

Pastor's Message – 4/28/24  
Acts 8:26-40

"Aoccdnrng to rscheearechrs at Cmabrgide Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbemls. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe."

Our Bible reading today is the well-known Bible story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. The "treasurer of Ethiopia," a man of authority in the court the "Kandake," queen of the Ethiopians" had been in Jerusalem to worship. Now he was on his way home, and as many a traveler, he'd picked up something to read. In this case, it was the prophet Isaiah — not exactly a trash novel. As he is reading from chapter 53, Philip suddenly appears running toward his chariot. Hearing the eunuch reading Isaiah, he begins a conversation by asking if the Ethiopian understands what he's reading. His response is: "How can I, unless someone guides me?" The catechism concludes with the Ethiopian's baptism. Philip then disappears as quickly and mysteriously as he'd appeared.

As I was working on building the worship service for today and preparing the sermon for today, I was a bit overwhelmed by the deep themes in the text. I almost broke the reading down into three parts: the first part about Philip interpreting the Bible for the eunuch, the second part about baptism, and the third part about evangelism, otherwise know as sharing our experience of Jesus – our faith.

The Bible is important to us. Christians, along with Jews and Muslims, are called "People of the Book." Every worship service that I put together, the prayers, the hymns, the sermon, are all based and centered on the Bible passage and the message I think we need to hear. But understanding what it is that God wants us to hear from any particular passage of the Bible is not always easy to discern. Even more so when we consider just what it was that the Ethiopian official was reading, a passage about "The

Suffering Servant,” and how Philip was able to steer that passage to tell the story of Jesus.

Did you catch that he’s reading the Bible — what we call the Old Testament: Isaiah 53? Some people, including a few preachers, don’t have much use for the Old Testament. They don’t like the Old Testament version of God. They don’t like all the rules and commandments. They don’t like the warring and the blood. They don’t like the eye-for-an-eye culture of vengeance. And yet, from that, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus which led him to want to be baptized!

It is not the easiest of tasks to read and understand the Bible. The Bible was written in languages different from our own, and even though we have it in many translations, it has thought forms that are very different from much other writing we are used to. It comes from a *different culture* and civilization, and it talks about difficult things.

What's more, the Bible is a *long book*. Its content is centuries old, and its original audience were people with vastly different life experiences than ours. Some of it, like the ancestry list in Genesis and 1 Chronicles, are downright boring.

The Bible is a *complicated volume* too. It contains 66 "books" divided into two unequal clumps with a 400-year gap between them. Some of the books are out of chronological order, and others, like the closely reasoned letters of St. Paul, require a philosopher's mind to read for very long. On top of that, the Bible covers a phase of history that is usually only touched on in school, if dealt with at all. Learning to use the Bible efficiently is at least as difficult as learning to use some of your harder college texts or some of today's software.

Then too, there's the problem of trying to figure out *how God's dealings with the ancient Israelites (or the even more obscure Jebusites!) has anything to do with us*.

All of that is difficult, but not impossible. And despite all of the hurdles, people who take the time to read the Scriptures deeply often report that they experience God by doing so. Hearing the Word of God can lead people to faith conversion or confirmation of their faith or even bringing their children to be

baptized that they can be taught faith in God and belong to a Church that lives out its faith in God.

Over the years, I've baptized a number of people: infants, youth, adults. And unfortunately, baptism is often misunderstood, but fortunately, at the same time, can be an opportunity to learn about faith and experience God's welcome and love. Sometimes, parents or even grandparents want a child to be baptized because "it's the thing to do" or they believe that salvation is in baptism and prevents an individual from going to Hell. It is a hard thing not to immediately and spontaneously baptize everyone who asks without them knowing the meaning and purpose of baptism.

Did you notice the missing verse in our Bible reading today? Our Church Secretary, who proofs the bulletins and my sermons carefully, noticed that verse thirty-seven is missing. Some ancient manuscripts of Acts included verse thirty-seven which is not in any of the newer translations (or at least is relegated to a footnote). I did find it in the New Century translation of the Bible.

"As they rode along, they (i.e., the eunuch and Philip in our Bible reading today) came to some water, [and] the eunuch said, 'Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?'" The missing verse, as included in the New Century Version reads, "Philip answered, 'If you believe with all your heart, you can.' The officer said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him."

Belief is the necessary foundation: belief in Jesus, but there's more. The Ethiopian eunuch is returning home after a long trip to worship in Jerusalem. He is reading his Bible. He is showing a commitment to his faith and a hunger to know more about God. Even with the Bible, he needs more, he needs other believers, namely Philip in this instance, for him to be truly convicted in his faith. The words of the Bible *are* important; more than that, they can be life-changing, as our reading from Acts demonstrates. But there are more ways that we experience God.

We may be overlooking a detail in this conversion, i.e., the role of the Holy Spirit. We applaud Phillip for putting himself out there. Praise him for knowing his scripture well enough to convince this stranger from another land that Jesus was worth

following. The eunuch gets their moment of admiration for being willing to be baptized on the spot. Being so moved by the gospel they could not wait to join the new covenant family. The Spirit is hard at work here.

The Spirit is the one who guides Phillip. It tells him exactly where to be and who to join on their journey. The Spirit has been working behind the scenes for longer than we even get to see, putting the eunuch on his journey to Jerusalem so that the gospel could return with them to Ethiopia. When the Spirit works there are no coincidences either. There is a reason this person is chosen to interact with Phillip.

The whole subject, the end point, of this passage today, is the Good News about Jesus. By the Spirit at work in Philip, he shares his faith, and another person comes to believe. Our passage today is about reading and understanding the Bible, it is about baptism, and it is about witnessing faith. Witnessing faith, evangelism, is about telling one's own story of faith. It is about telling the story about how Jesus has made a difference to you in your life. It is about bearing witness to where you have experienced God's presence and action in your life. Evangelism can be a scary thing for people, but Philip shows us how to witness. He was:

1. Willing to go to anyone, anytime, anywhere. (vss. 26-27)
2. Sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. (vs. 29-30a)
3. A good listener. (vs. 30)
4. He asked good questions. (vs. 30)
5. He got in the chariot with the man. (vs. 31)
6. He shared what Scripture said. (vs. 35)
7. He brought him into the church through baptism. (vs. 38)

Is that something that everyone and anyone can and is expected to do? As we petition the Lord to open the eyes of our heart to know and experience God, we learn and can tell the stories of Jesus. Convicted, believers come to be baptized in water and the Spirit and to join other Christians to live out our faith. All of this, that the light of Jesus might shine in us and through us and the Good News of Jesus is heard.