

October 23, 2022
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Joel 2:23-32

Our Bible

Today we have given Bibles to our friends, Maggie and Caleb. It's our tradition to give Bibles to our third graders because in third grade kids are beginning to read for themselves. And we think this is an important book to read. We want you, Maggie and Caleb to read it and enjoy. But we don't just want you to read it by yourself. We want to read it with you. We want to talk about it with you and experience it with you.

Because the Bible is a story for all of us, ABOUT all of us.

The Bible that we gave to you, Caleb and Maggie, is all yours. And your Bible has all kinds of stories in it for you. It has poems and songs. It has adventures and battles. It has funny parts and sad parts. There are lots of small people doing big things. And big people remembering how important small things are. Like love and patience and being faithful. And that God is always with us and will always make things right. And these stories are important to pass on to their children and their children's children from generation to generation.

That Bible you have is all yours now. And I want to give you some instructions for your Bible. The the first thing you should know about your Bible is that it will make you wonder. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, when you read the stories, Maggie and Caleb, they might sound a little strange. You might wonder what is going on? Who are these people? And why are they in a place so far away? And why do we talk about Israel so much? And what about all these Commandments? And who is this guy, Moses? And this shepherd boy, David? And this Jonah guy who gets swallowed by a big fish? And a baby born in Bethlehem and put in a manger, a box for animal food? Well, I'm glad that you asked. Because the Bible stories are about other people in other times that are strange and a little mysterious to us.

Sometimes, we forget that as grown-ups. We forget that the Bible is full of things to wonder about. It is about different people in a different kind of world. In the Bible, people speak different languages and have different customs. And they thought about the world differently. They didn't have cars. Or medicine or grocery stores full of food. They didn't have TVs or radios and they couldn't vote on their leaders or listen to

different music than their parents. Life was different. Being a man or woman or a child was different. The importance of family and hospitality was very different. And if we met someone from the Bible, someone like Abraham or Sarah or the prophet Isaiah, they would look and sound strange to us. And we would look and sound strange to them. When you get older, I hope you get to travel, Caleb and Maggie. I hope you get to go somewhere that is really foreign and really different from home. To a place where things are really different. And you don't know the language and you don't know how things work. And you have to ask people and be curious and wonder about why things are the way they are. I have gotten to travel. And I have been to some of the places in the Bible, to Egypt and Turkey and Israel. I have gone to Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born. There are people there that speak English, but most people also speak Hebrew or Arabic. In Bethlehem there is a church called the church of the Nativity and it is very old. It has been there over a thousand years. Inside that church, it is dark because of all the candles and the centuries of smoke. There are oil lamps hanging from the ceiling from chains like necklaces. The altar wall in the back is

covered with gold and pictures of saints. All the words are in other languages. All the pictures of Jesus have dark skin and dark eyes. In this church is a little cave. Here is where they say Jesus was born. Here there was a room next to a house where animals were kept. And here was the manger.

In the cave of the Nativity, there are lots of candles. And everything smells like incense, woody and spicy and heavy, because it's the tradition in old churches to burn incense. In the cave, it's dark and close. And I tried to imagine Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus there on Christmas Eve. I tried to imagine it, but it was hard because it different than what I was used to. It was not the familiar stable or a barn. It wasn't quiet. There weren't animals and the sweet smell of hay. It wasn't at all where Jesus should be born. It felt strange; which is probably what it felt like to Mary and Joseph too. How could this be right? How could Jesus be born here? How could things happen like this?

The Bible is full of wonder and mystery. It makes us ask questions and puzzle over the stories. Because they are about DIFFERENT people from DIFFERENT cultures with DIFFERENT languages. And THEY

are giving us a DIFFERENT understanding of God. All of their stories and poems and laws, written thousands of years ago in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin, are so different. And we take them, and we try to understand what God was doing and saying. We try to understand what they mean. But there will always be some mystery about it.

Because there is always mystery when it comes to God. And who are we to think that we can understand all of it?

The Bible is full of wonder and things that are strange to us. But it is also full of things that are familiar. That's the second thing you should know, Maggie and Caleb. The Bible has lots of things in it that we can relate to. Brothers fighting. Families fussing with each other. Love and longing for a special someone. Anger at broken promises. The sorrow and sadness when someone dies. The joy when a baby that finally arrives. The relief of freedom from slavery. The delight of coming home to YOUR home. The people in the Bible are like us, and like us they have feelings and the same human experiences that we have.

