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Psalm 119:105-112

“What About ... My Version of the Bible?”

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Have you ever met a person whose version of Christianity seems very different from yours? Maybe a neighbor who's a strong believer. But some of the words and phrases she uses to talk about her faith and her church are like a foreign language to you. Or perhaps it's a co-worker who goes to another church in town. And he sometimes comes across as pretty judgmental and legalistic. Maybe he even makes you wonder if you're on the right track, if you're doing the right things in order to be saved.

We all know there are many, many kinds of Christians in this world. Right here in Wake Forest are dozens of Christian churches. Only one Lutheran church, though. But also Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, Holiness, Assembly of God, lots of Baptist churches, and many non-denominational churches.

All Christian. All connected in some fashion to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But they don't all teach and believe the same things. In fact, there's a tremendous variety and multiplicity in the answers they give to some really important, fundamental questions. So when we talk to our Christian friends and neighbors, sometimes the conversation gets muddled. We don't need to be paranoid about this, or isolate ourselves from our fellow Christians. But let's recognize this. Sometimes, in our spiritual conversations with other Christians, we're going to hear answers to important questions that can lead us down a dangerous path.

So let's talk about a few of these important questions over the next few weeks. Today we start with a question that

seems benign and harmless. But actually it's a question of great magnitude. What about ... my version of the Bible?

I was talking recently with a friend of mine from outside this church about a particular topic. "I know what the Bible says about this," he said, "But I don't believe that's true. I just don't think that's what God really meant at all." My friend is a Christian, but he has his own version of the Bible on this particular topic.

And plenty of people do the very same thing. Thomas Jefferson famously cut and pasted (not on his computer – he literally cut out and pasted together) the Bible words he believed were true, discarded the rest, and produced his own version of the Bible. Many people today do exactly the same, in their minds, in their hearts.

If I don't accept the Bible's teaching on this topic or that topic, I just ignore it. I like what the Bible says about Jesus and his love, but I don't like some of the things it says about sin and judgment. I've been a Christian all my life, but I don't really think all of the Bible stories are actually true. I know what the Bible says about stuff like divorce, sexual sins, and the sanctity of life -- and about caring for the poor, concern for immigrants, and not being judgmental toward others -- but I'm going to make up my own mind about what's right and wrong.

Christians just like us do that all the time. Christian churches do it, too. I've never been in any Christian church that doesn't use the Bible in some way. But, boy, there is a vast disparity in how the Bible is employed, how the Bible is interpreted, how seriously the Bible is regarded, from church to church to church.

Churches have their own versions of the Bible, too. Some take the Bible ultra-seriously. Some follow the Bible rather loosely. Some churches regard every word as inspired by God. Other churches feel free to interpret and dissect the Scriptures according to modern cultural realities.

Some churches lean toward a hard-core, word-for-word literalistic, highly-legalistic approach to the Bible. They're fond of fire and brimstone, they pour on the guilt, they pound you with endless rebukes. And some churches lean the opposite way. Their teachings and their stands on modern social issues are all based on human reason, human emotion, human interest – as if the modern church's job is to edit and re-write what these old, ancient words have to say about modern Christian living.

So what about ... my version of the Bible? Is it OK for Christians like us, or for Christian churches, to just pick and choose what we're going to follow and believe in these pages?

Please be careful! The Bible is something really special, something absolutely unique. It's not like any other book. It's not just a human religious manifesto, or just one more textbook that's emerged from human history.

The Bible is God speaking and interacting with humanity. The Bible is the rich, inspiring story of God and his people. But not just people long ago. The Bible is the story of you and me today, the story of your everyday life and mine, the story of how God loves and saves us despite our sin through his Son Jesus Christ.

So, with all my heart, I'm telling you today, please be careful when it comes to your version of the Bible. Don't presume to edit the story. Don't be so cavalier about ignoring the story of

God and you. Take this story to heart! Wrestle with these words! Dive into these pages! Listen for God's voice in this book! Invite him to speak to your heart through all the parts of the Bible!

I'm not saying it's going to be easy. I'm not saying you're always going to be comfortable with every word you read here. But, in the end, if you believe in a God that's all-powerful and all-knowing, he's going to have the last word in the end, isn't he? So try letting him have the last word today. Let him guide you here, now, and not just in your version of the Bible. Please be careful.

And let's be careful here at Hope, too. Let's recommit ourselves today to being a church that is resolutely Bible-based; a church that is going to always take into account what we read here, on every issue; a church that grapples persistently with God's insights on our modern problems. We're not going to do this all perfectly, and we don't claim to have all the perfect answers. But we need to continue to be a church that is striving to pay attention to God's directives, even the hard ones, even when they're counter-cultural; a church that's dedicated to accommodating our Christian thoughts and our Christian actions to what God says right here. As a church, we're going to preach, teach, and proclaim Christ crucified and resurrected as our only hope for salvation, because that's what the whole Bible preaches, teaches, and proclaims.

Together we'll take the careful, faith-filled perspective of the psalmist, in today's First Lesson. *"Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path. I am severely afflicted; give me life, O Lord, according to your word! ... The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart."* Amen.