

A Guided Tour of the Bible

In 25 Stops

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All inspired scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for reformation of manners and discipline in right living.

1 Timothy 3:16

INTRODUCTION

San Francisco is a beautiful, vibrant city with streets that bend and stretch and rise and fall. They are also, for the most part, quite narrow. Lombard, the “crookedest street in the world”, is a marvel to behold but also a single lane. Even if it lost its crooked-ness and ran straight up and down two lanes would barely fit. Yet there is one street in San Francisco that is decidedly unique. Van Ness opens up like a broad and welcoming Parisian avenue and is distinctly, well, un-San-Fran-like. As a visitor I have noticed the difference but could not have possibly imagined a reason. Until, that is, one day on a guided tour. As the bus we were on emerged from a narrow vein onto the main north/south artery that is Van Ness, the guide asked if we noticed just how different it was. He went on to explain that in the fire that followed the great earthquake of 1906 a quick decision had to be made. In the midst of the inferno, officials chose to cut a firebreak through the city in order to avoid its spread. The result of that decision is visible today in the broad expanse that is Van Ness Avenue.

I enjoy guided tours immensely. I especially like the curious and trivial information one picks up from a capable tour guide, the answers to questions that haven't been asked, the local information that is otherwise inaccessible to outsiders. Guided tours give us a lot in a short period of time. And while they are no substitute for the knowledge acquired by personal experience, they are often fun and fascinating ways to learn. It was on a guided tour of San Francisco and area that I first thought about offering a guided tour of the Bible.

Why a Guided Tour of the Bible?

It may sound a little churlish to suggest that anything edifying can be gained in something so superficial as a guided tour of the Bible. The Bible is a serious book, is it not? The Holy Scriptures, the Word of God, is this not the font of wisdom and not to be trifled with? Absolutely! I write with a deep and abiding love of scripture and have no intention of bringing its relevance into question. Just the opposite in fact. I want for readers to join me in deepening our appreciation of the Word and to be fascinated by this text that has shaped human history more than any other reading material. But it is a sweeping and sometimes complicated tome. Accessibility to the Bible is often addressed by modernizing and paraphrasing the translation from the ancient and original languages. That effort may serve some purpose but I wonder if it really helps clarify the reader's most heartfelt questions about the Bible's authority, contradictions, overarching themes, and myriad of literary forms. Why not a fresh approach, a contemporary approach, an approach rooted in one preacher's quarter century of reading, studying, and reflecting? Will you join me on a guided tour?

What a Guided Tour is and What It is Not

It is necessary to say at the beginning that there are certain things that a guided tour is not. A guided tour is not a comprehensive review of an entire work that has 66 books, 1,281 pages, 31,173 verses, and 774,746 words, give or take depending on the translation. Reading the Bible from beginning to end is a daunting task, and

perhaps even a worthwhile and satisfying one but it is not the intention of this volume to cover the whole Bible at any speed.

A guided tour is not a graduate course in biblical studies. This will not require you to have an extensive knowledge of Hebrew and Greek (I know I haven't). We are working from translations in English and are dependant on those whose knowledge is extensive. There is a reason the Bible has been translated into more languages than any other published book and that is because there is inherent value in reading it in one's own language.

A guided tour is entirely subjective and so is this book. The tour guide makes assumptions and decisions about what is worth attending to and in so doing chooses what not to pursue. Another story from an excellent guided tour. My wife and I were on a bus tour of Europe when we were young enough to desire 14 countries in 17 days or thereabouts. It was a dizzying adventure but loads of fun. On the one morning we had in Paris we were taken to a side entrance of the Louvre. I remember exactly what the tour guide said as he greeted us, "There are 250,000 works of art in this museum. I'm going to show you six!" What followed was a most informative introduction to why some of the art in the Louvre was more renowned and important than others. In the chamber where Da Vinci's Mona Lisa was hanging behind a secure bullet proof case he told us that the paintings on either side were just as beautiful and just as priceless as the Mona Lisa but only one masterpiece in that room was in a secure case. A guided tour is about making choices. There will be biblical texts that get passed by in this book. That is not to say that they are not important or beautiful or inspired.

It is simply to offer that choices must be made if a tour is to end at an appointed time.

This is to say finally, that a guided tour has a beginning and an end. In order to hold the passages together as part of a whole we must attempt to make our tour concise enough to be engaging yet long enough to be representative of the whole. To that end I have chosen to lead you through *the twenty-five most important stories of the Bible*. Well...sort of. They may not be your twenty-five most important if you were to make a list. At another time I might leave some of these ones out and add different ones. I am sure that every reader of the Bible could come up with their own list which would not match this one yet still be just as legitimate. However, this is not a random list. The stops on our tour have been chosen with intention to offer a look at the Bible as a whole. The stories, passages, and verses included have been deemed important because they contribute to an increased understanding of how the Bible, despite its many and varied constituent parts, is nonetheless a good book. Like any worthwhile guided tour one can only hope that this may stir within the tourist a desire to make a return visit to places of interest.

PART 1

What is Most Important

The idea of choosing the most important stories of the Bible is not so strange. In Matthew 22 Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees, a group opposed to his teaching and committed to discrediting him. They seek to catch him in a question and ask, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the law?” Surely they must consider that this is a question no one can answer. If he answers one way they can argue the other. If he chooses one they can say that the commandments are equal and given by God so that no mortal can or should choose among them. More than that, the Pharisees are not simply asking Jesus to select from the list of ten that Christians refer to as the commandments. Their question is meant to invite reflection and selection from among the hundreds of regulations to be found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Given all the regulations, prohibitions, edicts, and legislations in the law, choose the greatest they ask.

But a trick question is not going to be Jesus’ downfall. With aplomb he responds by giving an answer with which no one could argue. “Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mark and Luke add strength to the list but really it is about a complete love). But before they can draw a breath at this selection, Jesus adds another, “The second is like it – Love your neighbour as yourself.” And with that the debate is over.

Does loving God and loving neighbour sum up everything one can say about Christian faith? Maybe not but it just might come as close as anything else we could offer. Augustine said in the 5th century in On Christian Doctrine that a true interpretation of scripture reveals the love of God and love of neighbour. “*So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.*” Not one or the other but both, always seeking after both.

The twenty-five texts selected here may not always appear connected to one another in obvious ways. My hope is that they will display a constant affinity for the double rule of love and will expand our capacity to find the same everywhere we look. This tour is departing.

Getting on Board

You have to start somewhere and tour guides always seem to begin with insulting the intelligence of the tourist by stating the obvious so here it goes. The Bible has two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. Now we are underway.

The Old Testament speaks of the history of salvation from the point of view of Israel, God’s chosen people. The New Testament speaks of the history of salvation from the point of view of the Christian church. By using the term ‘history of salvation’ I do mean to draw out a thread that ties the whole of scripture together despite its complexity and variety. The Bible reflects an understanding that God acts with saving power from the beginning of time until the end of

time. Or from the dawn of history until the close of history. Not history in general so much as a particular view of history, which is from the perspective of those who have responded to the call of the God of Israel and of Jesus. There is a sense in which the Bible moves chronologically through history, both telling us things of the past and making promises about the future.

Some people question the use of the term Old Testament, preferring to use expressions like the First Covenant or the Hebrew Scriptures. The concern is that one doesn't want to sound condescending or superior regarding Judaism's scriptures. However, in addition to the historical use of the phrase I would argue there is just reason to continue to use Old Testament to describe the first section of the Bible. We honour Judaism by respecting it wholeheartedly. God made a covenant with Israel and if we know one thing it is that God keeps God's word. If we like to think of Christianity as a new covenant, it is only new in the sense that it is opened up to those who are not Jewish. The new covenant does not replace the first covenant. Furthermore, in the Christian church we do not typically read these texts either in Hebrew or with Jewish faith and theology so the phrase Hebrew Scriptures has its problems too. For now, I continue to use Old Testament and seek to bear faithful witness to Judaism.

So it is a History Book, Right?

One of the most wonderful features of the Bible is that it is a book made up of many books. These sixty-six books are written at different times and by many different people. Most wonderfully perhaps they contain a multiplicity of literary forms. This is the

feature that is most exciting and yet can cause the most trouble at times in the task of interpreting the Bible for spiritual guidance and religious meaning. The Bible has history and myth and law and legend and chronologies and poetry and prophesy and gospel and parable and letter and apocalyptic literature and more. This shouldn't confuse but rather delight the reader.

We already know the differences embedded in different literary forms from our lived experience. We know intuitively that when our parents told us a fairy tale we should listen for a moral. We know what a Christmas letter attempts to do and we receive it accordingly. We remember the difference between the material we read in our high school English and high school History classes respectively. So it is that we have different expectations when we read a psalm than when we read a commandment. When we hear "a sower went out to sow" we don't expect that there really was a sower but rather our hearts prepare to be the place where this seed may take root. Knowing or recognizing the literary form of the text we are reading does not diminish the authority of scripture or lessen its importance. Instead it deepens our understanding of wisdom and strengthens the claim the Word wishes to make on us.

So Where are We Going?

