Sunday, September 15, 1985
THE BATTLE OF THE BIBLE
Hebrews 1:1-4; Matthew 16:13-23

There is a lot of debate about the Bible these days! Not only is there debate, but the Bible is both used and misused in a variety of ways. Several weeks ago, The Wall Street Journal carried a front-page story with the headline—"Biblical Petroleum." The story was about a group of people from America's Bible Belt who are investing millions of dollars in Israel with the hope of finding the world's largest deposit of oil. Instead of seismographic studies, these people rely on old maps of ancient tribal lands and on readings of the Scriptures.

They have taken chapter 33 of the Book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament where Moses gave his final blessing to the 12 tribes of Israel, which are named after the 12 sons of Jacob, and in their reading of that chapter, claim that it speaks of rich petroleum deposits to be found in those ancient tribal lands. As Moses blessed the tribes of Zebulun and Issachar, he said, "They shall call people to their mountain; there they offer right sacrifices; for they suck the affluence of the seas and the hidden treasures of the sand." (Deuteronomy 33:19).

The Bible believers who are drilling for oil claim that these verses are actually talking about oil. "They suck the affluence of the seas and the hidden treasures of the sand."

There's one more verse in Deuteronomy 33 (verse 24) where the text reads: "Blessed above sons be Asher; let him be the favorite of his brothers, and let him dip his foot in oil." Thus say the oil drillers, oil is mentioned, so there must be oil in the ancient tribal land of Asher.

But, to date, no oil has been found. "I just thank the Lord and pray for this project because it could revolutionize the fulfillment of Bible prophecy," Pat Robertson, the host of Christian Broadcasting Network's '700 Club,' told his television audience after being advised by one Bible oil driller that "within days his drillers would tap into the largest oil field ever discovered."

But instead of discovering oil, the drillers got hopelessly stuck 21,428 feet below the Holy Land and abandoned their well two years ago. Today, despite all the prayers of the investors, this 13-million-dollar hole appears to be just another of the many dry holes drilled by these people in Israel.

Some others of these "Bible oil drillers" claim that the holes have been put in the wrong places. One of them is certain that the oil doesn't lie in the land of Asher at all, but in the lands of Zebulun and Issachar. Moses, after all, said that these sons would "suck the affluence of the seas," and there's a big difference between just dipping your foot in oil and sucking an abundance of it out of the sea.

Here's an example of a complete misuse and misunderstanding of the Bible. It's a perversion of the Holy Scriptures into some kind of treasure hunt. People can interpret the Bible any way they want, but it becomes abusive when it leads people to declare war, to throw away their life savings, and to drill oil wells in Israel. All too often, these prophetic projects become get-rich-quick schemes for their promoters.

Incidentally, most respected biblical scholars say that this passage from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 33, where Moses gives his blessing, is an ancient poem of unknown authorship, and how the poem came to be placed here is unknown. It is entirely unrelated to

the narrative context either before or after in the Bible. The problem is taking the metaphors of poetry and not seeing them as poetic metaphors.

This example points up one of the major issues in the “battle of the Bible.” On the one side is the notion of what the biblical fundamentalists call “inerrancy,” the belief that in its original manuscripts, the Bible cannot include errors even in matters of geography, nature, and history. This point of view implies that in the Bible, God dictated something absolutely perfect, dropped like a rock into the world, and we’re not even sure that we have any of the original manuscripts. Biblical fundamentalists are said to be taking the Bible literally, although I think this is a mistaken use of the word “literally.” More about that in a moment.

Thus, the biblical fundamentalists are those who usually favor teaching the creation stories in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, as being scientifically true. They even now call it “scientific creationism.” Actually, it should be correctly called “religious creationism,” for the Bible never intended to be a book of science, nature, or geography. It does contain some history.

At any rate, scientific creationism maintains the Earth was created in six 24-hour days, that Adam and Eve were the first two human beings, and that the Earth is a mere 10,000 to 20,000 years old. (Today most scientists estimate that the Earth came into being four and a half billion years ago.)

Incidentally, the idea that the Bible is free from error and is to be taken word for word as if dictated by God is a rather recent one. The early Church never understood the Bible that way. Furthermore, it doesn’t solve any problems. Biblical fundamentalists among themselves sharply disagree on what a particular passage from the Bible is saying, which means it is impossible to read the Bible without interpreting it in some way.

It was only after the 16th and 17th centuries following the Protestant Reformation that the Bible began to be considered by some Christians as being free from all error and as a complete answer book to all questions, including scientific ones.

In fact, what we commonly call “fundamentalism” in this country is a modern and largely American phenomenon in Christianity, growing out of the anti-modernist movements of the late 19th and 20th centuries. The name itself comes from twelve booklets called “The Fundamentals,” published in 1909, which attempted to define the fundamental elements of the Christian faith which they maintained one must believe. Although “fundamentalism” began as an anti-cultural movement, conservative religion has changed itself more than it has changed the world. Martin Marty, America’s foremost church historian, recently wrote: “If I want images of total sellout to militancy, the religion of success, the norms of ‘work-righteousness,’ the attention to the externals of life, the devotion to sports and beauty-queening, the fascination with one’s own spiritual existence at the expense of others, I turn on Christian television or scan the book lists of many, many conservative publishers.”

