiful, the more I read, the more I find that my own Christian faith is only a shallow (and often misinformed) shell without them."

You might think differently than this quote. That's ok. In fact, I'd love to hear what you think as we meet in Bible study or anytime. But these ideas help you know where I'm coming from as your pastor as we look at this story of Cain and Abel.

Basically this story comes just after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit - not necessarily an apple, doesn't say apple in Bible, it only says fruit - and are exiled from the Garden of Eden for eating it. As God commands in Genesis 1:28 - to be fruitful and increase in number - Adam and Eve give birth to two children - first Cain and then Abel.

Very simply the story states that Abel worked with the livestock and Cain worked with the soil. If you have a hard time remembering which is which - think Abel "Baaaa" and Cain "Carrots". This was who they were as individuals.

Apparently after the soil began to produce fruit, Cain gave an offering to God from what he grew. As it says in the original Hebrew - Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground. Sweet, right? Cain gave an offering to God. He gave thanks. That's good.

But ABEL it says - brought God the first born from his flock and the fattest (or best) one at that. So, God respected Abel's offering, but not Cain's. This makes me say - "What!?" Why did God seem to pick favorites? Why wasn't God respectful of Cain's offering? The way the story is told - it seems that Cain made the offering first and then Abel tried to best him, not that siblings would do that, right?

But looking closely at the text - there are few hints to consider. We don't know if the offerings came in succession. It doesn't say that. Maybe they were offered at the same time? And Cain's offering is described as "some" of what he harvested, but Abel's was the "best portion". Thinking about that there really is a lot to take from it for our lives in relationship with God, right?

A quick glance at this idea helps us consider that God really respects when we give Him our best

in every way, not just some, or a mediocre part of ourselves. We can extrapolate that into a lot of ideas. When we think of our time, our energy, our finances. How often are giving back to God the best portion of what God has first provided for us?

I went to visit John Walker recently. John's one of our long time members. His wife, Boots, passed away a few years ago and right now John is living in a senior living facility in Placentia. When I visited, he told me that his living facility came up with an idea to get their residents out of their rooms, away from their TVs or devices (yes, it happens at all ages) and to socialize more.

They began offering "bucks" for attending group gatherings - \$100 for any event they attended - monopoly money. And when the residents gathered for the monthly birthday party for those that would have a birthday that month, they would also have an auction where they could use their "bucks" to buy things on auction.

John decided to be an example and take part in this. After a while he's earned thousands of "bucks" to spend. Two of the prizes he bought with his bucks at auction for his great-grandchildren to be are throw blankets. Two of his grandsons recently got married, so he's thinking it won't be long now. But he noticed at the auction that they didn't have any good prizes for men. So in order to inspire them to get involved, he gave his best portion. The next time his son visited him, he asked him to take him to the local store. There John bought prizes he thought men would enjoy and donated them to the center for the next auction.

I'm so inspired every time I visit John. He's always smiling like in his picture, even though he fell a while ago and injured his back badly and has been getting rehab to walk and also was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He told me he gets up early every morning and the first thing he does in order to help improve his health is to do his exercises. He walks a mile around his living center with his walker every day. In fact, one day, just for the heck of it to see how far he could go, he walked 20 miles around inside his facility. His daughter got him a pedometer and when I visited him he had walked 640 miles in the last 10 months. He said it's about 430 miles to San Francisco so he's walked further than that. The best nugget I

took away with me from the visit though was this - He said he'd been married to Boots for 63 years, but now he has two girlfriends - Siri and Alexa.

There is so much more I could say about this one, short Old Testament story. I'll touch on one more thing that I hope will leave you with assurance of God's great love.

We know that God, respecting Abel's offering, but not Cain's - made Cain very angry. And even though God warned Cain, "If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Cain chose not to master it and wound up murdering his brother Abel.

Even though God put a curse on Cain - that when he worked the ground it wouldn't yield and he'd be a restless wanderer on the earth - when Cain complained to God that the curse was too much, and he was afraid that whoever found him would kill him, God once again saved and protected Cain. He put a saving mark on Cain that would signify to everyone he was God's protected and wouldn't be harmed.

This - in a way - is the mark we carry upon us also when we wear the cross, or when we make time for worship in our week, or even when we bow our heads to pray. That God loved us so much, even in our depravity, he came to us - very God and very man, Jesus the Christ - to give his life for ours that we might never die, but have eternal life.