Seldom does a guided tour start out simply on trust. 'Oh, here is an interesting tour; I wonder where it goes?' Once my wife and I took an 'architectural tour of Chicago,' expecting that it would include sights and explanations of Chicago's architecture. We were not disappointed. We go on tours because we have heard a little

something about what is offered and our curiosity is piqued. Once committed, we are given an itinerary or a map in order to raise our excitement and prepare us for what lies ahead. Our itinerary is what I am calling the 25 most important stories of the Bible. Actually they aren't all stories. Some are chapters, some are verses, while others are parts of a greater narrative. But together they represent one person's invitation to travel through the Bible looking at parts with a sense of the whole. Our journey together will look like this:

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Genesis 1 | In the beginning |
| 2. Genesis 12:1-3 | the call of Abraham |
| 3. Exodus 3:1-12 | a burning bush |
| 4. Exodus 20:1-17 | 10 commandments |
| 5. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 | choose life |
| 6. 1 Kings 19:1-14 | a still small voice |
| 7. Isaiah 9:6,7 | promise of a messiah |
| 8. Isaiah 65:17-25 | the lion and the lamb |
| 9. Micah 6:6-8 | justice, mercy, humility |
| 10. Luke 3:7-14 | the baptism by John |
| 11. Matthew 4:1-11 | temptation |
| 12. Luke 4:14-19 | Jesus at Nazareth |
| 13. Matthew 4:18-22 | call of disciples |
| 14. Matthew 5:1-12 | beatitudes |
| 15. John 6:1-13 | feeding 5000 |
| 16. Luke 10:25-37 | good Samaritan |
| 17. Luke 22:54-62 | last supper |
| 18. Mark 15:20-39 | crucifixion |
| 19. John 20:1-18 | resurrection |
| 20. Acts 1:6-11 | ascension |
| 21. Acts 2:1-13 | day of Pentecost |
| 22. Galatians 3:26-28 | no Jew or Greek |
| 23. Ephesians 4:1-6 | of unity |
| 24. 1 Corinthians 13 | the greatest of these |
| 25. Revelation 21:1-4 | a new heaven and earth |

First Stop – Genesis 1

So it was; and God saw all that God had made, and it was very good.

Genesis 1:31

Questions of Life and Life

Biblical scholars love questions that would strike fear into the hearts of a typical worshipping church person. One good one is ‘who is the first historical character in the Bible?’ I had a professor in university who strongly made the claim that it was Moses. (I remember the lecture because of the shock to my system) Just a couple of years ago National Geographic had a feature story on archaeologists questioning the historicity of David. The roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all reach back to the character of Abraham and so understandably there is a lot of interest in the question of whether or not he and Sarah walked where it is said they did.

For me it matters little. The biblical stories of these characters all offer something about faith in the God who is present and active in the lives described. That wisdom shows itself without concern for historical accuracy or placement. My answer to the scholar’s question is immaterial but I will begin this tour by saying that I don’t hold that Adam existed and I don’t think ancient Israelites did either.

I remember as a teenager looking at the Bible for ways to prove it was wrong. One of the best I found was the simple fact that Adam and Eve are said to have had three sons, Cain, Abel, and Seth.

Unfortunately for me when I presented this discovery to my father, a minister who had at one time studied Hebrew, he told me that I was better to understand Adam as a Hebrew word meaning ‘mankind’ rather than ‘man’ (I do prefer to choose inclusive or expansive language as a counter measure against patriarchy in scripture but at times the narrative requires application of a gender).

Today I would be less inclined to resolve this problem as a question of translation and more open to talk about myth and creation. Read Genesis chapter 1 and immediately continue on to Genesis chapter 2. There you will find not one but two accounts of creation. In some ways they appear to contradict one another. Is the human being created on the sixth day as in the first account or on the first day as in the second account? A closer examination of most English versions will find that chapter 1 uses the word ‘God’ as the name of the divine creator while chapter 2 repeatedly uses the term ‘Lord God’. Is this a coincidence or poetic licence? Are the names of the Holy interchangeable? In Hebrew they are two different words, ‘Yahweh’ in chapter 1 and ‘Elohim’ in chapter 2. They are, most agree, two stories set side by side, from a different source. Both are inspired, both offer wisdom, and neither was intended to describe the way the world began.

The Birth of Stories

Many different volumes describe the spread of civilization as understood by anthropologists. The Sumerians living at the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates around 10,000 BCE are most often said to be the starting place of human community in the so called Fertile

Crescent. The spread of civilization is not just about migration but also about the agrarian revolution, the developed capacity of the human beings to transform from a hunter/gatherer/nomadic lifestyle into a settled/agricultural/communal lifestyle. What this means about the start of the Bible is greatly speculated but I have come to appreciate the work of Bruce Feiler, a journalist of Jewish ancestry who has sought to understand his origins through books like Abraham and Walking the Bible. Feiler suggests that settled communities in Mesopotamia (literally “the land between the waters”) were the first people to have the time to sit back, tell stories, and ask big questions like ‘where did all this come from?’ and ‘what does it all mean?’ It is Feiler who has wondered if stories of antagonism between brothers like Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his ten elder brothers represent very early conflict between hunter/gathering people and their settled/agrarian kinfolk. The possible connection is fascinating.

Through thousands of years these stories evolved (ironically) to become the myths by which Israel understood how their revealed relationship with God began. And it began in the most obvious place, “In the beginning...” Since Israel so clearly understood its covenant relationship with God to begin in another time and place I think it likely that they were perfectly aware of the nature of the story(s) they were telling, namely that they were creation myths. The so called new atheists love to use the creation stories (including the Garden of Eden, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel) as proof or evidence of the pre-scientific nature of Genesis. As if the ancients didn’t know a bedtime story when they heard one. You’ve got to feel a little sorry for Richard Dawkins’ mother as she tried to tell him a fairy tale!

The Birth of Scripture

But back to Genesis 1 as scripture, inspired, and the first stop on our tour. The point of understanding this text in a broader perspective is not to disprove anything. For people of faith Genesis offers the assurance the God is eternal, that wherever and whenever human beings began to reach out for God, God was there. That is pretty awesome. It says that God creates ‘ex-nihilo’ or ‘out-of-nothing’ which means that God has not the limits that govern you and I. Most importantly for faith in the world we inhabit today, Genesis 1 tells of God’s interest in the care of everything that is above or below or around us and reminds us that it is good. Genesis 1 repeats a variation of the refrain “God saw that it was good” seven times. If God has ordained that the earth and heavens are good, and of God’s making, then our response is surely to treat it with reverence and kindness.

If only the first chapter of Genesis was simply intended to describe the way the world was made. That would be easy! Rather it offers a story with meaning, one that has bearing on our relationship to the earth, sky, water and every thing that has life. Yikes!

Second Stop – Genesis 12:1-3

...go to a country that I will show you. I shall make you into a great nation; I shall bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings.

Genesis 12:1b-2

It will be a fair argument to say that this tour doesn't pay enough attention to the epic story of Abraham and Sarah. There are wonderful and dramatic episodes in this story and the importance of Abraham in the future narrative cannot be understated. This is the one to whom God refers when Moses asks for a name to attach to the voice emanating from the burning bush. Of all that might be said in that moment the voice calls itself, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." That is some reference! And it is broadly understood that Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all make deferential claims about Abraham when they speak of their origins.

But it may also be said from the point of view of a Christian tour of the Bible that Abraham and Sarah are more catalyst than characters. Some scholars say that Genesis 1-11 constitutes a sample of pre-history and that the advent of Abraham at the beginning of chapter 12 marks a shift away from this type of literature. Another way of putting it is to say that up to this point we have been reading myths of the human experience and now we begin with myths of the Jewish experience. Still others may argue that with Abraham we meet the first historical character of the Bible. However we understand this moment it is nonetheless pivotal. It introduces the first generation of a clan that will eventually become the covenanted people of Israel.

The reason for stopping ever so briefly at the call of Abraham is to lift up something essential to interpreting the stories that will follow. And that is that when God makes a promise, God keeps a promise. Every time we look and admire a rainbow in the sky there is something in us that recalls the childhood Sunday School lesson that God has promised to never again destroy as the flood is said to have destroyed. That is a promise we need to remember when claims of God's wrath are inevitably made after a natural disaster. God keeps God's promises.

Here God makes a promise to Abram (his name has not yet been changed, an interesting biblical motif) that God will make him a great nation. Truth be told, Abram is not a great candidate to be patriarch of a great nation. He has little; a great journey is before him; and he and Sarah are unlikely to produce a multitude of progeny since they are old and haven't even started yet. But as the saga of Abraham and Sarah unfolds all obstacles to God's promise are taken care of. A peculiar episode in Egypt brings great wealth. They make a good home in a foreign land. And in spite of Sarah's beautiful laughter at the proposal of making babies in their retirement years, a child is granted. So true is God to the promises God makes that the potentially tragic story of Sarah's servant Hagar and her son Ishmael is redeemed by the assurance that they too will be remembered by descendants 'as numerous as the stars in the sky.' And in Islam they are.

Third Stop – Exodus 3:1-12

Do not come near! Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

Exodus 3:5

Let My People Go

Pictures taken, the tour guide gets back on board and re-directs attention with a sharp and obvious turn. The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) are called the Torah or the Pentateuch (literally “five books”). In some versions they are sub-titled the Five Books of Moses. I think it easier to understand if we think of them as one and four. Genesis contains a myriad of stories and a multitude of characters. Exodus begins with the birth of Moses and Deuteronomy concludes with his death. Moses is the central human character for these four books and they differ in intent from the stories, myths, and epics of Genesis. It could be argued that Genesis exists solely to situate the descendants of Abraham in Egypt where the real story of Israel begins. This is not to say that the stories of Abraham are not vivid or that the Joseph saga is not one of the best told stories in the whole Bible. It surely is. But choices must be made on a tour and it is critical for what follows that we stop on Mount Sinai.

As Exodus begins we come to learn that while the clan of Israel has grown into a great nation living in Egypt, a pharaoh has come to the throne who does not remember Joseph or the invitation by which Israel had come to reside there.

Irrationally afraid Pharaoh orders the death of the first born boys of Israel. By the heroic efforts of midwives, a mother, and a sister, Moses' life is saved and he comes to be raised in Pharaoh's household. Later he will act impulsively to save the life of a Hebrew slave which results in his exile from Egypt. He is taken in by Jethro, a priest of Midian, and marries Zipporah, Jethro's daughter. Moses begins a pastoral and peaceful life tending the flocks of his father-in-law. So might Moses have been content to live out the rest of his days but as is so often the case when we get complacent, God has another idea.

It is just another day of shepherding near the foot of Sinai (or Horeb) when Moses is drawn by the mystery of a bush that burns with fire but is not consumed. A voice calls out to inform him he is standing on holy ground. More than that, the voice knows him better than he knows himself and has a plan for his life. He is to return to Egypt, where he had barely escaped with his life, and tell Pharaoh that the days of enslaving Israel are over. Just go tell the most powerful man on earth to "Let my people go." What could possibly go wrong?

