

Epiphany 4

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

January 31, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

**The main thing is to keep the Main Thing the main thing.**

It must have been tempting for Jesus. The people of Capernaum were begging him to stay in their fishing village. That was much nicer than being rejected by his hometown of Nazareth. If you'll recall from last week, they tried to kill Jesus by pushing him over a cliff. Amazingly, Jesus walked away unharmed. It is arguably more amazing that Jesus would walk away from Capernaum. Things would have been nice for him there. Yet, Jesus replied (Luke 4:43), "**I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.**" Jesus did not come just to heal people from their sicknesses (which is why the people in Capernaum wanted him to stay). If Jesus healed every disease, they would still be sinful and need a Savior. Jesus came to win salvation through his life, death and resurrection.

The Apostle Paul must also have been tempted to stay in many cities. As an apostle, he could perform miracles and people would certainly want such free health care. Paul understood that the gospel was The Main Thing. This was so important that, just before Paul was executed, he wrote a farewell letter to his beloved student, Timothy – who was now serving as a pastor. Paul reminded Pastor Timothy that the main thing is to keep the Main Thing the main thing.

In case you have not noticed, Christianity is rejected more than it is respected. Indeed, a new movement has evolved in our society called "New Atheism." (You can Google it.) There have always been atheists, people who do not believe there is a god. In the past, atheists were glad to stay home on Sundays and simply leave the Christians to their own beliefs. New Atheism, however, "advocates the view that superstition, religion and irrationalism should not simply be tolerated. Instead, they should be countered, criticized, and challenged by "rational argument."" New Atheists say that believing in God is harmful and it is abusive to take children to church. Some books on the market include: "The God Delusion" by Richard Dawkins "God is not great: How Religion Poisons Everything" by Christopher Hitchens "God, the Failed Hypothesis" by Victor Stenger Christianity is not even simply tolerated. It is under attack.

Centuries ago, nearly every culture – the Greeks, the Romans, the Native Americans, etc. – had their own religion, their own gods. Today, the most popular kind of "idols" in the world are science and reason. If something can be proved by science and people like it, then it must be true. But if something can not be proved by science or does not make sense to human logic, then it is just make-believe. Students at public colleges are taught that the Bible is a myth and that they need to leave behind those fairy tales and face the reality of the world the way it is. College is when many Christians lose their faith.

Paul told the young Pastor Timothy that such things would happen. He wrote (4:3-4), "**The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.**" The Creation, which is taught in the Bible, is laughed at and Evolution is taught as an absolute truth in our public schools and throughout society. Instead of a difference between right and wrong, as taught in the Bible, morality is whatever people feel is right or wrong for them. Truth has become relative. Your "truth" or belief of how you understand something can be different than someone else's "truth." I'm not making this stuff up. A friend of mine was meeting with his son's teacher who said that there is no such thing as absolute truth. He asked her if  $2+2=4$  is an absolute truth. She refused to answer.

Truth has even become relative, or subjective, to many Christians. In the last few decades, many churches have changed their teachings to go along with whatever direction the cultural winds are blowing at any time. What's popular in America these days is a "gospel of prosperity." Preachers rip Bible passages out of context to say that if you do the right thing, you will be successful – happy, healthy and rich. Your lives and families will be as wonderful as the ending of a Hallmark movie. Never mind that the Bible says life in a sin-infected world will be filled with struggles, suffering and sorrow. Preachers like Joel Osteen (who gets an estimated 10 million people to tune into his weekly TV show) tell people that God is not a God of failure, but a God of success. If you pray hard enough, you can get exactly what you want. "Name it and claim it." A few weeks ago, I visited someone who had visited our church for the first time. I offered to talk to them about the Bible or answer any questions they had. They said, "We need to find a church that feels right for us." Talk about itching ears! They politely made it clear they did not want to

talk with me. It seems that their feelings were more important to them than the Bible.

It's easy to think that big churches are successful. But if they are not telling people the Main Thing, then they are a failure. The Main Thing is the absolute truth that all are sinners and that Jesus lived, died and rose for all to forgive them and give them life after death in heaven. The Main Thing is that you are saved through simple trust in your heart and not by anything you do or say or think or feel.

It was tempting for young Pastor Timothy, and it is tempting for us – especially me as a pastor, to shift our focus from the Main Thing. For example; it would be easy not to talk about sin or hell or Judgment Day since all of that stuff is so negative and people might not want to hear it. Or, it would be easy not to tell people what the Bible says about marriage and sexuality because our culture says that it is hateful and racist and misogynistic if you do not approve of anyone who wants to scratch in whatever way they itch. I could give dozens of examples. The danger is also there for each one of us to turn aside from the truths of God's Word. If God does not take away our health problems or we are not as happy as we would like, the devil and others are eager to offer you the sweet tasting candy of false teaching that is poison to your soul. We need to keep reminding ourselves that the main thing for us as a congregation and as individuals is the Main Thing of salvation through Jesus.

The Apostle Paul could not have been more earnest with the young Pastor Timothy (4:1-2), **“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season [when it's popular or not].”** The word “preach” sounds like something that a pastor does on a Sunday morning. The idea is to share a message. The idea is that all of us can share the message of salvation. In your families and with co-workers and classmates, friends and relatives, share your faith whenever and wherever you are able. What Paul says to Timothy applies to each one of us. Like Jesus, we want to get the Main Thing to as many people as possible. As we sing in our hymns this morning, so many people in the world do not know Jesus or do not know him in truth. We need more missionaries around the world and we need to be missionaries in our own circle of connections.

Timothy's mother and grandmother shared the Main Thing with him. Paul reminded Timothy (3:15), **“from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”** Only one book that can be understood by an infant. The Bible is different than any other book because the Bible makes itself known. The Holy Spirit is active through God's Word to give and strengthen faith. The gospel is able to save you. The word “able” has the idea of powerful. God's Word does the work of bringing you to faith and strengthening your faith. Christianity is about God making us wise, not us figuring it out. As we and the missionaries who represent us share the Main Thing, the Lord will do the work of changing hearts.

The Bible is the foundation for what we believe even if scientists in a laboratory can not prove everything the Bible says, or if we do not understand some things in it. Maybe, just maybe, God is smarter and wiser than humans. The Bible is not a message written by humans to make humans happy. Paul says that the Bible is (3:16) **“God-breathed.”** God used different people to put his Word on papyrus and parchment and paper, but it's still his Word. The Bible is God's message revealed to you for salvation.

The Bible is (3:16), **“useful for teaching** [so we know what God wants us to know], **rebuking** [pointing out that we are sinners], **correcting** [strengthening our faith as forgiven children of God] **and training in righteousness** [letting us know how to live a God-pleasing and blessed life according to the 10 Commandments].” The Bible reveals to you Jesus as your Savior who saved you from all the pain and broken-heartedness you may feel, from all the guilt that tries to haunt your conscience, from all the fear of your impending death. The Bible makes you ready for the absolutely irrevocable moment that is coming for you – when you stand before God. The Main Thing is that you are saved. That is our joy and focus. That's the message we believe and the message we share with a dying world. As a church and as individuals, the main thing is to keep the Main Thing the main thing. Amen.