Sermon on 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
(How God Uses the Bible In Our Lives)

Denise and I had decided to go on a short hike; map in hand, we began to follow the trails outlined on it; at one point we looked at the map and realized that the trail we wanted to go on, a trail that followed the ridge line and promised us a view wasn’t on the map.

But given our knowledge of the area, given what we had already experienced of the trails that were on the map, we felt like this “new trail” wouldn’t lead us astray and indeed would be more interesting than walking by the book, so to speak.

And we were right, and though we came out somewhere differently than we thought we would we stayed calm (Denise actually complimented me for not freaking out!) and had a great time.

This, strange as it seems, and as I hope to explain, is something like how God uses the Bible in our lives for our good and for the salvation of humankind.

I offer the illustration as a lead-in to our second reading today which has the famous verse, “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

This verse is set in the context of a book in which the second generation of Jesus followers is beginning to experience what eventually all honest readers of scripture will experience: its seeming weakness and irrelevance; its seeming incompleteness.

Famously, the greatest theologian of the first millennium of our era, St. Augustine, didn’t convert to Christianity until his 30’s because he thought the Bible a crudely literal and unhelpful representation of God and the spiritual life: not up to the sophisticated intellectual standards if it was truly inspired by God.

At the point this letter was written most Christians would have had very little contact with what St. Augustine and we know as the New Testament; their “Bible” was the Old Testament.

And as citizens of Rome, they found most of the stories it contained, on the face of it, irrelevant to their lives. One of the leading churchman of the time, Marcion, suggested that the Hebrew Bible was a mere container, necessary to get us to Christ and the Holy Spirit but now irrelevant, and indeed misleading in its depictions of God.

Yes, Jesus was a Jew in his historical existence but now he’s the Cosmic Christ, he is everyone’s Jesus, so let’s let go of this Jewish “weirdness,” imagine Jesus as a good Roman and get on with it.

I think of every picture of Jesus I can remember from my Sunday School days, long-haired California beach bum, lamb draped around his neck and smile

Marcion may have been declared a heretic but much of the Church practices what Marcion preached.

In our day, most Christians act and live as if both the Hebrew Bible *and* the New Testament is irrelevant to their everyday economic and political decisions.

Most Christians will not go home today—if they happened to go to Church—and pull out their bibles and search for insight into whom they should vote for in tomorrow’s election.

They will make that decision based on a whole variety of factors that have far more to do on their job situation, there housing situation, their experience with “the system” etc.

 Of course there *are* some Christians that in reaction to this understanding imagine the Bible to be some sort of answer book, perfect in every way, containing no errors, and providing all the information that humankind needs to live, everything from soup to nuts.

But there is no testimony to that within the Bible itself. What we do have are one or two texts like we have in our reading today that testify that whether in Rome or in the modern West, these simple, disjointed, seemingly irrelevant stories are inspired by God.

They are as the word means in-breathed by the Spirit. This doesn’t mean they are perfect, this doesn’t mean there’s no mistakes in them or that they don’t contain some material that is sexist, racist or violent.

We might even say that, in line with what St. Augustine and others came to see, that it is the “incompleteness of the map of scripture” that allows God to breath into and through it.

We remind ourselves that human beings are formed from humus, breathed into by God and become in their humanity, in their finite incompleteness the very image of God.

The Bible is inspired but that inspiration doesn’t make itself known as a book, as a mere ornament resting on a lecturn or held high in the Gospel procession!

Rather it’s when we begin to use this “trail map” that we feel God’s breath in us.

If, as my opening illustration suggested, the Bible is a map, then one of the paths on the map is labelled “teaching.” This path takes us to vistas that are even more beautiful than what we immediately glimpse around us in creation,

 it unfolds, in all sorts of stories unique in all religious history, how God feels and acts towards us, not to control us, not to enslave us, but in compassion to free us!

Another path is labeled “reproof and correction.” To experience the Bible’s inspiration is to begin to notice the difference between God and us. Without these stories we, like Marcion, like the Sunday school pictures from my youth can too easily make God, make Jesus into our image.

To cut off our Jewish and/or New Testament roots is to cut off a taproot of truth that leaves us vulnerable to all manner of “fake news,” a tendency, as our text describes it to “accumulate to ourselves teachers that suit our desires, turning away from the truth and wandering away to myths.”

And this wandering after myths isn’t harmless because that way is loose shale leading to a cliff edge, that way is a what looks like an idyllic valley but a place subject to flash flooding.

Not confronting a God who asks us to change but, rather, making God in our image eventually leads to a God who is only for *us* and not for everyone.

And so, it turns out, we need a few really good map readers as part of the group, a couple of people; we need the equivalent of some people who can read the skies for signs of the weather, people who are good at drawing together the right kind of supplies.

We are called then, as a community, to involve ourselves in all the mess of historical research, the difficulty of interpretation and persistence in attending to these stories even when we feel like there’s sexier stories out there, more interesting myths that clamour for our attention.

But ultimately we experience the inspiration of Scripture most powerfully not simply by attending to it’s beautiful revelation of the character of God and when we find ourselves confronted by a necessary and even life-giving “no you may not,” but when we begin to hear the voice of scripture say “yes you may” and maybe even more powerfully, “yes you *can!*”

When, to use our illustration we come to a fork in the path that we see is somehow connected to the trail map but not on it.

And here we discover that our immersion in the teaching of the scriptures, in the correction it offers comes home to roost, for now we begin to realize that as a community we are not just meant to follow already laid out paths, but forge new ones, without confusing those new ones for the cleverly devised myths that also advertise themselves as new paths!

Here’s where the last part of this famous verse, the part about being trained in righteousness. This is one of our greatest but alas one of our most abandoned words.

It means doing justice but doing it rightly. It is the expression of love! Love is not ultimately “no” but “yes,” it doesn’t just tell us what we can’t do but invites us to creatively partner with God in the glorious extension of God’s loving justice.

As so the breath of God enlivening us, breathing on us through the message of this book is also the breath of God in us, the power of Jesus’ own Spirit working in and through this community so that we *can* be reconciled with our neighbour, so that our difficult relationship might yet become a life-giving one, so that yes we can come to new courage to escape abuse or, yes, that small idea of service might yet influence the direction of our lives.

Here we are this morning, finding fresh relevance in a book written thousands of years ago by people most of us have no natural or ethnic connection to and yet we find that as we come to it in light of Christ’s resurrection, if we come to it willing to act, we may, indeed, feel God’s wind in our lungs and at our backs.