Religion and Politics Mixing

Moses on Sinai moves the Bible's story forward in a couple of essential ways. In it we hear two things about the nature of God that really haven't been crystallized before. The first is that there is one God who identifies with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. One God, or the idea of monotheism, is the single most distinctive concept that Judaism offers to religious history.

Secondly, here we find out something very important about God, namely that God takes an active interest in human affairs. It is not just a coincidence that God meets Moses in the burning bush on Sinai. God is there with a purpose and it is political and economical. “I have heard the cries of my people and have seen their suffering and am sending you to deliver them.” Moses gets to enjoy his mountaintop-spiritual-awakening, close-to-God experience, for all of three verses before he is brought back into the realities of the world and God’s determination for transformation. This God is not distant, remote, or detached from the welfare of God’s people. This is a God with a message and a mission, the economics of slavery are over no matter what argument Pharaoh might offer in response.

Fourth Stop – Exodus 20:1-17

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the hand of slavery. You must have no other god besides me.

Exodus 20:2

They Aren't Called Suggestions

Close your eyes and imagine Moses on Sinai carrying the commandments without picturing Charlton Heston. Go on, I dare you. A younger generation 'sees' this moment the way the animators of *Prince of Egypt* depict it. I'm more partial to the Mel Brooks' interpretation in *History of the World Part 1* in which Moses upon descent drops one tablet and must present 10 commandments instead of the intended 15. We teach Sunday School children to memorize the list of commandments without any commentary about how they are to be read or understood. Do they require such? Surely if anything in the Bible is self-explanatory it is the Ten Commandments. Even Hollywood thinks so.

If this were a guided tour of what was most important in the Jewish scriptures then by no means would we skip from the call of Moses to the gathering of Israel at Sinai wherein the commandments are given and God's covenant with Israel is established. By absolute necessity we would consider the institution of the Passover and the crossing of the Red (or Reed) Sea. Those are beautiful episodes in this formative narrative and worthy of reflection. However, for now let us set aside how the exodus unfolded and return to why it is so important.

When God speaks to Moses on Sinai out of that burning bush and commissions him to return to Egypt, Moses is also instructed to bring the people back to the holy mountain where a covenant will be made. In the aftermath of ten plagues and an arduous journey the people of Israel come to the foot of Sinai. Moses ascends to receive the law while the people wait below. This time of covenant making can be thought of as the birthplace of Judaism. There is no doubt that the descendants of Abraham understood themselves to be God's people and the Bible says that while in Egypt this clan or people became a great nation. But it is at Sinai that Judaism as a religion is born, a chosen people with a law given and a land promised.

Re-reading the Ten

The Ten Commandments have come to represent the essence of all the laws that will follow in the Torah. Perhaps we can increase our appreciation of them by considering them in at least three ways. One way to understand the commandments is to think of the first one, "You will have no other Gods beside me" as the only law that matters and everything else that follows is commentary. Think about it, if one is truly faithful to God and sets aside every other form of worship then requirements to not murder or steal or lie would hardly be necessary for these offences represent a form of idolatry. Another way to think of the commandments is to imagine the first four as rules about the people's relationship to God and the last six as rules about our relationship to one another. Christians will recognize this movement from the question posed to Jesus about the greatest commandment. While his response doesn't make explicit reference to the Decalogue (the list of ten), it is most clearly inferred by his

answer to love God with all of one's heart, mind, body, and soul *and* to love neighbour as oneself. Love of God and love of neighbour may not say it all, but it says a lot.

A third and intriguing way to interpret the Ten Commandments is to remember the context in which we find them in scripture. Here is a people who for generations, if not centuries, have been under the influence and control of Egypt. Invariably they have experienced how Egypt operates as a culture and society. The effect of this has been unequivocally desperate on Israel. They fell into slavery and God heard their cries. Now they are free from the economics of enslavement and preparing to return to their ancestral and promised land. What they now need essentially amounts to a constitution, something that says 'this is how we will be as a people and as a nation.' The one thing they know for certain is that they do not want to govern themselves the way Egypt governed them and so we might understand that the commandments are rules of governance antithetical to the ways of Egypt. For example:

You will have no other gods before me...*unlike the multitude of gods of the Egyptians.*

You will not make any graven images...*unlike the manner of Egypt*

You will keep the Sabbath holy...*unlike the way Egypt gave you no day of rest*

You will not kill...*the way Egypt so routinely took life*

You will not bear false witness...*the way Egypt always lied to us*

And so on. Israel was free and they needed to leave Egypt behind in every possible way.

In the narrative arc of the Bible this moment is very important, not simply for its moral code but because it helps orient us to the central pattern of sin and mercy (an essential human quality identified in the Garden of Eden with the eating of forbidden fruit), a pattern upon which Judaism and Christianity revolve.

Fifth Stop – Deuteronomy 30:15-20

I summon heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life and you and your descendants will live.

Deuteronomy 30:19

A Simple Choice of Life and Death

One might have some sympathy for Moses if he had expressed a desire to see this through to the end. When the direction of his life changed that day on Sinai before the burning bush, it was pointed in the direction of the Promised Land, or as it is often vividly described, a land flowing with milk and honey. After the confrontation with Pharaoh and the delivery of ten plagues, after the crossing of the Red Sea and the encampment at Sinai, after 40 years of wilderness wandering, Israel comes to the east side of the Jordan River and prepares to enter the land of their ancestors. But Moses will not cross with them.

After the covenant with God is made on Sinai, Israel actually has the opportunity to go directly to the Promised Land. Moses leads them in that direction and as they draw closer he sends out scouts to do some reconnaissance. Remember that back at the beginning God as much as warned him that the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, and a few others would be residing in that land when they got there. You can't expect a land flowing with milk and honey to remain empty for long. The scouts report back and Israel balks. Fear rises within them and they begin to question whether it is wise to go any further. Of course,

when they question this wisdom they are, in effect, questioning whether or not God keeps God's word. Trouble follows. God turns Israel back and says that because they had not the trust to do as they were told that no one of the generation who left Egypt would enter the Promised Land save Joshua. Including Moses. And so forty years of wandering in the wilderness ensues (actually, according to the text much of it was spent encamped but forty years is a long time either way).

This seems like a harsh punishment and a bit of a disappointment to a faithful leader like Moses but it serves a wonderful narrative purpose. It means that when God makes a promise, God keeps a promise. If God said that no one save Joshua who left Egypt would enter the Promised Land then that is exactly what God means. Even if that includes a great prophet like Moses. Not only does this reinforce the promises of God in the covenant on Sinai but it is consistent with earlier promises that could have been set aside such as the promise of the rainbow to not return violence with violence or the promise in the Abrahamic saga that the descendants of Ishmael should be as numerous as the stars in the sky. When God makes a promise God keeps a promise.

But the other redeeming facet to this story concerns the complete transformation of Israel from the consciousness of a slave people to that of a free people. The new generation that will enter the Promised Land really is new, generationally and spiritually. Where once they did not trust God sufficiently to enter the land, now they are transformed and they are ready.

With that as the setting, Moses addresses the people one last time and says something that you only say to free people – choose. Moses tells the people that as they finally enter the Promised Land they have the choice between life and death, blessing or curse. Life here means, of course, choosing to keep covenant with God who has delivered them from bondage in Egypt. For the rest of the Old Testament the story of Israel will unfold along these parameters, when the chosen people keep covenant, peace and prosperity are their fortune. But when they don't, well, curse is the least of it.

Sixth Stop – 1 Kings 19:1-14

The Lord was passing by: A great and strong wind came, rending mountains and shattering rocks before him, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a faint murmuring sound.

1 Kings 19:11-12

After David

This stop is an Elijah story which means if you are following the Table of Contents of the Bible that this tour has bypassed the entire David saga. *How can a guided tour of the Bible skip past David!?! I mean, Come On!* As was mentioned earlier with regards to the Passover, if this was a book of the twenty-five most important stories of Judaism then episodes in the Davidic saga would be essential. Indeed later on we will return to David without whom we cannot fully understand the meaning and movement of Jesus. But there are other texts for that.

One of the forms of literature in scripture is history. When we travel out of the Torah (or Books of Moses) and into the rest of the Old Testament we find ourselves in the largest section of historical texts in the Bible. From Joshua through to 2 Chronicles we are reading the early history of the nation of Israel. These are the accounts of how the wandering people with a covenant relationship with God come into the Promised Land and settle it. While it may have flowed with

milk and honey it was also the home of other peoples who were less than enthused to find the descendants of Abraham returning. But return and settle they do in stories of conquest and accommodation. They also suffer through the birth pangs with which any new nation must struggle. Though the law offered a system of governance with judges and priests, it initially resisted the institution of a monarchy. An admittedly simple (and thus insufficient) way of describing this is to say Israel was created to be 'a light to the nations' whose only ruler was the God who provided them a land and a law. But over time, and despite the efforts of wise people like Deborah and Samuel, Israel clamoured 'to be like other nations' and a relenting God allows Saul to rise to the throne.

What follows is the David saga wherein Saul is found wanting and David is anointed to take his place as king over Israel. David proves his worth over a long life and reign but also experiences an abundance of turbulence and turmoil not the least of which was a civil war incited by his own son Absalom. While Israel enjoyed relative peace and prosperity during the rule of David it begins to diminish in the subsequent reign of his son Solomon. The biblical history will go on to speak of the kingdom divided in two and the various inadequate and often corrupt rulers that followed.

There is much to read and reflect on in these stories of the history of ancient Israel. There is wisdom and inspiration to be gleaned from them. But in a volume attempting to cover the whole Bible in 25 stops we can say for now that there is little about God or God's relationship to God's people that has not already been revealed. Still, a wonderful account stands as a corrective for the misreading of

God's intentions and it arises in the career of Elijah. It is worthy of a brief stop.

