

**Living Biblically:
LIVING HISTORICALLY**

Hebrews 11:1-3, 12:1-3

We have a story that informs our faith.

A sermon preached by
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Several months ago, as I was planning the sermons for this fall, I saw a commercial for a new sitcom on TV. It was called “Living Biblically.” I thought that was an interesting idea for a television show that would probably be terrible. I watched it. I was right. The show debuted in February and was canceled by April. But the idea is still interesting.

The TV show was loosely based on a book that was written in 2008 called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*.¹ The author, A. J. Jacobs, is a self-described agnostic Jew who tried to live out the rules of the Bible as faithfully and literally as he could in the 21st century. I haven't read the book, but Jacobs did a TED talk on his experience that you can watch online.² Parts of his journey were pretty funny, such as his attempt to stone an adulterer—with a pebble. In the end, Jacobs' life was changed by trying to live by the Bible, and he developed a list of his own commandments:

- **Thou shalt not take the Bible literally.** I would say, don't take all of the Bible literally. Some parts are meant to be taken literally, like the food laws. But whether we should follow them all literally is another matter. I would say take all of the Bible seriously.
- **Thou shalt give thanks.** Self-explanatory.
- **Thou shalt have reverence.** As an agnostic Jew, Jacobs came to believe in a spiritual dimension to life.
- **Thou shalt not disregard the non-rational.** The companion to reverence.
- **Thou shalt not stereotype.** Jacobs had conversations with Christian fundamentalists, orthodox Jews, and Amish people. Everyone was different than he expected.
- **Thou shalt pick and choose,** because you can't do everything the Bible says. Just make sure you pick and choose the right things, like love, mercy, grace, and justice.

As Christians, we love the Bible. It's the Word of God. It is the plan of salvation and a guide for abundant living. If we could live Biblically,

that would be a good life, right? But what does “living Biblically” mean?

Living Biblically strikes a deep chord in our Methodist DNA. John Wesley, who described himself as a “man of one book,” (*homo unius libri*) sought to reform the church and the English nation by a return to Scriptural Christianity. In 1744, Wesley held the first Annual Conference of Methodist preachers, and they crafted what we would call today a mission statement. In the minutes of the conference they asked, “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodist?” The answer was, “To reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”³ This is how the Methodists would talk about living Biblically—Scriptural Holiness.

Dr. Stephen Dawes, a Methodist clergyman and scholar from England, describes Scriptural Holiness this way:

For Wesley “Scriptural Holiness” is a search, a process or, to use a common word from contemporary spirituality, a journey. It is a journey from new birth to spiritual maturity, from sinfulness to perfection, from “original sin” through “justification by faith” to “entire sanctification.” The goal of “holiness of heart and life” is an integrated life filled with awareness of the love of God, marked by freedom from the guilt and power of sin, and lived in love towards others – a mature, responsible, fulfilled life. It is, for most, a journey begun and continued, rather than a destination reached or goal achieved. It is a journey undertaken in company with others, in “fellowship,” not one walked alone.⁴

For four weeks this month, we are going to talk about the idea of Living Biblically, or to use Methodist lingo, Scriptural Holiness. What does it mean to live by the big ideas of the Bible? What does the life of a Scriptural Christian look like?

Today we want to talk about “Living Historically.” Biblical Christians live with a sense of history. The Bible itself is historical, parts of it written between 2,000 and 3,000 years ago, each part written

in a particular historical context and situation. We have stories that inform our faith and life—the Biblical story, 2,000 years of Christian history, our Methodist story, our American story, our personal story. We walk in the footsteps of a mighty parade of faithful saints who have gone before us. We stand on the shoulders of spiritual giants. We live in a deep and meaningful tradition.

Our contemporary culture tends to forget the past. Everything has to be slick and shiny and new and technological. We're all about "The Church of What's Happenin' Now." We need to be relevant in our presentation of the Gospel and our practice of ministry. But we cannot be disconnected from our tradition.

On the other hand, we can't be bound by our tradition so tightly that we cannot embrace new days and new ways. Theologian Jaroslav Pelikan said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."⁵ It's a balance. But I want to argue that living Biblically means that we live in touch with our history, that we cherish our tradition, even while we speak to a contemporary culture.

About a month ago I attended a memorial service for the father of a good friend of mine. Roy H. Smith was the father of my "brother from another mother" Roy P. Smith, who is also a colleague in ministry. Roy H. was a man of deep faith and sharp intelligence who lived to be 100—a great southern gentleman. It was the first funeral I had been to in a long time that I was not leading. The pastor got up and began the United Methodist funeral service. I have done this service hundreds of times; I could say the words with her. But in that moment, it was so meaningful to me to hear those words, to know what was coming, to participate in the tradition as we celebrated Mister Roy's life.

We ended the service by singing my favorite Charles Wesley hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." The last verse gets me every time: "Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be. Let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee; changed from glory into

glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.”⁶ I was so lost in wonder, love, and praise I couldn’t even sing. What a tradition we live in! What a treasure our faith is!

