

“Being Equipped”

II Timothy 3:14-4:5

Whenever we leave on a long journey, we want to take needed things with us. We have to pack for the trip. We haul the suitcases or backpack down from the attic or up from the basement, open it on the bed and ponder the age-old question: What to bring?

How you answer that question has everything to do with what kind of trip you’re going to have. With both the trips we took last summer – to the Oberammagau Passion Play in Germany and backpacking in Colorado – we were provided with lists of what to bring by the travel agency and by the Bible Camp. But sometimes we think we know more than what’s printed on the paper in front of us. The shoes I took to Europe were not broken in enough but I would never make that mistake in the Rocky Mountains. Andrew and Emily Kronenberger made a choice to listen to their Mom instead of the “what to bring” sheet and ended up being cold in the mountains because they didn’t have enough layers. It’s not always easy to decide what to bring. Usually Moms and Dads are good people to listen to, but sometimes we give bad advice.

We know we want to pack light to keep our suitcases under the weight limit or to keep our backpacks from weighing us down, and yet want to be properly equipped for the journey.

I think Paul’s message to young Timothy is very similar. Carry with you what you have learned from childhood. “Know the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

The Bible is like the “what to bring” list or the traveler’s guidebook that equips us for the journey. The Biblical writers were “inspired by God” to teach us things about ourselves and God that we could never discover in any other way.

So as we venture out on this expedition called life, Paul advised us to tuck the Bible into our carry on bag or backpack. We won’t want to be far from the tools it provides.

In II Timothy 4, Paul “solemnly urges us to proclaim the message.” Be “persistent and patient” in teaching our children and grandchildren because they are also listening to other teachers who will try to “turn them away from listening to the truth and encourage them to wander away to myths.”

Paul is reminding young Timothy to earn as much as he can and then to proclaim that knowledge and faith persistently to others. We are being well-advised to do the same, to the best of our ability, knowing we will make mistakes along the way by wearing the wrong shoes or not packing enough layers. We will never come close to “packing perfectly.” We will never come close to perfectly discerning God’s will for our life journey. But we can try.

Methodist pastor and writer Adam Hamilton out in Leawood, Kansas has written a book entitled “Confronting the Controversies – Biblical Perspectives on Tough Issues.” Before writing a chapter on each of the tough issues of the separation of church and state, creation and evolution in public schools, abortion, and homosexuality – he writes a very helpful section entitled “Four Tools for Discerning God’s Will.” He describes four tools that God gives us and “equips” us with for the journey.

I quote from Pastor Hamilton's book . . .

So then, if God does care about these controversial issues and we as Christians long to know the heart of God, where will we go to discover God's will? How can we discern the convictions God would have us hold and work toward? John Wesley, the eighteenth century founder of Methodism, offered four tools for discerning God's will.

1. Scripture: The Bible is the primary means for learning God's will; we study the Scriptures prayerfully, looking for precepts, principles, and direct commandments as they relate to the issues at hand. The Bible is our map, our guide, our owner's manual. But the Bible can be difficult to interpret. It was written in a time when circumstances were very different from ours; and sometimes confusing us further, the writers express perspectives that seem to conflict with each other. But, remarkably, most often the Bible speaks to us with one voice about what God expects of our lives. To help the Bible speak to us more clearly, we also turn to the Christian tradition.

2. Tradition: Along with the Scriptures, we look for guidance to the teachings and beliefs of the church as expressed by Christians in all ages. The Christian tradition includes writings about theology and doctrine, prayers and liturgies, the writings of councils, and the wisdom gained throughout Christian history. Tradition, for those of us who are Lutherans, would include the Book of Concord and the Augsburg Confession as well as Martin Luther's writings. As Lutherans, we may not always agree with our denomination's official positions; but we must, at the very least, take them seriously in forming and shaping our understanding of God's will. God speaks through thoughtful church leaders through the ages.

3. Experience: The experience Wesley refers to is not simply a collection of events and happenings, which may not always present a reliable picture to go by, but our experience of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. We experience the Holy Spirit in worship, in the fellowship of other believers, and in our work and testimony for God's Kingdom in the world. In other words, we believe God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit's witness, discerned through prayer and confirmed by our experience with the community of disciples.

4. Reason: Wesley believed God gave us the ability to apply reason to our interpretation of God's will. Reason by itself can be manipulated and lead us in the wrong direction – it is obviously possible to make a “reasonable” argument on either side of an issue – but reason can be used along with the other three tools and be constrained by them.

These are four basic tools that I encourage you to use everyday as you seek to discover God's will for your life and to see all aspects of your life through the eyes of faith. They can help us view all issues through the eyes of faith. Our task is to be informed and to seek God's direction for us.

That's the end of Pastor Hamilton's quote from his book which I hope you find helpful in discerning God's will for your life journey with the tools of Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason – all of which Paul refers to in his letters of teaching to young Timothy.

But by far the most powerful tools God has “equipped” us with, the most powerful gifts he has given for the journey that we always need to pack no matter what – are the gifts of – Love and Forgiveness.

When we sin, when we lose our way, when we get lost, God's Word encourages us to confess and repent. We may be punished – there are consequences for our actions – yet when we repent; we will not be cut off. With God's help, we can change, we can turn around and guided by God's love and forgiveness, we can begin again. It's a message of love and forgiveness that's need in our own lives and in the world around us.

When we are “equipped” with the power of God's love and forgiveness, when we have “experienced” God's love and forgiveness, when we are “inspired” by God's love and forgiveness – we want to share it with others. As Paul writes at the end of this text in verse 5, we are called to action to “do the work of an evangelist and to carry out our ministry fully.”

My hope is that each of you here in our Divinity community is “being equipped” to do the ministry God has called you to do – whether it be here in our congregation, in your family, in your work place, in your community, or wherever God sends you to share his promise of love and forgiveness.

Then may the peace of God . . .

#676 - Lord, Speak to Us, That We May Speak