Elijah's Not-so-Subtle Reprimand

The role of the prophet in biblical witness is one of the most misunderstood. Unlike prophets in popular understanding the biblical prophet does not predict the future. The prophet is rooted in the here and now, the real life problems of the people, and the political and social realities of God's people. The task of the prophet may be thought of as having two responsibilities, to *de-nounce* and to *pro-nounce*. The prophet denounces the ways in which the people are not keeping covenant with God and pronounces a vision to which the people must aspire to return. One of the best was Elijah.

Elijah lived in the northern kingdom during the reign of King Ahab around 850 BCE. The most troubling concern of this age was the marriage of Ahab to a Canaanite queen named Jezebel. It is important to note that the king marrying outside of Judaism was not the chief concern. What mattered was the first commandment, that the people of Israel should have no other gods. For Jezebel was not merely content to be Queen of Israel, she wanted Ahab to worship her god, Baal, and do him homage. Now we have a problem. The resulting idolatry brought harm and danger to God's people, a fact Elijah was only too happy to point out to the King. And denounce he did.

In a remarkable story in 1 Kings 18 Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal in a showdown on Mount Carmel. It's a 500 to 1 fight that

wouldn't have been fair if 5000 had shown up. Elijah invites the prophets of Baal to make a sacrifice calling upon their god to light the fire. All day long they struggle to no avail. All the while Elijah is only too keen to taunt and tease them asking if their god is perhaps asleep and needs an alarm clock. When it is Elijah's turn he asks for water to be poured all over, saturating the sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones of the altar. Then in a flash he summons the fire of God which ignites the whole thing instantaneously. With the smell of victory in his flaring nostrils and the people momentarily enthralled he leads a charge against his 500 counterparts and has them slaughtered in vengeance for the violence Jezebel had ordered against the prophets of Israel.

Jezebel is enraged and Elijah, recognizing the danger his zeal has brought upon him flees in fear to Mount Horeb. Here God meets him and in a wonderfully evocative demonstration helps Elijah recall what is required. Offering to pass by Elijah God first send a mighty wind but, we read, God is not in the wind. Next an earthquake and then a fire but God was not to be found in either of these. Finally a faint murmuring sound or a still, small voice passes by in which God is present.

This wonderfully dramatic and disturbingly violent story is a good place to recall the struggles of being God's people. It is fair to say that Elijah may have forgotten the promise of the rainbow. The sin of the people in Noah's day was violence and the rainbow was placed in the sky as a sign that God had tried exchanging violence for violence and had rejected it. There is brokenness in Elijah's zeal and a redeeming grace in God's response.

Be less like wind and earthquake and fire, and more like the faint murmur. Wisdom the world could still use today.

Seventh Stop – Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child has been born to us, a son is given to us; he will bear the symbol of dominion on his shoulder, and his title will be; Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty Hero, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

Messianic Promise

For the purpose of this book, I have deemed that a text is one of the 25 most important of the Bible if it helps contribute to an understanding of the overall themes of scripture. In other words, a text on this list helps us understand other passages more fully. So it is that we are going to stop briefly at Isaiah 9 and it has nothing to do whatsoever with Handel's Hallelujah Chorus. Being famous is not the same thing as being important.

Earlier I said that we will talk about David without stopping at any of the stories of the Davidic saga. This is one of those times. In the history of Israel the reign of David is remembered as perhaps the most peaceful and prosperous era of all. It is generally thought to have begun around the year 1000 BCE and 1 Kings 2 says that David ruled for forty years, seven in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem. In other words it was a long reign and a uniting one. It was a time when Israel believed it was doing well in its covenant relationship with God and the peace and prosperity that it experienced was a result of this faithfulness. Its borders were secure and its relationship with her neighbours was stable. Today we might look back into our

own history with a sense of nostalgia and think of a particular time as a golden age of sorts. The reign of David was remembered as Israel's Golden Age.

Golden Ages become especially important when things are not going well. Such was the case in the time of Isaiah. One way to think of the long and complicated writings of the Book of Isaiah is to remember that it contains material from at least two different eras (and likely more). The two primary moments are the mid eighth century BCE during the life of Isaiah himself, a time in which the kingdom of Israel is divided in two (Isaiah 1-39), and the sixth century BCE during the exile to Babylon (Isaiah 40-66). We will consider the latter in the next stop and focus first on events in the prophet's own lifetime.

Isaiah lived in a time when the nation over which David reigned had split into a northern and southern kingdom each with its own ruler. Not only were God's people divided but they found themselves at war in 735 BCE with the neighbouring Syro-Ephraimites and governed in the south by an impotent ruler named Ahaz. Where David's time was peaceful, Isaiah lived in conflict. Where David's time was prosperous, Isaiah's generation knew scarcity. And where David's time has trusted leadership, Isaiah's pined for God to send another. So it is they looked to the golden age and prayed for a king like David, an anointed ruler, or if you will, a messiah.

Perhaps Isaiah hoped a young prince named Hezekiah would be the one. In another sense it doesn't matter who in particular fills the promise that "unto us a child is born." We need to be attentive to the

hope, the longing, and the deep desire for inspired leadership that finds expression so poetically and beautifully in Isaiah 9. For centuries later another generation will come to believe that God had graced them with a king-like-David.

Eighth Stop – Isaiah 65:17-25

The wolf and the lamb will feed together and the lion will eat straw like the ox...Neither hurt nor harm will be done in all my holy mountain.

Isaiah 65:25

An Alternative Vision to Exile

Exodus and exile. These are the two most formative events in Israel's history. It is essential to be aware of both of these momentous occasions in order to make sense of Old Testament texts and thus to appreciate the context out of which the New Testament arises. But here's the thing, whereas we have a book of the Bible called Exodus and are familiar with its dramatic and transformative narrative, the Bible doesn't have a book called Exile. There is no straight forward story that lays out the traumatic events of the exile to Babylon. Rather we have to piece it together from writings of that era and the works of prophets in the time that followed.

When we speak of exile we are speaking of a very particular historical event. During the rise of the Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE, armies of Babylon reached Jerusalem in 597. By 587 Jerusalem had fallen and her citizens ordered to march across the desert to serve the victors in the Babylonian homelands. This would be their fate until the fall of Babylon in 539 and the subsequent liberty of the exiles declared by Cyrus of Persia. A remnant remained in the desolated city but the heart of Israel was forced into indentured servitude. Theirs was a spirit broken.

As hard as it is to contemplate, this condition was perhaps even worse than the slavery in Egypt which precipitated the exodus. Whereas the clan of Israel had voluntarily come to Egypt during a time of need and for generations had prospered and grown there only to fall into slavery at the hands of a pharaoh “who did not know Joseph”, Israel of the exile had been invaded, conquered, their city destroyed, and their people deported. They were dis-heartened, dis-spirited, and dis-assembled. Their pain and sorrow finds expression in the heart breaking lament of Psalm 137.

*“By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept as
we remembered Zion. On the willow trees there we
hung our lyres,
for those who had carried us captive asked us to
sing them a song,
our captors called on us to be joyful;
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’
How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign
land.”*

The Peaceable Kingdom

The setting of Isaiah 65 is therefore one of profound significance but does that by itself qualify this text as one of the Bible’s most important? Absolutely not. We have stopped here to get a glimpse of the peaceable kingdom, a depiction by an author we will call Second Isaiah (remember that these events are 200 years after the life of Isaiah the prophet). It represents the very best of prophetic pronouncements, the placing of a vision back into the hearts and

minds of a broken and dis-spirited people. It is as if the prophet is saying that no matter how dire our situation has become we must not lose sight of what it is that God, who makes and keeps promises, wants for us. The promise of place (a land flowing with milk and honey) has been replaced with the promise of peace (where wolves and lambs feed together). It is a new promise, a healing balm, the re-birth of hope.

Understanding scripture means recognizing that at different times the same dream finds different descriptions. The Garden of Eden; the Promised Land; the peaceable kingdom; the Kingdom of Heaven; the new Jerusalem; a new heaven and a new earth. All of these expressions arise at appointed times to comfort God's people and keep in front of them the life that God wants for them.

Ninth Stop – Micah 6:6-8

What is it the Lord requires of you: only to act justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

Keeping the Balance

Sometimes on a guided tour you just have to be satisfied with a representation. At a wine tasting I attended the ‘tour guide’ was leading us through ‘new world’ wines but had to choose one from each country to represent what one might expect from Argentinean whites, Chilean reds, and so forth. We could stop many places in the minor prophets, the collection of twelve books at the end of the Old Testament, and find wisdom and even some familiar expressions. But we will only make a brief stop in Micah and acknowledge the goodness that comes before and after.

This short passage offers a succinct example of the tension that always has, and always will, be characteristic of religious life, the tension between love of God and love of neighbour. When we stopped at the 10 commandments we observed that one way of examining them was to consider the first four as indicative of a love of God and the next six as indicative of the love of neighbour. We also are aware of the instruction of Jesus that loving God with all our heart, and mind, and body, and soul, is equal to loving our neighbour as our self. Here then is a prophet who *denounces* love of God at the expense of neighbour and *pronounces* an ethic of neighbourliness as righteousness.

Spirituality without the love of God is largely self-serving and unchallenging. While we are keen to speak of God in intimate terms and refer to Jesus in song as our friend, and however appropriate that may be, I am fond of the passage in Job where God has listened patiently to Job's soliloquy on his virtue (something the story does in fact acknowledge – Job is a good guy). In chapter 38 God asks "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" and "In all your life have you ever called up the dawn or assigned the morning its place?" God is God and as the first commandment reminds us, we worship God, not the other way around. Furthermore, we have experienced that there is merit in ritual and ceremony and the emptiness of our lives without such is demonstrated by the empty rituals that arise where none exist.

BUT (that's right, a big but!) the ritual and ceremony of religious life which meets our spiritual needs was never, never, ever never meant to replace the essence of righteousness which is embodied in our relationships with one another. Whether or not Micah intended, this will be a crucial dynamic in the ministry of Jesus to which we now direct our attention.