Now our purpose this morning in this sermon is not to put down the biblical fundamentalists, but rather to show that there is another way of understanding and using the Bible, a way which we believe makes more sense and is more in keeping with the message and revelation of Jesus Christ, and more in keeping with the spirit of the Bible as well.

How then do Christians, in our tradition, understand the Bible, its authority, and its use?

First of all, we try to put Jesus Christ, his birth, death, and resurrection at the center of our faith. We worship Jesus Christ as the Savior, not the Bible. As the Book of Hebrews in the Bible puts it: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers and mothers by the prophets; but in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son.” The Gospel of John says the same thing in another way: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”
Jesus Christ is the most complete revealing of God there is. For several hundred years, the Church did not even have the New Testament of the Bible. When the New Testament speaks of the Scriptures, it is always referring to the Old Testament. Later, the Church produced the New Testament. Stories that had been remembered, the teachings of Jesus, the parables, the healings that Jesus performed — all these incidents were gradually written down as remembered. As time passed, 27 different writings came to be accepted as the New Testament. They are a selection out of a larger body of writing, some of which have come down to us while others were lost.

The impulse to accept this collection of writings by the early Church came about because after several hundred years, the continuity of the Church was threatened by extravagances and eccentricities of belief and practice within, as well as by persecution from without. In response to these dangers, the Church set out to consolidate its own life and beliefs. These 27 writings had gradually, through usage and tradition, become the norm or standard of Christian faith and life, so it was natural they came to be considered as the New Testament.

Secondly, in our tradition we believe that the Word of God, in addition to coming to us most completely in Jesus Christ, also comes to us through the Bible. In the Bible, we have a written record of God’s revelation in history. In the Old Testament, we see God working through the Hebrews, and in the New Testament, it is continued through the Christian community. The Bible is therefore authoritative as the record of the saving events by which the Christian faith was brought into being. And it is also the record of how the Christian faith has its beginnings in the life and faith of Israel.

Thirdly, in our tradition, we believe that the Bible exists primarily to tell us about God, about God’s salvation and love, and about the interrelations between God and us. It is a religious book, as I said earlier, not a book about how to find oil wells, or about astronomy, or about any kind of science as we define science today.

Yet how often the Bible is misused for other purposes. I read about a man who said that the dimensions of Noah’s Ark are the perfect dimensions for all boat building, implying that the art of boat building was a matter of divine revelation. I know nothing about the proper dimensions of boats, but if this man’s judgment is true, I should attribute it to the fact that either Noah, or whoever wrote down the story, was a skilled builder of boats.

Or think of what a needless struggle was set up in the days of Galileo by turning the Bible into a book of astronomy. People claimed that the Bible said that the Earth was the center of the universe, not the sun. And even more ridiculous, a century ago, John Hampden was defending “the clear and unmistakable flat-earth teaching of the Bible,” and insisting that “no one can believe a single doctrine or dogma of modern astronomy and accept scripture as divine revelation.”

Note the very similar words of creationist Henry Morris in defending six literal and recent days of creation: “The creation account is clear, definite, sequential, and matter-of-fact, giving every appearance of straightforward historical narrative.”

The point such notions miss is that the creation stories in Genesis (and there are two, not one, and they differ one from the other) contain a religious message and a very important one — not a scientific message.

And here's where I believe that we take the Bible more literally than do the biblical fundamentalists — we try to discover the original meaning of words and stories. The Bible is both language and literature. As language, it must be read in the light of what its original words meant, not what we think they meant, or what we would like to have them mean. And as literature, it must be interpreted at each particular place in accord with the type of literature with which we are dealing. We cannot interpret poetry as prose, drama as history, parable as detailed theological writing, or story as history, nor can we interpret the Bible allegorically unless we are dealing with allegory.

To study the Scriptures is not to be afraid of hard questions, to bring the best critical and historical scholarship and discipline, to try to separate the various kinds of writing.

Again, take as an example the creation stories in the Book of Genesis. The writers use the cosmology of that time. People observed the sunrise and the sunset — although today we still use the terms, we know about the Earth's rotation. We still speak of sending a rocket upward into space or refer to the Australians as living "down under."

The ancients imaged the universe in terms of four directions or quarters horizontally, laid out relative to the society doing the mapping, with the center of the world located in the holy city and/or capital of each nation in turn. There were also three major zones vertically, with their subdivisions. These representations of the cosmos were not being questioned in the Bible or even discussed. The Bible simply uses the same general cosmological patterns familiar to all in the world at that time.

So in the creation stories, the concern was to make the point that one — God was, and is, the creator over all. All the surrounding cosmologies identified the major regions of the cosmos with their various gods and goddesses. The creation stories in Genesis, over against this viewpoint, affirm (1) that there is only one God; (2) that this God is not identified with or contained by any region of nature; (3) that the pagan gods and goddesses are not divinities at all, but creatures, creations of the one true God; and (4) that the worship of any of these false divinities is idolatry. This is what is being taught and celebrated by the creation stories — it is a strong religious message, not a scientific one. It's a message for today as well as then!

The important thing to remember is that the basis of our faith is not the fact that the Bible contains no discrepancies, or errors in geography, or astronomy, or certain other facts. Our faith is based on the saving act of God in Jesus Christ and the inward testimony of God's Spirit. The historical events of the Bible, which are accessible to sense perception, are the occasion, but not the foundation of faith. Amen.