

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

October 25, 2009  
*Discipleship Series - John Calvin Sunday*  
Psalm 91; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

### **The Bible: God's Gift**

For some months now we have been anticipating this day of worship in which our observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of John Calvin's birth culminates. Some of you may recall that we began our observance back in July—Calvin's birthday is July 10. Our services on July 5 included prayers and hymns inspired and informed by this theme of celebrating Calvin's central influence on who we are as Presbyterians today. The sermon that day emphasized Calvin's insistence that the understanding of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a shared communal meal around the table of the Lord be recovered, as opposed to being understood solely as a sacrifice being offered on an altar before God. As a visual aid, to make the point that day, the table, that at the beginning of the service was up on the back of the platform up against the organ cabinet masquerading as an altar, was physically carried by some of our able-bodied elders and placed here where it has been ever since. Our 500<sup>th</sup> jubilee continued with a couple of our Sunday evening Rockhaven vesper services given over to the life and legacy of Calvin. Then this fall our adult Sunday school class has just completed a 5-week study on Calvin and his influence on history and the church.

Today was chosen to be the capstone of our celebration since today is known as Reformation Sunday in the church year. Each year the last Sunday in October is devoted to celebrating the start of the Protestant Reformation that began with Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517 protesting the abuses and excesses of the Catholic Church and calling for a reformation. While it was not Luther's intention that a whole new church be formed, a series of events coalesced in this turbulent period of history that led church leaders in addition to Luther to push and cajole to the point that they were thrown out of the Catholic Church thereby precipitating the formation of a new movement. Calvin who was only 8 years old when Luther began his protestations was one of those who followed in the time that the new churches were becoming more established. Much of Calvin's ministry was in Geneva, Switzerland which is why we have fashioned our service today after the 1542 Geneva Liturgy. Most of what we have included in our service today is an attempt to re-create that service today. So when I went to prepare this sermon, I thought it might be an interesting possibility for me to learn and preach one of Calvin's actual sermons (they're easy to find with most of Calvin's works now cataloged in a number of online libraries). Upon further examination I couldn't find a single sermon that was any less than 2½ times longer than the sermons that Jody and I typically preach. So I abandoned that idea on two accounts—first, the length would be tedious at best and intolerable at worst (you can thank me now!). But secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, Calvin was passionate about the word of God being preached in the language of the common people, spoken in such a way that the truths of scripture could be easily grasped. So ironically, in spite of the fact that Calvin was a prolific writer of scholarly and academic proportions, Calvin's preaching was much more matter-of-fact and down-to-earth. He would not approve of preaching his 16<sup>th</sup> century sermons in the context of half a millennium later.

Since September we have been focusing on the 6 marks of discipleship that we're advocating as practices that will lead to a deeper faith and richer spiritual life. They are, pray daily, worship weekly, read the Bible regularly, serve in and beyond First Presbyterian Church, cultivate and nurture spiritual relationships with others, and give of your time, talent and resources. When thinking about which of these 6 marks to include on this Calvin Sunday, it would have been easy to take any one of them since Calvin had a lot to say about each. But one of them rose to the surface as particularly appropriate—especially in light of the fact that today is Reformation Sunday—read the Bible regularly. Here's why. With the development of the printing press in western Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the availability of books to the common people became possible. No longer were the possession of books and other printed materials reserved for the wealthy and privileged. In addition Calvin and the other reformers were advocates of the Bible being available in the language of the people. So with the availability of the Bible in the common language at an affordable cost, the masses of Christians were encouraged to obtain Bibles and to read them. No longer was the content of the Bible reserved for the clergy who were trained in the biblical languages and who had access to the scriptures through the church. The Bible was now a resource available to all Christians. And it was the reading of the Bible first hand by so many Christians, who were no longer dependent on the ministers of the church to tell them what was in the Bible, that added strength and vitality to the fledgling protestant church movement.

A couple of weeks ago in our Sunday school class on Calvin, it was pointed out that Calvin was quite a proponent of using technology in advancing the Christian cause. I had never thought of it that way, but the invention and widespread use of the printing press was a revolutionary development that is actually very similar in its impact on the world to the emergence of the internet, worldwide web and the new world of cyber communication and cyber information in which we find ourselves today. I jokingly said that I guess that if Calvin were active today he would be on Facebook and Twitter. So imagine my surprise when I did a Facebook search and found that the 16<sup>th</sup> century John Calvin indeed has a Facebook page today and there's a Twitter site for Calvin's 500<sup>th</sup> jubilee! I think it's finally time that I get with the times and join Facebook myself! You ought to consider it too. To be relevant today, we must use what God has given us in technology for the glory of God.

One of the roles that Calvin had in Geneva was to be a teacher of the Bible. And over the course of his life he wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible. He was a trusted interpreter of Scripture who advocated what has become one of the mottos of the Protestant Reformation - *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) when it comes to understanding God and God's intention for the world and as the sole source of truth for the church. Because of his extensive attention to the Bible, Calvin's understanding was exhaustive. Over the course of his life he came to understand the Bible as a gift of God given to us to better understand God. Time spent reading the Bible was time spent with God, receiving the blessing of dwelling in God's presence. It was Calvin's experience and conviction that as one reads the Bible over time, one is drawn into an ever deepening relationship with God. It's almost as if Calvin viewed the Bible as a letter from God to the creatures that God had made, wanting them to know of God's love for them and for all of creation.

As key to understanding the Bible, Calvin spoke of the essential role of the Holy Spirit as a participant with us when we read the scriptures. As we approach the words on

the page, it is the Holy Spirit who will make them come alive with meaning and truth. It is through the participation of the Holy Spirit that the words of the Bible become the holy Word of God. This is one of the aspects of the Bible that sets it apart from other writings and other books. So when we read the Bible it is most appropriate that there be a prayerful attitude that makes us open to hearing that holy word.

Calvin was particularly taken with the book of Psalms. He wrote extensively on the psalms. It is in the Psalms that perhaps we can most fully and completely feel this loving reaching out to us by our loving God. In the Psalms we can almost feel God inviting us into God's holy, loving and protective presence. Listen again to the opening words of Psalm 91. "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.' For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler." (Ps. 91:1-4) Can you hear what Calvin is talking about? God as refuge. God as fortress. God as shield. God as shelter. These are words of assurance and comfort no matter what is going on in life—but particularly so when one is going through a rough patch. Calvin finds in the Psalms, over and over again, words of God's love and care.

As we've been emphasizing the marks of discipleship this fall, this one about the regular reading of the Bible may seem at first one of the easiest—simply setting some time aside to regularly sit down and read the Bible. On the other hand though, the Bible also can for some folks seem a mysterious and even off-putting book if it is not something that has been read much before. I would take a cue from Calvin that the book of Psalms would be a great place to begin one's regular reading of scripture. There's 150 of them, so reading a psalm or two a day would be quite manageable. A quick word of warning: allow a couple of sittings or even 3 or 4 for Psalm 119—it has 176 verses and in my Bible takes up 4½ pages. But it's made up of 22 8-verse units, so pick a multiple of 8 and go for it!

And so, I invite you to follow Calvin's lead and make Bible reading a regular part of your routine. Set aside the time to carefully and thoughtfully take in the words of the Bible. But each time before you open the Bible, say a prayer in which you ask that the Holy Spirit be your companion as you encounter the words. And when you do, be prepared for and open to God coming to you in a new and powerful way in which you will find yourself encountering God in God's loving care and keeping.