PART 2

Rest Stop – Toward the New Testament

Attendance at my church on Christmas Eve is four times greater than the Sunday before. The second highest attendance over the year, every year, is Easter. My guess is that this is a statistic that surprises no one. In the modern practise of Christianity the high points of the year are Christmas and Easter. That makes sense doesn't it? Don't they represent the beginning and the end of the old, old story? If church attendance is any indication these must be the two most important stories in the whole Bible, right?

Well, sort of. Later we will look at aspects of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that are fundamental to a Christian understanding of the Bible as a whole. But I am going to intentionally invite criticism and welcome debate by leaving the birth narratives of Jesus off this list.

A responsible tour guide entering the New Testament is going to once again begin with the obvious. There are four accounts of the life, death, and new life of Jesus in the Bible. We call them gospels and traditionally they have been named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This is the order we find them in the scriptures though most scholars would say that their order chronologically ought to be Mark, Luke, Matthew, John. The first three have numerous similarities and are often referred to as synoptic gospels from the Greek word for sharing a general view.

The fourth gospel, John, differs in content, order, and character but is nonetheless of equal value as a testament to the essential story of Christianity.

But here's the thing. The familiar story of Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem and finding no room in the inn is found only in Luke. The wonderfully evocative tale of a star shining in the east and three wise ones following it until they find the place where Jesus lay and presenting gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, that is only told in Matthew. In fact, Mark and John have no birth story whatsoever. This isn't biblical trivia. It is an indication that the early church didn't consider this story to be among the most important. However, all four gospels say that before Jesus begins his ministry, before calling disciples, before any parables or miracles, Jesus went to John in the Jordan River to be baptised. It is where the Jesus movement begins and where we will make our first New Testament stop.

Tenth Stop – Luke 3:7-22

During a general baptism of the people, when Jesus too had been baptised and was praying, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove, and there came a voice from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; in you I delight.’

Luke 3:21-22

A Voice in the Wilderness

John the Baptist is mentioned in all four gospels and his importance for understanding the mission and ministry of Jesus cannot be understated. He may have very well been a cousin of Jesus as in suggested in the birth story of Luke but there is no mistaking that he had a profound influence on Jesus. As John Dominic Crossan has commented, both men were first century Jewish apocalyptic prophets and though they had much in common, at some point they went their separate ways. But not before Jesus took seriously what John had to offer.

John the Baptist was Jewish. The baptism he offered was a Jewish ritual. The audience of his preaching was first century Judean Jews. And so was Jesus. We say this in order to be clear that even though the Christian church would adopt baptism as its primary rite of initiation, the baptism that John offered, and to which Jesus submitted himself, was a Jewish rite of repentance. In other words John was affording his own people an opportunity to return to their covenant relationship with God, to deepen their faith, and to live

fuller, richer, and more meaningful lives. This wasn't accomplished by more religiosity, by giving more, sacrificing more, worshipping more. It was much simpler and more obvious than that.

When people asked what this repentance means in practical terms, John told them to share their shirts and their food. When tax collectors asked the same questions they were told to exact no more than they were required. Soldiers inquiring were instructed to cease blackmail and bullying. It is not a stretch to suggest that for John a holier, deeper, more meaningful life could be reduced to being generous, honest, and peaceful. Like Micah he was *de-nouncing* a faith of ritual and piety and *pro-nouncing* a faith where loving neighbour was the spiritual equivalent of loving God. Jesus took notice and was baptised.

Going his Own Way

Every year in the church's celebration of Advent (and certainly while watching productions of Godspell), the message comes through that John was a messenger, literally a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. But it has always been troubling to me when John goes on to describe that the One he is waiting for will clear threshing floors and burn chaff on unquenchable fires. If he is talking about Jesus then we have to confront the reality that these descriptions don't come true in the gospel record. In his book God and Empire, John Dominic Crossan makes a case for understanding the difference between Jesus and John that reconciles this problem.

John's apocalyptic view was that God would intervene in history, bring it to a close, and end the tyranny of Rome. The Empire would thus be cleared from the proverbial threshing floor and God would see this done. Jesus, however, came to break away from John (who he nonetheless admired greatly) and saw that God's intervention in history would be achieved by love as opposed to violent overthrow. God was opening a new commonwealth that all could enter into, on earth as it was in heaven. His baptism by John was simultaneously an ending and a new beginning.

Eleventh Stop – Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was then led by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew 4:1

Scarcity and Clarity

The synoptic gospels agree that following his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days and nights. This sounds eerily familiar and so it should. We have heard the number 40 used to describe the length of time the rain fell in the story of Noah and as the number of years before Israel entered the Promised Land after leaving Egypt. And we have heard reference to the wilderness before as well. It was the place of Israel's wanderings and the home of that locust and honey eating baptiser. Surely this is no coincidence.

If there is a common theme in the story of the great flood in the time of Noah and the story of the exodus under the leadership of Moses, it might be cleansing. The Noah myth comes about because God is despairing over the nature of creation and wants to start again. The earth is literally washed clean and the creation is restored. In the exodus Israel is struggling with the transformation afforded them as they cease to be a slave people and are re-created as a free people. It sounds like a simple thing but it is not. Even following their departure from this place where God heard their cries, they occasionally petition Moses to turn around and take them back. The wilderness is a place of radical spiritual transformation for Israel. It

is not a place where water and food are absent but rather where the necessities of life are scarce yet available. The wilderness causes one to focus on what matters most and to grow in gratitude. The sand is an irritant that cleanses and polishes and yields a new creation as sure as an oyster yields a pearl.

One of the great mysteries of following Jesus is the complete lack of information about where he was and what he did as he grew into the 30 year old (or so) man to whom the gospels bear witness. Novelists and film-makers get free licence to imagine how these years may have been spent. We should probably not assume too much or too little. Jesus was certainly educated in his Jewish tradition. He knew and read and understood Jewish scriptures deeply and passionately. He may or may not have been a disciple of John but at the very least he admired and was influenced by him. Is it not possible that the temptation in the wilderness represents the moment of pivoting in which Jesus comes to understand his own path and mission? In the wilderness (whether 40 is a symbolic number or not) Jesus is cleansed and polished. He emerges with a keen sense of what being in a covenant relationship with God is all about, having resisted the temptation to only go part way, and now he has something to tell others. He begins to preach good news.

Twelfth Stop – Luke 4:14-19

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me; has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Luke 4:18-19

Failure to Recognize

People who have gone on guided tours of the Holy Land will routinely tell me how moving it is to see the places that they have read about in the Bible. A woman told me years after her visit to the Jordan that when she set foot in the water the tears flowed as easily as the river. Cynics are quick to point out that much of what is claimed on these tours cannot be proven historically or archeologically. Cynics miss the point. Being inspired is not a question of holding artefacts in your hand; it is the consequence of breathing the air and sensing the place. While there is good reason to question the historicity of places and events in the gospels, a safe assumption is that Jesus spent much of his formative years in Nazareth.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that after Jesus has had his own moment of conversion (baptism) and transformation (temptation) he is armed with the power of the Spirit and begins teaching. And he goes home.

We learn a lot about Jesus and those years the Bible doesn't talk about in this short passage. We learn that Nazareth was where he had been brought up. We learn that it was his routine to go to synagogue and thus that he was a practising Jew. We learn that he is literate and familiar with scripture for he is asked to read from the scroll of Isaiah. At that point no one knew that the sermon that would follow this reading would incite the congregation to rise up and run him out of town. But that's what it did.

A Recurring Theme

The passage Jesus read at Nazareth that day is found in Isaiah 61:1-2. It is part of a *pro-nouncement* about the peaceable kingdom but the audience of Jesus wasn't thinking about days of exile when they heard it. Perhaps they murmured amongst themselves as he read of the Spirit being upon him to bring good news to the poor, release for prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set the broken victims free. Who does this hometown boy think he is? How did he get so full of himself? Or more to the point, who is he to criticize us?

Is Jesus being critical of the synagogue at Nazareth, the place of his own religious nurture? In a manner, yes. But more than just Nazareth. Isaiah wasn't Nazareth's scripture it was a holy text for the Judaism of the day. When Jesus reads it aloud he is reminding the people of that which they had neglected, or at least conveniently forgotten. Namely, that loving God as one purports to do in worship is empty without love of neighbour. It was the reality that confronted Moses on Sinai. It's the relationship between the first four and the

last six commandments. It was the call of the prophets like Micah and the essence of John's understanding of repentance.

Compared to what is best remembered, Jesus at Nazareth may not appear to be among the most important stories in the Bible. But in as much as it sets the stage for what is to follow this story is crucial. Loving God and loving neighbour returns again and again and again.

Thirteenth Stop – Matthew 4:18-22

Jesus said to them, 'Come with me, and I will make you fishers of all.' At once they left their nets and followed him.

Matthew 4:19-20

Why Disciples?

Children in Sunday School are taught the names of the disciples even though they will never hear of Bartholomew again. Adults don't routinely question the numbering even though it is problematic. Obviously there are the two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, who are chosen first and more or less function as an inner circle. Just as obvious there were woman in the group of followers who would seem to warrant being included in the count. Twelve certainly echoes the twelve tribes of Israel who entered the Promised Land and that may be as meaningful as anything else about the disciples. But why even have them? They bicker and confuse and ultimately abandon. Why was inviting disciples (literally "learners") part of Jesus' plan at all?

There may have been practical reasons. Itinerant preachers need someone to help with the schedule and make arrangements and so forth. There may have been social reasons. Everyone knows that life on the road is much more palatable with companions to share the time. But likely the answer about the place of disciples has to do with the essence of the mission. Though it has been established that Jesus was literate he left nothing in his own writing.

The sharing of God's redeeming love with radical egalitarianism was something to be experienced as opposed to read or studied. The theological word for this is 'Incarnation' which means 'the word made flesh'. The mission of Jesus was to demonstrate love of God and love of neighbour in such a way that it brought about transformation in the lives of those who witnessed it and compelled them to do likewise. In other words, disciples become the church.

