North Kildonan United Church

16th October 2022 *~Rev. Don Johnson*

Psalm 119: 97-104 II Timothy 3:14-4:5 Luke 18: 1-8

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

The story is told of Old Angus, who was a crofter in a quiet, rural part of Scotland. He farmed his land carefully and brought that same attention and care to his livestock. In addition to being a farmer, Angus was a man of deep faith, a dedicated and diligent member of the Church of Scotland, our spiritual cousins.

One day the minister, his minister, came for a pastoral visit. After tea and a good conversation, the minister suggested it was time for worship.

"Where is your Bible, Angus?' the minister asked.

Angus got up and went to a shelf. He brought to the minister a large Bible, dusty through a long lack of use.

The minister took the sacred text, blew the dust off and gently rebuked his parishioner.

"Angus, you've not been reading your Bible."

"Oh no, minister, the Bible I read every day is over there. This is the Bible I use when the minister comes."

Clearly embarrassed by his lack of pastoral care to Angus, the minister cleared his throat and opened the dusty Bible to the psalms and began to read.

I was going to say that this story is from years gone by and that much has perhaps changed, but that may not necessarily be so. Though I have attended church in Scotland, and for six weeks led services in a three-point pastoral charge north of Glasgow, I know little about the actual pastoral life of the Scottish Church.

Back in 1995 I was on a pulpit exchange with a retired minister who cared for a small parish. The only duty was Sunday worship and each Sunday I was at one or two of the churches. Tyndrum, Crianlarich, and Bridge of Orchy were the locations of the churches. The largest attendance we ever had was a combined service at Bridge of Orchy, with 13 people present. Some Sundays at Tyndrum there were three of us, sometimes more, with a similar attendance at Crianlarich. Music was a portable sound system, and we sang along to tapes of famous choirs. Which meant making announcements like – *"on the second verse, sing the text in the hymn book, not the words that the choir is using."*

The church building at Crianlarich was interesting. It was a square structure that had been built by the railway in the late 19th century. The original design was slightly

awkward because the entrance was right beside the pulpit, which of course meant any late comers had to endure the steely cold stares of the minister conducting the service. But since it was a perfectly square building, the solution was simple enough. All the contents were turned around, the pulpit and table were sent to the far wall and the pews reversed their direction. You can still see the marks in the wall where the pews once were, and you can also arrive a tad late for worship and quietly slip into a back pew with no embarrassment.

The main church of this three-point charge was at Tyndrum, which was a solid stone structure, with the former manse attached to the sanctuary. Long ago the manse had been sold but still, at the front of the church, just to the side, was the door that used to lead to the minister's house. I stayed in the newer manse in town, which did not have a washing machine – you went across the road and down a bit to the commercial washers and dryers at the local park. One time when I was getting caught up on my laundry, a group of young German hikers came in. It had been wet – it was Scotland, so when isn't it wet, and a few of the guys put their hiking boots into the dryer. I had never seen a dryer door get kicked open before but that's what was happening with these less than clean boots.

That summer the weather throughout that part of the world had been very hot. So, it was a strange experience to go from 85 or more degrees outside into the stone church which was more like a meat locker and the heat had to be turned on for Sunday service. The other thing with the manse was that the hot water tank was on a timer, so if you wanted a bath, since the shower didn't work, you had to set the timer two hours in advance to heat up the water. It was a great experience, in a beautiful country, but I digress.

Let's go back to Angus. Why would he, why should he, read his Bible everyday? Why should anyone read the Bible?

We live in a time when we are surrounded by stories, big stories, some of them truthful, many of them tragically false. I'm not sure the expression is still used anymore, but I remember years ago people talking about their "story" on TV.

Back in the day of limited channels and antenna TV, before VHS recorders, often the daytime soap operas had tremendous followings. *"Don't phone me till after 2 o'clock because I'll be watching my story"* was the not too subtle warning to family and friends alike. So, in the days of our lives, as the world turns, people normally terrified of anything medical would eagerly watch General Hospital, closely following the romantic exploits of the doctors and nurses and patients. Or the exact opposite setting and characters in Coronation Street. Pretty innocent entertainment either set in luxury and wealth and temptation in California or struggling to get by in a Northern English community. Or perhaps the show, the story was set in the melting pot of various ethnic groups that was Kensington Market in Toronto, complete with its own King of Kensington. Perhaps you

have your own list of "stories" that you follow, shows that you make a point of seeing, though nowadays PVR recording technology means that it is safe to call before 2 o'clock because the show, the story, can be paused or recorded and returned to later. So, we are not quite the slaves to the TV schedule we once were.

Jesus used stories, parables actually, to help his followers understand and embrace the big story, which is the mystery of life itself. Actually, all of Scripture offers a world view quite at odds with the worldview found in the Guiding Light or EastEnders or virtually anything else on TV, or a political speech anywhere, or much of what is on the Internet.

In the biblical worldview, human beings are made in the image of our creator, and our supreme worth is based upon the conviction that each of us is a daughter or son of God. That is what defines us, that is what makes all humans equal, of equal value and worth. The world's view values or discards us on what we own or don't own, how rich or poor we are, which race to whom we belong, how attractive or talented we appear to be, where we live in the world. To regard and treat everyone we meet as a fellow human being, a child of God, worthy of our love and compassion, is so radically different from the wisdom of the world that builds walls between people, creates suspicion and fear based on prejudice and wrong assumptions. And converting our way to Christ's way is indeed a lifelong challenge. It's hard and at times painful to allow our assumptions to be challenged and changed, to reject the old lies and ways of the world. But that's the discipline involved in being a disciple of Christ.

So in these times of so-called fake news, of false stories on the internet, of novels and movies and shows on TV and the stage that are more bleak and hopeless than enlightening, in these times of fear of climate change and the end of the world, we need hope and grace and good news. We need to change the channel to a station we can trust, to a story that contains the words of life, not death; of forgiveness, not condemnation; of truth, not lies; of welcome, not rejection. We need the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In our reading from II Timothy, the challenge to offer the word of hope is given, to offer a word, a story that is different than any other story that is told. And it is a story unlike any other because it is inspired by God.

Often that sentence *"All scripture is inspired by God"* is used as an argument for the infallibility of scripture, which has caused a lot of pain when the Word has been misused in order to put down other people. But the word inspired, translated from the Greek, can literally mean "God-breathed".

Think of it. In the Bible, the breath of God is creative, life-giving and faith-giving. In Genesis, for instance, God breathed life into the man formed from the dust of the earth, or after the Resurrection Jesus breathed into the disciples and said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit."*

Why should Angus read his Bible every day? Because Scripture is a means by which God can breathe life and faith and hope and love and forgiveness and resurrection into us. We may disagree with some parts, love other parts, wrestle with wisdom contrary to our own perspective, be comforted or challenged or changed, and in all of this God is able to breathe new life into us and we can grow in knowledge, grace and love.

Amen.