Today, we read from 2 Timothy in our Bibles. It is Paul's second letter to his friend Timothy, who is the pastor of a church. We have to

remember, that way before this, Paul didn't like Jesus or his message and he started out trying to get rid of the church. Then he had a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, and everything changed about Paul. He changed him from someone full of hate to someone full of hope. From someone who had no mercy, to someone who depended on mercy. He went from being someone who was an enemy of Jesus, to someone who loved Jesus and told everyone about him.

Paul went out into the world to set up more churches, so more people could follow Jesus. And in his letter to Timothy, Paul is teaching the next leaders of the church. And he is looking back on his own life.

That's what people do when they get older, Maggie and Caleb. They look back over things and wonder how they did and if it was enough.

Paul reflects in this letter, and he says that he had lots of struggles.

Things weren't always easy. It was hard to change. It was hard for him to be a leader. It was hard to deal with people. But, he says, God was good. And he can see that God was with him. And he ran his race and kept the faith. Paul tells Timothy. "Don't give up. Even when it's hard,

keep going because it will get better. God was with me and God will be with you too.”

In the Bible, we have a bunch of stories to give us hope. Just like the people in our church today. Today, Niesje Spragens is 98 years old. Niesje has lived an incredible life. And she has so many stories about life then and now. Like the one about the pony she had named Hamburger who was kind of mean. And about the sudden loss of her childhood home in a fire. And about traveling to design school in New York. And the farm with the pool and the big garden that she helped run with her first husband, Newell. And the birth of their two daughters. And the sudden loss of Newell. And her second marriage to George. And their faithful work together in this church. And the slow but steady loss of her friends, and of George, and of her daughter, Katherine. Niesje has had full life. And as she reflects on it, she thanks God. And she prays for people now trying to get through life, people facing war or hunger or loss. She gives me hope. She reminds we that we all have just one life. And it will have sad parts and happy parts. And things won't always go the way we planned. But God will be with us. And God's promises

won't change. Our story is part of a bigger story, the story of the Bible that just keeps going. The story of God's love and faithfulness from one generation to the next.

The Bible stories are old and ancient. But they are stories for us now. And they are stories that point into the future. We might worry about what will happen sometimes, but in the end, God will set things right. That's the third instruction I have for you: Remember how the story ends. In the Bible, there are people called prophets. And the prophets remind the people of what God has said and what God wants them to do. They help people get back on track when they wander away. They warn people about the consequences if they are selfish or greedy or if they stop taking care of the world around them. Bad things will happen. There could be floods or droughts. There might be sickness or famine or war. The prophets tell people to think about what they are doing and they are never very popular. No one wants to hear that they can't do whatever they want. And they have to think about more than themselves. The prophet Joel, today, gives the people a hard message. He tells them

to repent. “Turn around. Go back. Remember that you are God’s people.”

Sometimes, I am a substitute teacher at the school. And sometimes, kids only want to do what they want to do. Sometimes, they do things they know they shouldn’t because the teacher isn’t there. And maybe, they think, the rules don’t apply! Maybe now they can hide under the desk. Or eat their crayons. Or sharpen all of their pencils for an hour. Maybe they can shout and run around and play chase in the library. I have to say no, and sometimes people lose dojo points or recess time. But the rules are the rules. And they are there for the good of everyone. And in the end, it’s not just about you or me, but all of us.

Joel the prophet reminds us that God wants things to be good for everyone in the end. Even if it’s hard right now. Even when we are hungry or scared or sad. Even if there is a terrible drought or armies marching closer. God wants us to do what is right because God will make things right. God will pour out God’s Spirit of life and love on everyone! It will be given to everyone: Young and old. Big and small. Boys and girls. They will all know God and be filled with joy and peace.

We believe it will be true, so we act like it's already true. This is God's plan. And it's God's plan for you, Maggie and Caleb. We believe God's blessing will be part of your life. And you can trust in that.

This Bible is yours. It is full of wonder and adventure. It is a comfort and a guide. It is a promise that God made from the very beginning, to be our God. May all of its stories encourage you and push you and keep you wondering and asking questions from now on.