Who's Included?

There is speculation about the significance of the fishing brothers as the first disciples. Some have suggested that the Galilean fishermen were of a low social standing. They were poor and uneducated and, well, smelled like fish. Since this movement was going to direct attention on the poor and the outcast, the lame and the blind, the leper, demon possessed, and other so called sinners, then it made perfect sense for men of a low caste to be among the first invited to the party. If Jesus was a 'peasant revolutionary' then Peter and the others felt right at home.

I am more convinced by an alternative explanation first heard from Dr. PHEME PERKINS of Boston College. History and archaeology have shown that Rome was interested in the area around Galilee. The Decapolis or 'ten cities' were in various stage of construction or development. There was commerce and movement in the region in the first century. This would mean that not only would there be a ready market for fish but also that when not fishing the boats could be used for transporting people and goods across the lake for a fee. In other words, perhaps the fishermen were of the mercantile class.

This wouldn't change the fact that the attention of Jesus would be directed towards the poor and outcast, lame and leper, etc. But it does mean that attraction to this message cuts across social strata. Why not include fishing folk, especially as it demonstrates that they sacrificed to follow in a way that would not be necessary of peasants. Including prosperous fishermen in the circle says something about the diversity of the church that would rise after Jesus had gone.

These options need not be mutually exclusive. The disciples can be whatever we need them to be in order to feel welcome in the community of faith.

Fourteenth Stop – Matthew 5:1-12

When he saw the crowds he went up a mountain. There he sat down, and when his disciples had gathered round him he began to address them. And this is the teaching he gave...Blessed...

Matthew 5:1-2

An Agenda of Sorts

If too-much-of-a-good-thing exists then it might be in the teachings of Jesus. To choose just a few and offer them as representative is a guarantee to disappoint someone whose favourite is obvious but left out. But choices have to be made on a guided tour and so we will stop at a mere three lessons. They represent one example of teaching, one example of a miracle, and one example of a parable.

The passage we have come to know as the Beatitudes comes at the outset of a large teaching section in Matthew commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. In Mark and Luke these teachings are more interspersed with the activity of the ministry. In Matthew however, they are brought together in a discourse that lasts three chapters long! As such I tend to think of the Beatitudes of a table of contents or agenda if you will. They serve to announce what is to follow, both in the sermon itself but also in the activity described in the remainder of the gospel story. And it is not what one might expect.

Beatitude means blessing but what exactly does blessing mean? In our common use of the word we associate blessing with good fortune. One has been blessed with good health or with many grandchildren or with a tremendous recipe for turkey casserole. Really, we use the word blessing quite freely and without pausing to consider what using the word says about our understanding of God. In the most common use, the ‘bless you’ that follows a sneeze no longer means what it once indicated, namely that the sneeze had evicted an evil spirit by God’s benevolence. At the very least, blessing does seem to be associated with a state of grace, that something has come to us that is unearned or unwarranted, as if granted from above.

When Jesus uses blessing it is not whimsical and without thought. For Jesus, blessing was absolutely about God’s concern and intervention in the welfare of the human condition. When he says, “blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are the sorrowful...blessed are the gentle...” and so forth he is using the classic Jewish understanding of blessedness which is ‘favoured by God’. In other words, someone who is blessed is in possession of God’s companionship if not God’s undivided attention. We are thus assured that the poor in spirit, the sorrowful, the persecuted as mentioned in this passage are not abandoned by God.

This is a radical statement of God’s love because we all know from our personal experience that there is nothing about sorrow or persecution that feels like a blessing. Just the opposite. Jesus is announcing God’s favour in times of distress and pain, not as the cause but as the cure.

For the beatitudes go on to announce that the hurtful or difficult situation will be reversed. “They shall find consolation...they shall inherit they earth...they shall see God.” The second half of the couplets that are the blessings all indicate a reversal. Not only is God with us in our most challenging moments but God will stay with us until that challenge has come to completion. This is blessing indeed and the teaching here will be amply demonstrated in the ministry that is to follow.

Fifteenth Stop – John 6:1-13

Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to the people as they sat there. He did the same with the fish, and they had as much as they wanted.

John 6:11

A Miraculous Feeding

The Gospel of John is different. While the synoptic gospels say Jesus went to Jerusalem once, John says he visited three times. Matthew, Mark, and Luke say Jesus turned the tables in the temple near the end of the story but John says it happened at the beginning and mobilized opposition. John alone tells wonderful and intricate stories like the wedding at Cana, the healing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. John is different but there is a curious episode that is included in John in much the same fashion as it is found in the others, the feeding of 5000 with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

There was undoubtedly an event that is remembered as a miraculous feeding of a large number of people. It is found in all four gospels. In fact, Matthew and Mark tell of two occasions in which a multitude was fed by Jesus. The size of the crowd varies in the different versions but the actual number is irrelevant. The common theme is of a day in which a large number of people were in the company of Jesus and the disciples and while it appeared that there was but scant supplies to meet their needs, in the end all were filled abundantly.

Preachers and scholars can go round and round on what this meant. Perhaps there were five loaves and two fish and by the power and authority of Jesus enough was made for all. That is one understanding and the faithful have little problem with it. Sometimes a miracle is a miracle after all. But it can also be speculated that it was a miraculous demonstration of common sharing. Maybe the disciples had only a little food and presumed that no one else had brought enough for a meal. However, when the followers of Jesus shared what little they had, and others saw their generosity, everyone began to pull out what they were carrying and in the end there was enough for all. Another possibility is that it was more of a symbolic meal, not unlike communion. The story shows Jesus in a priestly role, taking the bread, giving thanks, and distributing it for all to sample. This interpretation, not to mention the inclusion of the story in John, might say something about the centrality of table fellowship in the life of the early church.

Does it matter? Must we take a position on whether this was truly a miracle, a demonstration of common sharing, or a liturgical and symbolic offering? Not in the least. One of the great gifts of the gospel in story form is that we are free to interpret it in the manner we need to at a given time. As long as the love of God and the love of neighbour shine through. All three interpretations above pass the test. If the hungry need to believe that God provides in a time of want then that is exactly what they may pray for. If a community is seeking to empower itself to reach out and share their resources then here they can find their inspiration.

If a congregation can hear this story as they worship and approach the table, and if this ritual connects spiritual hunger with the hunger of the world, then a miracle is achieved.

We stopped here on this tour because the story of the miraculous feeding reminds us that the answer to the questions of faith we have is often all of the above.

Sixteenth Stop – Luke 10:25-37

‘Which of these three do you think was neighbour to the one who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He answered, ‘The one who showed kindness.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Luke 10:36-37

A Story for the Ages

Ask anyone what a “Good Samaritan” is and likely you will get the essence of this most beloved parable. It is a phrase which has entered into common English parlance and is used even by those who may not know where it comes from or where it can be found. That is, in and of itself, quite a remarkable feat for a tale two thousand years old and it is testimony to the power of parable as an instrument for teaching.

Jesus spoke in parables. Not exclusively, mind you, but often. And while a parable is first thought of as a well structured story it may a number of different things such as an extended metaphor, an aphorism, or a simile. However, the one thing a parable will always attempt to do is offer a glimpse into that other reality to which God is leading us that Jesus often referred to as the *kingdom of God* or the *kingdom of heaven*. (Other phrases are used to describe this new reality that don’t rely on the inherent masculine authority of *kingdom* such as the kin-dom, reign, or commonwealth. It is worthwhile to be open to a variety of expressions when dealing with something that is ultimately mystery however I don’t believe that kingdom should

never be used. It offers a sense of the authority and person of Jesus that is missing in alternatives) Parables show the faithful what it is we should aspire for as we seek to be faithful followers.

The “Good Samaritan” is told as the answer to the question that a lawyer puts to Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ The parable shows what neighbourliness looks like rather than trying to describe it academically. And does it ever show a lot.

Love of God, Love of Neighbour

A man is travelling down from Jericho when he is set upon by thieves who beat him, rob him, and leave him for dead. There is no mistaking the first two travellers who pass by and have opportunity to help are people who love God. The priest and the Levite were representative of the religious authorities of the day, people who were deeply concerned about the spiritual well being of the people. And yet they had not the wisdom (or courage? or faith? or conviction?) to stop and help a person in obvious need. The paradox of loving God but not caring for neighbour would have been abundantly clear for those listening to the parable in Jesus’ day. One can surmise from the gospels that little enraged Jesus more than the belief that loving God and loving neighbour can be separated. Yet it was the dominant attitude of religious authorities in 1st century Judea. In every possible way, and at every moment, Jesus rejects the notion of clean and unclean, saved and unsaved, righteous and unrighteous, worthy and unworthy. His association with the sinners and tax collectors and demon possessed and anyone else alienated

from full participation in the community was a repudiation of current religious practise.

How can a Samaritan, an outsider and one looked down upon, recognize and respond to the needs of a neighbour when a priest and Levite were unable to? But that's how it will be when the promises of God are fulfilled. All that will matter is the truth the lawyer spoke without realizing when Jesus posed a question to him. "Love God with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your body, and all your soul. And this is equal to it. Love your neighbour as yourself."

Seventeenth Stop – Luke 22:7-20

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this cup and share it among yourselves; for I tell you, from this moment I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the time when the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it, and gave it to them with the words: 'This is my body.'

Luke 22:17-20

Quick trivia question – what was the main course at the last supper? The Bible doesn't say precisely but there is an answer. It is lamb. No less than five times in Luke's account of the last supper does the text mention that they were preparing for the Passover. And if they were at a Passover meal then the only answer to our question is lamb. It wasn't a special occasion dish like turkey on Christmas and it's not because it was their favourite or the only thing available. When the Passover was celebrated lamb was the main course because in an earlier day, lamb was the difference between life and death.

Important Meals

Our tour didn't stop at the institution of the Passover but it is fair to recall it here. When Moses was confronting Pharaoh for the freedom of Israel there came upon Egypt ten plagues. The last one was the most severe and it was that whatever Egypt brought upon Israel would be brought back upon Egypt.

