

Bible Study—100 Key Texts

Background to the study

This is a Bible study. Many ways to do Bible study. Scholarly, to dig behind the text and try to determine what the author intended to say. Community—we try to discern together what the text may be saying to us. Individually—for reflection and prayer. For preaching....

This Bible Study is mostly of the community variety. We will talk somewhat about historical issues and certainly will try to take the texts in context, but mostly this study is not to teach as much as to inspire thought and conversation. We hope the conversation can be had in small groups and, maybe for the first time, over the internet, on FACEBOOK.

We also want to address what I think many Christians would see as a need. To have an overview of the Bible, of the texts that are important for constructing a theology and living the Christian life.

So 100 Key Texts, identified in various popular Bible Studies. We won't be looking at them through the lens of those commercial studies, though, but through our own.

We're going to jump in, beginning with the New Testament, with the life and ministry of Jesus, so that we begin roughly where we are in the church year. We will continue into the month of May and then take a break. We may break for the summer or not. These are questions that the participants must answer.

Each week Pastor Amanda or I will develop a short study that can be used by a small group or accessed on line. Today, we have put out a sheet for those who would like to be part of a small group weekly Bible Study. We will have it available this weekend, next Wednesday, and next weekend, and then put together our groups. The study will be designed to be self-led.

Background for this week:

Today we read from Luke's gospel. A brief primer on the gospels: Matthew and Luke draw upon Mark, which was the first of the gospel accounts, perhaps 70 CE. Luke and Matthew also seem to have a secondary source, which Mark did not have available to him. John was likely written later than all three synoptic gospels.

Each of the gospels has distinctive emphases, just as you and I would have if telling the same story. We want to make different points. The gospel of Luke emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' outreach and acceptance of the marginalized, affirmation of the role of women, extension of the ministry to the Gentiles, the importance of prayer, and more.

Luke claims to be written as an explanation to one Theophilus, whose identity remains unknown to us. It is a Greek name and, since, Luke emphasizes the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (and in the book of Acts, tells that story), it may have been written with a Gentile audience in mind. The word Theophilus, though, means “friend of God” and so some have said his identity is a symbolic one, referring to all sympathetic readers.

All of the gospels speak of John the Baptist and contrast his ministry with that of Jesus. All three synoptic gospels speak of Jesus’ baptism, while John only directly refers to it.

The text for today: Luke 3:1-22. (Please feel free to post your answers to these questions on our 100 Key Texts Facebook Page and engage in a discussion.)

First, read the entire text. What jumps out at you in the text? What thoughts are inspired by it? What questions arise?

Next, look at the texts in parts. Begin with context, before the actual text, with chapter 2:41-52. Note how Luke bridges the time frame between the birth and presentation of Jesus to his adulthood in these few verses. By the time chapter 3 rolls around, Jesus is ready to come on stage.

Read Luke 3:1-2. Luke is interested in history, often placing events in historical context. Here he uses Roman and Jewish figures of Jesus’ time to fix Jesus’ arrival in time. Think of how he begins the story of Jesus’ birth in chapter 2—its similar!

Read Luke 3:3. What do you think Luke means by “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?” Is there a difference, do you think, between confession of sins and repentance from sin? Is there anything you feel called to repent from today? Is there anything you feel that we as a society or Church are being called by John to repent from?

In Luke 3:4-6, the evangelist quotes Isaiah 40:3-5. These words were originally addressed to Israel while in exile in Babylon (6th century BCE). It was a promise to a long-suffering people who had endured the loss of their nation and their temple. What do you hear in these words that sounds like a promise for you and for us?

In 7-9, John the Baptist contrasts dependence on heritage and identify with bearing the “fruits of repentance.” Have you ever seen a tree that needed cutting down? Why? Do we ever treat our heritage and our identity as sufficient for God’s favor? What is John telling us to do?

What does Luke 3:15 suggest about the early Christian church? How does John answer? Is this as important today?

Read 3:18-20. What kind of man was this John? How was he like/unlike Jesus?

In verses 16-17, John speaks of fire in connection with Jesus' baptism. Does this image sound threatening to you? How so? Did John get the kind of Messiah he expected? Why or why not?

Read John 3:21-22. We read here that Jesus was baptized. What do you notice here in this text that stands out for you. Why do you think Jesus was baptized?

A couple of major questions (Please respond to each of these two questions on our 100 Key Texts Facebook Page)

Why is baptism important to us? What does your baptism mean to you? The baptism of your children?

How do you deal spiritually with the fact that despite John the Baptist's strong words, no matter how many times we repent and confess our sin, we seem to fall back into the same behaviors?

For your prayers:

O God of fire , God of grace, you came to us in the person of Jesus and by our baptisms into him, you call us to serve you and others with authenticity. You know our failings, O God. Purify us by your Spirit and empower us anew to live with integrity.