

**Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
16 October 2022**

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Anyone who reads “Money,” “Forbes,” or “The Wallstreet Journal” has read about inflation, the possibility of an upcoming recession, and employment data. I have been particularly interested in the so-called recession-resistant jobs. A quick search of these jobs yielded over 24,000 links, most of them trying to sell you something. Although many consumers are holding off buying big-ticket items, they are still buying so-called indulgence items and guilty pleasures, such as alcohol, cigarettes and fast foods. We know that food, clothing, and medicine are the only true recession-resistant industries but IBISWorld research believe that Americans will spend over 45 billion dollars in cigarette and tobacco products in 2022. The toy-manufacturing industry will grow to 11.4 billion in sales in the US alone, and McDonalds just posted a 10% increase in sales worldwide during their second quarter of 2022, an increase of almost 6 billion dollars.

Even during hard times consumers need to experience some little indulgences to make their lives better. Ironically, even while many Americans are simplifying their lifestyles watching carefully what they buy, we still have too much stuff. Two industries that have proven resilient during this economy are the storage and security industries. We continue to need places to house our stuff because we are running out of space. We also need new and more sophisticated security devices to protect our stuff. Think of how many combination codes we have, secure passwords, alarm codes. We are constantly trying to protect what we deem most precious and valuable to us, whether it be our identity, our families, or our money.

In the early middle ages, books were the most precious commodity, only available to the elite. The few libraries in existence went through great efforts to protect their books. Monasteries and churches, for example, implemented a high security system for protecting these treasures, “Bolting the Bible to a heavy stone lectern, chaining up the word of God inside the church. Among the most popular of the chained books in Protestant circles were the Bible and Fox's Book of Martyrs. Martin Luther spent hours poring over a Latin Bible chained within the Augustinian monastery at Wittenberg, and his reading of this chained book changed the world.” (SermonIllustrations.com).

On your pew today you will find a Book of Common Prayer, a Hymnal, and a Bible. This easy access to books, and especially the Bible, is one of the gifts of the Reformation. Reformers like Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, and Thomas Cranmer gave their lives to unchain the Word of God. Their dream was very simple: Unchain the Bible, translate it into the vernacular language of the people, make it available to all the faithful, and teach people to interpret it and understand it. Suddenly, the Word of God became accessible to all. “Words that had been unintelligible, stories that had never been told,

prayers that had never been heard, were finally put into the hands, hearts, and heads of God's people" (SermonIllustrations.com). The Bible was allowed to change people's hearts without the mediation of priests and monks. People could learn the rest of the story, the parts of Scripture not preached in sermons. They could learn from the book itself and not just from those who preached what they thought people needed to hear.

We hear in today's letter to 2 Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned." In other words, "Remain faithful to what I have taught you since you came to faith in Christ Jesus, the faith that tells you that Salvation is only possible through Christ." This is a command to Timothy to remain faithful to the teachings of the Church. This tradition which began with Jesus of Nazareth and continued with the Church, later became what we call the New Testament, but Paul here is appealing both to the Jewish Scriptures as well as the teachings of the Apostles. He tells Timothy that these traditions are the only source of truth for the disciple. Many think of tradition as a static, unchanging, frozen, and lifeless reality. But in fact this is not the case, true traditional faith is always alive.

For Paul and 2 Timothy, as well as for the Reformers, what fuels this tradition and makes it alive is Holy Scripture. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." The true source of authority for the Church is not the culture and what it has to offer. It is not the latest meeting of the House of Bishops or National Convention. It is not the latest poll, the latest marketing survey, or the latest expert opinion. It is Holy Scripture! This is where true tradition and true doctrine are to be found. This is where God's self-revelation to humanity in his Son, Jesus the Christ, becomes the very life of the Church. The Bible is the source, manual, guiding light, and center of the Church. All that we are, and all that we are called to be, is found in the Bible. It is the roadmap that leads us to a deeper relationship with God and with each other. And it is the single greatest treasure available to the Church today. Sadly, many of us are turning away from biblical Christianity.

There is a recession of faith in biblical Christianity around the world, and this recession goes deeper than any economic recession. I believe the Christian Church itself is to be blamed for this recession. We cannot blame it all on the rapid advance of secularism. The Church is liable, too. When we forget about context and interpret the Bible literally, we make it a book of capricious mandates, rather than a book about God's love. Every time we use the Bible to justify our prejudice, and to build walls of separation between us and the other, we make the Bible a book of hate and not a book of hope. Our church has failed, and continues to fail, to be relevant to our world because we have nothing of value to offer any more. We seem stuck on two extremes: On the one hand we have become so secular in our thinking and our behaviors that we have become indistinguishable from the culture. We are two parts psychology, one part social activism, and one part pietistic rhetoric. All covered with a light sprinkling of man-made doctrine.

On the other extreme, we are literalists void of any theological nuance or context. We wave our floppy Bibles in the air as we boldly proclaim how God will condemn

anyone who doesn't wear our uniform, doesn't attend our church, and doesn't consume the religious content we produce. In this version of Christianity, God hates everyone who doesn't belong to the particular group. This brand of Christianity is often used to justify religious nationalism, racism, classism, and all sorts of inhumane practices.

Both extremes have willingly abdicated their responsibility to draw sound doctrine from Holy Scripture, and to use Holy Scripture "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." And because we don't use Holy Scripture for teaching, we have nothing unique and distinct to offer the world. Because we don't use Holy Scripture for transformation, we have no choice but to settle for the culture dictums of the day, as our ears become itchy for new sources of authority. Because we don't use Holy Scripture for training in righteousness, our lifestyle has become indistinguishable from the lives of non-Christians. In other words, we have dealt with the spiritual depression of the day by adopting a steady diet of McDonalds' doctrines and guilty pleasures.

Are you having problems finding meaning in an image-driven, self-broadcasting, relativistic and secular culture? Have no fear, attend our newest seminar on "7 ways to a better self" and you will find the meaning you seek. Really? Is this what our Christian mandate to heal a hurting world has become? One more seminar, one more program, one more lecture? Only in Scripture can we find a God who has a purpose for our life. Only there can we find whom God is calling us to be. The Bible is the source of all truth and life, and in it we find the God who will push us away from the self and into community, the God who will call us into a deeper relationship with him and our brothers and sisters.

My friends, it is time to reclaim our Holy Scriptures. It is time to re-discover the book. It is time to realize that the only depression and recession-proof possession our church has is Holy Scripture. Amen!