

**Thursday, September 15 and Sunday, September 18**  
*God Loves Us, We Believe That, and We Want to Show It*  
**The Book of Leviticus 19: 23 – 28 and The Second Letter to Timothy 3: 14 - 17**  
The Rev. Dr. Annika Lister Stroope

***The Book of Leviticus 19: 23 - 28***

*<sup>23</sup>When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall regard their fruit as forbidden; three years it shall be forbidden to you, it must not be eaten. <sup>24</sup>In the fourth year all their fruit shall be set apart for rejoicing in the LORD. <sup>25</sup>But in the fifth year you may eat of their fruit, that their yield may be increased for you: I am the LORD your God. <sup>26</sup>You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice augury or witchcraft. <sup>27</sup>You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. <sup>28</sup>You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD.*

***The Second Letter to Timothy 3: 14 - 17***

*<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

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This evening/morning brings us to the second of a five week Bible study and sermon series titled “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say,” based on the book of this title by Pastor Adam Hamilton.<sup>1</sup> Last week we focused on the title’s phrase “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.”

This week, we turn to the phrase “God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It.” Can I get a show of hands – how many people have ever said this phrase or heard it said?

As I said last week, I hope that our Bible studies and the sermons in these five weeks are not simply about finding out if a phrase is in the Bible or not. We’re not playing Bible trivia. Rather, I hope that this five week series helps us all to go *deeper* in our journeys with God and God’s word. Deeper in our *formation*. Together, we can discern how we take God’s word seriously, but not always literally. Together, we can discern how God’s word *forms our lives* while nourishing our God-given room to grow and adapt.

Please join with me in prayer. *Lord, help us to love you with all of our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. Help us to love you, not only with our lips, but also with our lives. Help us to move from feeling that we are yours to lives that demonstrate all that we are, and that all that we have is yours. Help us to move from declarations of love for you in church today to open deeds of love for you tomorrow in the world. Amen.*

As you will note as we journey through worship this evening/morning, all of our hymns and songs this evening/morning are about God’s Word in our lives. Some of the hymns and songs seem to point to the Bible, but many of them, if you listen closely, speak of God’s Word not only as words on a page but

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, Adam *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016)

as a living presence for us in Christ Jesus and in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Yet usually, when we talk about God’s Word, we mean the Bible. I’d like to share a couple of reflections with you about the Bible and daily life.

The first story has to do with the special time we have taken this morning to present Bibles to our church family’s three-year olds and third grade children. I don’t remember receiving my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Bible, but I remember having it through childhood and my teen years. Even though I received it in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, it was a “grown up” Bible – just like the ones in our church pews – it didn’t have pictures and the size of the type was small.

In 1995, I had the opportunity to spend a month in Cuba through a joint program of Cuban Baptists churches and an American Quaker group. I took my third grade Bible with me to Cuba. During the last week there, I felt badly for a young man who was really interested in learning English. He’d done very well learning English in school, but in adulthood, due to the U.S. embargo on Cuba, he had very limited access to books in English so that he could continue to study.

The only book in English that I had with me was my third grade Bible. So I gave it to him. At age twenty, I didn’t know I was headed to seminary, but somehow I knew that I’d miss my third grade Bible, but I trusted that I wouldn’t have trouble keeping Bibles in my life.

Since I happen to have a third grader in my house this year, I was talking with her about receiving a new Bible this month. My third grader still of course has the Bible that was graciously given to her by Federated Church when she was younger. So she asked me, “Why do I need *another* Bible?”

I said that the Bible she received before teaches her about God and Jesus mostly with pictures. Now that she is a third grader, she can study a Bible that has *both* words *and* pictures. For all of our third graders, even though you might not understand all of the words, you can ask a grown up to help you with them. *You might find out that the grown up doesn’t know the word, either, so you can learn together!*

We teach the children of our community early on the importance that we give to the Bible by giving Bibles to very young children and again to elementary age children. We do this to nurture in them appreciation for the Bible and we choose Bibles at their level of understanding so that the Bible is *accessible* to them.

When folks say the phrase “God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It” it’s probably a phrase most often used to wrap up a discussion in which folks aren’t quite sure what to think or to believe about a passage in the Bible. We all know some of the favorite disputed verses of the Bible: they include but are not limited to, verses about divorce, homosexuality, slavery, and women’s roles.

Bibles that are specially designed for preschoolers and elementary age children generally either leave the disputed verses out, or simplify them to the point of neutrality. It’s not age appropriate for elementary age and younger children to discuss those topics yet in Sunday School.

We give Bibles to young children not because “God Said It, [We] Believe It, [and] That Settles It.” Because that phrase is a half truth.<sup>2</sup> We have all of adulthood for those debates. We give Bibles to young children because we want to teach them **that God loves you, we believe that, and we want to show it.**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

No matter which Bible they have, kids and grown ups alike can find plenty of Bible verses to back that up.