Pharaoh ordered the death of every first born son of Israel and so brought a wretched judgement on his own land. And because God keeps God's word, so too that judgement would be rendered on all who lived in the land including the Israelites. But God gave a word that if the slaves were to prepare a meal as they were instructed, and would take blood from the lamb and paint it on the lintel of their doors then the plague would pass-over those homes and the first born would be spared. Keeping the Passover was nothing less than remembering a moment in Israel's history when life had won a victory over death.

Aware of the connection, the early church found echoes of the Passover in the night of Jesus' arrest. I have a colleague who was fond of saying that the Lord's Supper (communion) is not the Last Supper. By that he meant that when the church gathers around the Eucharistic table it is not merely re-enacting the Passover Jesus shared with his disciples but is remembering another time when life had won a victory over death.

Worship in the early church consisted mainly of telling the story and sharing a meal. The story of God's redeeming love made manifest in the life, death, and new life of Jesus was told and then the community would share the elements that had been filled with meaning at the last supper. Bread was taken and broken and shared in memory of his body. Wine was taken and poured and drank in memory of his blood. In the communion of neighbours the presence of Christ was thus experienced. The testimony of the early church to this is evidenced in the story on the Emmaus road in Luke, "was he not known to us in the breaking of the bread?"

The Lord's Supper is not the Last Supper but were it not for this Passover ritual the course of the church's life for 2000 years would have been severely altered.

Eighteenth Stop – Mark 15:20-39

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and died; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two from the top to bottom. When the centurion who was standing opposite him saw how he died, he said, "This man must have been a son of God."

Mark 15:37-39

No matter how many stops are on any guided tour they are inevitably marketed by the one or two signature attractions which draw the interest of tourists. Debate what you will about the most important stories of the Bible but no tour would be complete without pausing to observe the story that is central to an understanding of the Bible as the scriptures of Christian faith. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The Heart of the Gospel

I am treating crucifixion and resurrection as two stops on this tour for the purposes of reflection but it is fair to think of them as one essential story. Despite all the differences that exist within and among the four gospels they all agree that this was the way Jesus died and that on the third day following he was experienced by some as newly alive. You might expect that this should be the longest entry in this journal out of deference to the importance of the story. I wonder if it shouldn't be the shortest since the heart of the story is mystery and no amount of commentary can make it any less so.

The crucifixion of Jesus is a haunting image. Here was one whose sole message was of God and the divine love for humanity; one who routinely called the suffering to his side, who exhibited an unqualified acceptance of all he encountered, who healed and taught and asked for little in return. And yet the consequence of his efforts is ultimately to be abandoned, betrayed, humiliated, tortured, and killed.

Too often the suffering of Jesus is depicted as if to suggest that he suffered more than anyone ever has before or since. When we watch the interpretation of this event in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* we are meant to believe that this death was far worse than any other death. It goes along with the idea that Jesus died so we wouldn't have to. But the more I reflect on the death of Jesus the more I become convinced that the story unfolds not to demonstrate that Jesus suffered *more* than anyone else, but rather that he suffered *exactly like* so many others throughout the centuries since. There is a diabolical spirit that attempts to compare suffering and catalogue it for the sake of qualifying who has had it worse than someone else. The truth is that Jesus suffered as so many others have, be it in nuclear explosions or in concentration camps, in sudden acts of terror or at the end of debilitating disease, as a consequence of famine or unforeseen accident. Jesus suffers because he shares the human condition in which any and all ultimately perish.

Nineteenth Stop – John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week...

John 20:1

A New Day

If Jesus was executed on a Friday and we remember that the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on the evening before the seventh day then something important becomes obvious. Early on the first day of the week was the first time since his death that anyone could possibly have gone to find the body of Jesus. It was the very first moment that it would have been possible, the first moment that it would have been permissible, the first moment that it would have been safe. And so it is that early on the first day of the week Mary of Magdala did what she likely had been waiting to do since Friday afternoon, she went to the tomb where Jesus lay. Even though the names of the attending women vary from one gospel to another, there is perfect consistency in the expectation of women at the grave. They expected that Jesus was dead. Mary does not come to see for herself if Jesus was alive. She comes to mourn. This is evident when she first tells two disciples that they (not sure ‘they’ is) have taken the body and she does not know where they have laid him. Shortly, after she confronts two angels and responds in a similar fashion, “They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Then again, when meeting Jesus himself she does not recognize him but presumes him to be a gardener and asks if he know where Jesus has been laid.

The resurrection is, at its heart, a mystery. None of the gospel writers attempt to describe just how it is that Jesus came to be alive. The resurrection is also meant to be understood as God's work. God alone wins a victory over death. The testimony of the gospels is that the followers of Jesus, for all they had seen and learned while following him, expected that on the third day after his death he was still dead. They had no expectation of resuscitation, or of reincarnation for that matter. And yet...

It is the most important story of the Bible but not simply because it is the most miraculous moment in the life of the Bible's central character (though it is that too). It is the story that requires the most of the reader. What is it that we see when we gaze upon this story? And are we prepared to bear witness to what we find? The tour guide can tell us where the painting comes from and who painted it and what to look for but in the end it is art when we discover the beauty of it for ourselves.

My own testimony is that discovering the beauty of this story is never apparent all at once nor is it an all or nothing subject but rather that it is a masterpiece that one appreciates more and more as deeper and deeper the wonder and mystery of it sinks in.

Twentieth Stop – Acts 1:6-11

*Men of Galilee, why stand there looking up into the sky?
This Jesus who has been taken from you up to heaven will
come in the same way as you have seen him go.*

Acts 1:11

Have a quick look at Luke 1:1 and Acts 1:1 and you will find evidence that Luke and Acts are two volumes of a single work. Not only are they addressed to the same person, an otherwise unknown figure called Theophilus, but the second book references the first. This isn't simply trivia but an important consideration when including an account of the ascension for inclusion in this tour. The ascension of Jesus is once again a mysterious story and one wonders what inspiration or knowledge can be gained from something so unknowable. But I have included it because sometimes the most important stops on a tour are by nature transitional. The story of the ascension serves the critical transition of moving the Bible from the story of Jesus to the story of the church.

Present and Absent

I find the understanding of Luke Timothy Johnson in his book [The Real Jesus](#) most intriguing and helpful. Johnson says to take a look at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts together. The episodes found there say something about the understanding of the early church concerning how God brought about the transition from Jesus to the church.

Think of these stories as a sequence or progression that Johnson memorably calls Present – Absent – Present – Absent – Present. That is to say that the two volume Luke-Acts says Jesus was first present to his followers in his human life, then absent by crucifixion, present again in a new resurrected form, next absent again through ascension, and finally present at Pentecost by the Holy Spirit to all humankind until the end of time. The stories work together to testify that the God who came to the disciples and followers of Jesus is the same God who is present in creation this very day.

But more than only being a transit stop the story of the ascension also has something to say about the mindset of the disciples as they witnessed Jesus in his resurrected life. It is the disciples to come to Jesus in Acts 1:6 and ask if this is the time that he will restore sovereignty to Israel. It is an audacious question. It shows that even though they have seen Jesus return to them from the dead they still hold an understanding of messiahship that they always held, namely that Jesus would be the one to return Israel to its former glory and rule as a king like David. The question implies that Jesus in his resurrected life would rule an earthly kingdom. We can have sympathy for this understanding. Surely Jesus had demonstrated a previously unimagined power and the truth was that the tyrannical Roman Empire still occupied Judea. But for love to be the true source of power in the church's mission something more than a revolution had to take place. And that new day was about to dawn.

Twenty-first Stop – Acts 2:1-13

The day of Pentecost had come, and they were all together in one place. Suddenly there came from the sky what sounded like a strong, driving wind, a noise which filled the whole house where they were sitting...They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance.

Acts 2:1-4

Tongues of Fire

Pentecost is the Greek name for a Jewish festival also known as the Feast of Weeks. It occurred on the fiftieth day after Passover (pente = five) and began as a celebration for the corn harvest. As with other feast days in ancient Judaism celebrants would gather in Jerusalem. Acts 2 describes the presence of devout Jews *drawn from every nation under heaven* but we should rightly understand this as a pilgrimage taken by those able to travel to the Holy City, a strong representation of the Diaspora.

Speaking in tongues is sometime referred to as glossolalia, the uttering of apparently meaningless sounds in a fashion beyond the speakers conscious intentions. It is a phenomenon that can be explained in medical, psychological, cultural, and religious terms because it can arise in a variety of contexts. I liken it to similar ecstatic experiences such as uncontrollable laughter or cathartic weeping. The person is aware of what is happening but at a loss to direct or control it. But whatever the trigger was on the day of

Pentecost, the followers of Jesus took it only to mean one thing, the bestowing of the Holy Spirit on those waited for the return of Jesus.

Arise the Church

There is no doubt that in Christian practise Pentecost has taken a back seat to the festivals of Christmas and Easter but it is no less significant. Indeed, one could argue that a third high holy day would be an appropriate addition to a tradition for whom the trinity is a central doctrine. But falling close to Easter and in late spring or early summer it is hardly surprising that Pentecost has been de-emphasized of sorts. This is further complicated by the fact that Pentecostal Christians have so fully embraced speaking in tongues as a essential element of Christian life. For those of us to whom the dawning of the spirit remains an elusive mystery, we know not how to celebrate it. How do we find meaning when we don't share the popular understanding?

Sunday School curricula have tried to encourage treating Pentecost as the birthday of the church and while this is a fair interpretation it is insufficient. Reading the story in scripture one gets a sense of the divine mystery and wonder of this moment. Blowing out candles on a cake just doesn't cut it. But Pentecost needs to be re-claimed in all Christian traditions. It is nothing less then the Bible's narrative explanation of why the ministry of Jesus did not end with his death or even his re-appearance. Here is where we are confronted with the testimony that Jesus was not simply a great teacher, or is alive in the memories of disciples. Here we find the promise that he is alive in ways he was not before.