Today we remember over 30 of our saints who have gone on to heaven in the last year. It’s a tradition. We do it because it means something. We do it because *they* mean something. The Scripture we often read on All Saints’ Sunday is Hebrews 12:1-3. It’s a classic. It’s where we get the idea of the great communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us like a great balcony full of cheerleaders as we play out our life on earth.

Hebrews 12 begins with the word “Therefore.” Don’t ignore that. It refers to all that has gone before. In the early chapters of the letter, the author has taken great pains to show how Jesus is superior to the Jewish traditions of the past and that he is the high priest of the new covenant with God. The letter is written to a community of Jewish Christians who seem to be falling away as time passes. In chapter 6, he tells them it is impossible to restore someone who falls away from the faith, like that is starting to happen. In chapter 10, he says, “*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*”⁷ If you have ever been tempted to fall away from your faith and discipleship—who hasn’t?—this word is for you. Hold fast to your faith!

Then in chapter 11, the writer defines faith—“*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*”⁸—and he starts a long recitation of the faithful souls of the past: Abraham, Moses, David, and all the rest, who persevered in their faith. They longed to receive the promise that is now available to all through faith in Jesus Christ. What are we supposed to do, give all of that up?

“Therefore,” Hebrews says, “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”—all these faithful people who have lived and died in faith—“let us also.”⁹ Let’s do two things: lay aside the sin that weighs us down, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

When I was young and trying to be an athlete, I would train by running with leg weights attached to my ankles. It was hard. But when I took the weights off, my legs felt light. It felt like I could fly. That’s how it is when we lay aside the weight of sin and run with the Lord.

We run because we have an example: “*Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*”¹⁰ The writer says to think about Jesus, to think about the hostility he endured for his faith, for this reason: “so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.”¹¹ Because of the witness of the faithful, because of the example of Jesus, because of our relationships with those we remember today, we can run the race; we can hold fast to our faith; we can persevere until the end and receive the reward. That’s our story, and we’re sticking to it.

One of the saints who passed away two weeks ago tomorrow was Eugene Peterson. He was a pastor for 29 years at the same small Presbyterian Church in Maryland. I mentioned Peterson just last August, but I wanted to bring him back, since he just became one of the cloud of witnesses recently. In his last days, he slipped in and out of consciousness and appeared to be talking to those who had come to usher him into heaven. Some of his last words were, “Let’s go. Let’s go.” He died with a smile on his face, and his family said, “With full and overflowing hearts, we give thanks for the gift of his life, knowing that his joy is now complete.”¹²

Peterson’s claim to fame was his translation of the Bible into modern language called *The Message*. But he wrote about 30 more books and lots of articles and was a mentor to hundreds if not thousands of pastors over the decades. One of his books was called *A Long Obedience In*

The Same Direction.¹³ The phrase actually came from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who said, “The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; [which] thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, [in] something that has made life worth living.”¹⁴

Peterson said that this long obedience is how we enter into God’s story. We don’t have the intelligence to figure out all the answers. We can’t invent the rules. But we can steadfastly, consistently walk the path God has laid out for us. In his memoir, he wrote, “The Holy Spirit is writing us into the revelation, the story of salvation. We find ourselves in the story as followers of Jesus. Jesus calls us to follow him, and we obey—or we do not. This is an immense world of God’s salvation that we are entering; we don’t know enough to use or apply anything. Our task is to obey—believingly, trustingly obey. Simply obey in a ‘long obedience.’”¹⁵

To live Biblically, we commit to a long obedience in the same direction. We stand in the story. We claim the tradition. We live historically. As you come to the Table today, be aware of this massive cloud of witnesses that has gone before you and is with you now. Whatever sin is weighing you down, you can lay it aside. Whatever race you have to run, you can finish. Whatever trials you face, you can hold fast. Because they did. Because Jesus did. You can, too. Thanks be to God.

¹ A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

²https://www.ted.com/talks/a_j_jacobs_year_of_living_biblically?language=en

³ “Minutes of Several Conversations” Q.3, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 8; ed. T. Jackson (Baker, 1978] 299. Quoted by Henry H. Knight III, “Wesley and the Methodists,” <http://www.catalystresources.org/consider-wesley-37/>.

⁴ Stephen B Dawes, “The Spirituality of ‘Scriptural Holiness’”,
https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/wc_Eur_Stephen_Dawes_The_Spirituality_of_Scriptural_Holine.pdf.

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, “The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities,” <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/78936-tradition-is-the-living-faith-of-the-dead-traditionalism-is>.

⁶ United Methodist Hymnal, No. 384.

⁷ Hebrews 10:23-25.

⁸ Hebrews 11:1.

⁹ Hebrews 12:1.

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:2.

¹¹ Hebrews 12:3.

¹² Kate Shellnut, “Eugene Peterson Has Completed His Long Obedience,” *CT.com*, 10/22/18.

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Intervarsity Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor; A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 247.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.