Another story I want to tell you about the Bible and daily life is a great example of why “God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It” is a half-truth.<sup>3</sup> My father for nearly all of adulthood kept a full beard. He kept it trimmed, but it was full in the sense that it covered his whole face. He told me that on at least one occasion his father-in-law, my Grandpa Lister, asked him why he didn’t shave his beard.

The next time the topic came up, my dad was prepared. He had found the verse in the Book of Leviticus, chapter nineteen, verse 27 that says that men should not trim their “forelocks.” As with many older words, “forelocks” has meant different things at different points in history. Some people think it means what we often call “sideburns.” Some people think “forelocks” means hair near the *forehead*, while others would say it was anything on the face.

Whichever part of anatomy you choose, a completely *clean shaven* man doesn’t appear to have been the ideal follower of God at the time that the Book of Leviticus was written down. And yet, in spite of the Bible saying that men should not be completely clean-shaven, by the time my dad could grow facial hair in the late 1950s in America, no man who wanted to conform to upstanding Christian society was keeping a beard anymore.

In regards to his beard, my dad essentially said to my grandfather, “God Said It, (specifically in Leviticus) I Believe It, That Settles It.” But my dad and my granddad knew all too well that my dad didn’t start growing a beard and he didn’t keep a beard in order to follow the Book of Leviticus.

My dad had a beard because my mom liked it that way.

We all pick and choose from the Bible what we like and what we don’t like. We all pick and choose from the Bible what we think is the most Christian, the most Jesus-like, and the most endorsed by God. The Book of Leviticus also says that you should not wear blended fabrics, so your favorite T-shirt is probably not Biblical.<sup>4</sup> If you eat pork or shrimp, you have broken a rule of Leviticus.<sup>5</sup> All the ranchers in Nebraska wish we would follow that one, but we don’t. Leviticus says not to sow two different seeds in your fields,<sup>6</sup> so the separate corn and soybean fields are fine, but how many backyard gardens only grow one thing?

None of us wants to be accused of ignoring the Bible because we put on a 50% cotton, 50% polyester shirt this morning. No one is rejecting God’s authority on her life because she planted a row of beans next to a row of tomatoes.

This is why our children’s Bibles and our confirmands Bibles need to be like this (open) and not like this (closed). The problem with the phrase “God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles” is fine....until that *very last part*.

To know the “God Said It” part, we have to keep the Bibles open. Sometimes we say “God Said It,” and we need to carefully look in our Bibles to know if Moses said it, or King Solomon said it, or Deborah said it, or Mary said it.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19:19

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 11:7-12

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 19:19

You can't know that if your Bible looks like this (closed). It's fixable problem (open Bible).

To know if "I Believe It," your Bible also has to stay like this (open). *And we need to turn the pages.*

Of all of the confusing parts of the Bible (and there are plenty of those) -- and all the parts of the Bible *that contradict other* parts of the Bible (and there are plenty of those) -- what the Bible asks us to do over and over again is first and foremost **to put our trust in God.**

Because, for the Bible, that God is there is an automatic. The Bible is not having a debate about whether or not God is there. People are welcome to that debate, but for the Bible, there is no debate. What the Bible knows all too well is that even when we believe in God, what happens in life is that we sometimes lose **trust** in God.

Why did God make us this way? Why create human beings to lose trust in our Creator?

Why? Because God can handle it.

God is still there, even when the level of my trust tank or your trust tank is on empty. God can handle it.

So the "I believe it" part of reading the Bible --- it's okay to have a bad day on that one. Go back to the "God Said It" part, pick up your Bible, and don't be afraid to have a wrestling match with God about whatever is on your heart. Remember, the word "Israel" means "wrestles with God." That's in your Bible.

So we come to the last part of the phrase – the "That Settles It" part. Lots of churches and lots of preachers in Christianity say that our job as believers, is the last part of "God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It".

A lot of churches spend a lot of time praying to "settle it," and a lot of preachers preach to try and "settle it," all while being mad at anybody who unsettles how *they* think it should be settled.

If I leave my Bible open instead of closed, there seems to be a lot of indication that our job as Christians, our job as faithful people is not to have everything "settled." We're not supposed to settle for poverty. We not supposed to settle for abuse – of children, of anyone. We're not supposed to settle for unethical conduct. We're not supposed to settle for polluting, rather than preserving the earth, God's creation.

The Bible is full of people on the move. Not settled. The Bible has over two dozen prophets saying that the status quo is not okay. There are four Gospels that have verse after verse after verse telling us that who was supposed to be out is in and that's because the only thing that is settled is that God loves *everybody*.

"God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It" is meant to show a believers' confidence in God and in God's Word. We hold up that confidence in gifting Bibles to our preschoolers and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.

May this day renew our commitment to have whichever Bible we hold dear OPEN to God's Word, renewing our trust in the ups and downs of life, and settle for nothing other than that trust.

Thanks be to God. Amen.