That the story is set during the Jewish festival of Pentecost is not coincidence. It sets the stage where there are present those who speak a multitude of languages and each heard in their own native tongue. More than that, the list includes languages, such as Median, that were extinct in the first century. In other words, the story bears witness that God's presence once known to a few people in a single language at a certain time was now accessible to all human kind and will be for all human history.

In verse 12 we read that those standing nearby were both amazed and perplexed and wondered aloud, "What can this mean?" Christians with even a modicum of wisdom ask this question still.

Twenty-second Stop – Galatians 3:26-28

There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

Consider Paul

The problem with a guided tour is that every once in awhile you come across something that is not well served by a quick glance. Something important that requires a little more explanation than bullet points in a brochure can provide. So it is with visiting Paul in a tour of the Bible. We will be well served to pause for a moment and look at aspects of his life and ministry that are not clearly evident in reading his letters.

Paul is the author of the greatest volume of material in the New Testament. But even this obvious statement hides some of the complexities of this important figure in the spread of Christianity. For example, not all of his letters are his. It is highly likely that some attributed to him were written in honour of him or by one of his followers in tribute. That was a common and acceptable practise in the Mediterranean world of the first century and not some ancient form of plagiarism. Even more confusing is the time line of his writings. Paul's letters are the earliest written material in the New Testament. They were written before the Gospels and Acts were written even though these books tell of events that pre-date the ministry of Paul. The life and death of Jesus was in the 30's CE, the letters of Paul were written in the 50's and early 60's, while Mark,

the earliest Gospel was written close to the year 70. (Luke, Matthew, and John follow in that order between 80 and 120 CE). Furthermore, the letters of Paul are not found in the Bible in the order in which they are presumed to be written.

Does all of this matter? A little. Paul did not write narratives like the Gospel writers nor did he have the benefit of the Gospels for his work. His letters therefore are highly contextual. They address very specific issues in very specific places and weren't intended for the broad audience they came to reach. And they were part of a remarkably ambitious mission. Paul took it upon himself, as one who did not know the historical Jesus, to convince Greco-Roman communities, that the religion of the Jewish people of a covenant relationship with one God was now opened to all humanity through the life, death, and new life of a peasant carpenter killed by the Roman authorities. It is almost impossible to conceive how difficult this task would have been.

Galatia, like so many other places, wrestled with what all this means. Their new found faith was Jewish in origin but not Jewish in key practices. Their scriptures were the Jewish scriptures (what we call Old Testament) but there were other unwritten stories just as important to the early church. They could remain Greek and/or Roman but must reject much of their spiritual understanding especially the idea of many gods. The Sabbath of the original religion was Saturday but the Sabbath of the new way was Sunday. It was all very perplexing.

Paul does well to patiently share that which he understands to be true. But it is fair to say that reading Paul is usually challenging, often difficult, and occasionally aggravating. Yet sometimes he writes with such eloquence and poetic phrasing that a few words say it all. *No Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.* A new order in an ancient world that we are still trying to bring into fulfillment.

Twenty-third Stop – Ephesians 4:1-6

Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives. There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope held out in God's call to you; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Maker of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:3-6

Paul was not a disciple of Jesus. He never met Jesus the way Peter and the others knew him so intimately. Neither was Paul present on the day of Pentecost to experience the birthing of the Holy Spirit which gave power and expression to the early church. Indeed, we meet Paul (named Saul before his conversion) as a zealous Pharisee who by his own admission sought to persecute the followers of Jesus. According to Acts 9 Saul was authorized to arrest Christians in the city of Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. As he was travelling to Damascus for this purpose he underwent a mystical experience in which he was struck blind and 'meets' Jesus. When he ultimately regains his sight through the intervention of an elder named Ananias he sees everything in a new way.

People sometimes speak of the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith'. It is a way of describing how it is that an authentic faith could exist in one who didn't know Jesus personally. In other words, the way Paul came to know Jesus is just as genuine as the way Peter came to know Jesus. This was an absolutely critical element in the growth of the early church.

Just as Pentecost represents a new understanding that a covenant relationship with the God of Israel is open and available to all people for all time, Paul's letters demonstrate the promise and challenge of bringing this reality to light. So it is not surprising that unity is a common theme in Paul.

Unity? Really?!?

Christian unity may sound like an oxymoron. There are catholic churches and there are protestant churches. There are Roman churches and there are Orthodox churches. There are evangelical churches and sacramental churches. There are churches in the Anabaptist tradition and churches in the Pentecostal tradition. There are conservative churches and there are liberal churches. And so it goes. There is too much truth in an old joke about a man found on a desert island after many years alone. He had constructed buildings for himself and his rescuers asked about the two on opposite ends of the island that looked very similar. The man explained, "That's the church I go to and over there is the church I left."

It is true that there are too many branches on the Christian family tree but a peculiar unity has, and must, lie at its roots. In its infancy the defining characteristic of Christianity after belief in the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ was that this way was open for anyone to enter in. Remember the things that matter most. For all our differences in language, culture, race, class, theology, worship practise, history, age, tradition, and experience we are who we are because of One God who has no favourites.

Twenty-fourth Stop – 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

There are three things that last forever; faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of the three is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

Does This Sound Familiar?

Our tour is drawing to a close and as it does so we come across one of the most familiar passages in all of scripture, surely worthy of a brief pause. We all know the routine. The bride is resplendent and her father has taken his place in the first pew. The groom is anxious but all in all holding up. The ring bearer is fidgety but what else would one expect of a tuxedo-laden four year old. The maid of honour's cousin's husband, or something, strides to the lectern and opens the very large book from which he seldom reads. And we hear the words, *I may speak in the tongues of men or women or angels...*

We have heard Paul's renowned discourse on love so often at wedding ceremonies that one could be forgiven for thinking that Paul must have written it for just such an occasion. Nothing could be further from the truth which is not to say that it doesn't make an excellent text for a wedding. But a modern liturgical event cast a new light on popular interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13 and expanded, without limiting, its appeal. At the 1997 funeral of Princess Diana in Westminster Abbey, then British Prime Minister Tony Blair rose to the rostrum and began to read (beautifully I might add) from the King James Version of the Bible.

His text was 1 Corinthians 13 and in an instant the world heard another perfectly appropriate setting for a passage that had been previously reserved for matrimony.

A Word Beyond Compare

Wedding, funeral, Sunday morning at the local church, anywhere is a fitting place to hear Paul's succinct and uncompromising words. For all the language we may bring to Christian faith the one word that cannot be left out is love. Paul finds his own way to re-iterate the teaching of Jesus about love of God and love of neighbour going hand in hand. One can be eloquent and effusive but without love it is nothing. One can be wise and pious beyond measure but without love it is nothing. One can be courageous, generous, even martyred but what does it mean without love? Nothing.

To be sure, Paul describes a love that no one can hope to fully embody but do we not need to be reminded of that to which we aspire? And has there not been One whose love was patient and kind, not envious, not boastful, bore all things, hoped all things, endured all things? Augustine made popular the acute doctrinal statement *God is love*. Re-read 1 Corinthians 13 substituting the word God every place you find the word love and you will see what Paul had in mind.

Twenty-fifth stop - Revelation 21:1-4

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had vanished...God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain, for the old order has passed away.

Revelation 21:1, 4

Hidden Language

If Genesis attempts to describe how it was at the dawn of time then Revelation attempts to say something about how it will be at the end of time. This is appropriate if we understand the Bible as the history of salvation, a record of God's redeeming activity from the beginning to the end. However, if that leads to the conclusion that Revelation is an accurate forecast of future events rather than a theological statement then we need to stop and re-imagine this most beguiling of all the Bible's books.

Revelation is not fantasy but it is apocalyptic. That is to say that it is an old and wondrous type of literature. It is the only book of the Bible written during the time of Roman persecution of the church. As such it was a dangerous thing to be carrying anything that identified someone as a Christian. The solution was to write in a form that had meaning for the Christian church but would not be recognizable by any agent of Rome who intercepted it. This solution was the hidden language of Revelation. Apocalyptic literature speaks of end times and draws on images, style, and metaphors from an earlier era to address concerns of the present moment. In the case of

Revelation (attributed to an author called John of Patmos) the visions and text draws heavily on exilic material found in the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel even while introducing new concealed meaning. For example, Rome was well known as the city of seven hills and the repetitive use of seven in Revelation is used to convey to the reader the need to remain faithful and trust God during this era of Roman persecution.

When All is Said and Done

But ultimately Revelation is not a puzzle at the end of the book to be solved either historically or futuristically. It is yet another testimony of the experience of people of faith concerning God's goodness in the midst of their everyday life. Remarkably, the author and audience of Revelation demonstrate the Christian faith is something worth holding fast to even in the face of persecution and death. They bear witness to *a new heaven and a new earth*, a time when God is fully present, a time when there will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more tears, no more mourning or crying or pain. Revelation testifies to life and its inexorable triumph. As has Genesis' *Garden of Eden*, Exodus' *Promised Land*, Isaiah's *peaceable kingdom*, and Jesus' *reign of God*, Revelation adds a vision of the future to which God is leading creation. We are reminded of the hope which pervades the Bible. It is a good place to end.

EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP

Guided tours invariably lead you to the gift shop so that you can grab hold of a keepsake or memento that will stir memories of what you have seen. One of the beautiful things about wandering through the Bible is that there is nothing to prevent us from turning the book over and wondering through yet again. Each time we return to scripture there is something new to discover, something previously unseen and waiting to be treasured. I have endeavoured to choose twenty-five so-called most important keeping in mind the wisdom of 1 Timothy that all scripture has it use.

I realize that I have swiftly, and without second thought, set aside stories that I love and would be on my list of favourites even if not among the most important. That list would include Naboth's vineyard, the call of Samuel, episodes of David, numerous psalms, Jonah, the Nativity, the prodigal son, and the parable of the workers among many others. But that is for another day. This tour is over. Thank you for sharing it with me.