Over the next two months, we will be taking a little journey together to some places that are familiar grounds to some of you. For all the years of my ministry, I have been asked questions – wonderful questions – about whether or not you can be a Christian if you harbor some particular – even peculiar – beliefs. These are real questions – causing the one who asks the question some significant discomfort. As I have listened to the questions over the years, certain themes have presented themselves and those themes are at the heart of our series of sermons.

I will also add this word of introduction. A series of the type upon which we are embarking this morning is all the more important, as many people are confused and feel condemned by some of the harsher and more severe strains of Christianity that are afoot in the world these days. There are a great many people who have left the church because of the insensitive and judgmental teachings that are in such abundance. It is to our great benefit that some of them have found their way in here, with the rest of the condemned, and, together, we are discovering that God’s mercy and goodness is broader and wider than we had ever anticipated.

So, the question before us today is, “Can I Be a Christian If I Don’t Believe Every Word of the Bible?” I’ve been asked that question a lot. Someone will be reading the Bible and come across something that seems startling, or out of character, and they’ll point to the verse and ask me, “Do I have to believe that?” Have you ever been there?

There are some outstandingly troublesome verses in the pages of scripture. Among them:
You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials. (Lev. 19:19)

Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death. (Ex. 21:17)

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. (Ex. 35:2)

Are these passages from the holiness codes of the Old Testament still in effect? Are we to give up our cotton/polyester blend clothing in accordance with Leviticus 19:19? Are we to put our children to death when they argue and tell us how awful we are, in accordance with Exodus 21:17? Are those who work on the Sabbath to be put to death for serving us in restaurants and stores, in accordance with Exodus 35:2?

It may sound silly, but this is an illustration of the very heart of the problem. Some Christians, who sometimes call themselves “Bible-believing Christians,” observe a strictly literal approach to interpreting the Scriptures. They often believe that God all but dictated the Scriptures to people who transcribed the words – “God’s secretaries” as they have been called. Literalism demands that every word of every verse is enforced in the fullest literal terms. But, in practice, literalism often focuses on a few verses that are to be taken literally, while other verses are given less arduous attention.

Other Christians – like those of us who do not subscribe to literalistic models of interpretation – look for meaning beyond the literalistic approach of some of our sisters and brothers. We Presbyterians have a tradition of looking at the Scriptures through a variety of lenses. Our Confession of 1967 reminds us:

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

For some Christians – like us – the matter of the Bible is not as simple as “The Bible says it – I believe it – that settles it.” For some Christians – like us – there is more to the Bible than a surface literalism. For some Christians – like us – the Bible must be approached with an eye to history, culture, traditions, ancient practices, and all the tools of the practice of higher criticism.
I had one student of the Bible tell me once, “Sometimes when I read the Bible, I feel like there has to be more to it than what I’m reading.” She seemed relieved when I told her, “That’s because there is.” There is more to the Bible than the literalism that seems to hold pride of position these days. And it is to that “something more” that we now turn.

A good place to begin thinking about the new lenses we will need for reading the Bible is, in fact, an old starting place. In the First Letter to Timothy, from which we read again this morning, we read these words:

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.

That word, “inspired,” means “God-breathed.” All scripture is God-breathed – Spirit-born – conceived and brought forth – by God. God was the “spark” that prompted the words we call “scripture.”

But the words are also the words of people who had experienced God in unique and particular ways. That means that the Bible is not just the “word of God” but also “words about God.” The Bible is also the response of people to what they had experienced with God. That means that the Bible may be a more human creation than we had previously thought.

And this makes a very important difference. Because the Bible has human fingerprints all over it, it is important to read and interpret what we read, keeping in mind those who left their fingerprints on the pages of scripture. How did they think about the world? What did they believe that we now know is not really so? What symbols and customs are reflected in their writings – symbols and customs that no longer speak to us in the same way? What words did the ancient intend as metaphor and what words did they intend as literal? These questions and many more draw us deeper and deeper into the pages of Scripture. They may ask more from us that we may be willing to give.

But as we allow for the presence of human involvement in the production of the scriptures, we can begin to see the fullness of the human experience of God. These ancient people, while very different from us, were still, much like us. They had encountered something beyond themselves, something that gave life direction and purpose, something that changed the way they saw themselves and the world around them. They asked questions – many of which we ask ourselves – and they found answers that are quite often in agreement with the answers we ourselves have found.

So, perhaps, we might begin to look at the Bible, not only as inspired by God, but also as the product of God’s people – men and women who had encountered and experienced God for themselves. When I was a young pastor, and speaking with my senior pastor, I was ranting about the Presbyterian Church’s Book of Order. In what were really the only words I remember him saying to me that amounted to anything, he said, “The Book of Order is the distilled wisdom of over 200 years of Presbyterianism in this country.” That has changed the way I have viewed the Book of Order ever since.
What if we took it a step further? What if we said, “The Bible is the distilled wisdom of over 4,000 years of humanity’s encounters with God?” Doesn’t that change things? Doesn’t that help us approach the scriptures with a little less fear and trembling and a little more of an inquisitive and curious wonder? Doesn’t that approach invite us into a discovery of God?

We’ve got to finish, so let’s go back to the question for the day. “Can I Be a Christian If I Don’t Believe Every Word of the Bible?” By now, I hope you know, the answer to the question is “yes.” You don’t have to believe every word of the Bible to be a Christian.

I’ve used this with you before, but it bears repeating. I first heard it in the work of Marcus Borg. Borg talks about a Buddhist tradition that often speaks of the teaching of the Buddha as “a finger pointing toward the moon.” The meaning of the metaphor is to remind Buddhists to guard against believing that being a Buddhist means believing in the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha was the finger, pointing to something much more.

In the same way, the Bible is a finger, pointing to something much more. We Christians sometimes fail and believe that being Christian is about believing in the finger rather than seeing the Christian life in relationship to that to which the finger points. As Professor Shirley Guthrie taught us, “Our faith is not in a book, but in the God we learn to know in this book.”

Do you have to believe every word of the Bible to be a Christian? No. If you’re anything like some of us, you’re a Christian in spite of some of the stuff you read in the Bible!

But, don’t discard the possibility that this old book may yet have some new insights for you and the life you’ve been given. Don’t overlook the possibility that there is still much to be gained from a careful reading and consideration of its pages. Don’t underestimate the power of this old book to lead you into a new way of seeing life and living life. And don’t ever underestimate the very real possibility – and I would add probability – that through the pages of this old book – you may yet find the life that God created you to have – life that is for now and evermore. Amen.