

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
May 13, 2012
“Reading Comprehension”
Acts 8:26-40

Read the scripture online: NSRV, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=203961825>

Last week’s marathon changed our Sunday worship schedule considerably. The race meant our usual pattern of Sunday School, Adult Education, and multiple worship services could not be offered. For me personally, it meant at 10:00 am, I looked up from reading the paper and realized, “Oh, *this* is what it feels like not to be in church on Sunday morning.” I know it can be tempting to sleep in on Sundays, to wear pajamas or comfy clothes, and gain a free half-day instead of coming to church. So for the record, I am very grateful that every one of you chose not to succumb to that temptation today. Which begs the question: So why did you come to church on this Mother’s Day? And why should you invite your friends and neighbors to join us here at ELPC? We come to church to celebrate who we are, God’s children, and remember how we are to live together: guided by God’s word, Christ’s example, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. In that celebrating and that living we gain life in its fullest measure possible.

Let’s see how that answer to the “Why do we go to church?” question was lived out in today’s scripture lesson. How many characters are there in the story I just read from Acts 8? Well, there is Philip, a Greek follower of Jesus, who was appointed as one of the first deacons of the church and described earlier in this chapter as an excellent preacher, evangelist and person of strong faith. And there is the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch, a major court official serving the Queen who ruled over the southern Nile region of Africa. We are told he was returning home after worshiping in Jerusalem, so he must have been a person strongly attracted to the monotheistic faith of Judaism. This man was powerful enough to be chauffeured around in a chariot, educated enough to be able to read Greek, wealthy enough to possess a handmade scroll of the Hebrew scripture, devout enough to be spending time reading the prophet Isaiah, and yet humble enough to know that he needed help in understanding what he was reading.

We’ll come back to him in a moment, but is there anyone else in this story? Yes, there’s a third character present here: the Holy Spirit. God’s Holy Spirit moves in and through this entire story. The Holy Spirit compelled Philip to go to a wilderness stretch of road out toward the desert. The Holy Spirit stirred up questions of faith in the Ethiopian eunuch, as he sought to understand what he was reading. The Holy Spirit pretty much brought these men together, prompted the one to ask to be baptized, and sent them both on their way rejoicing in the amazing power and inclusive love of Jesus Christ the Lord. This story symbolizes the movement of Christianity from being confined only to Jewish converts in Jerusalem to becoming a global faith embracing Jew and Gentile and all people. *That* type of growth and expansion is always the result of the Holy Spirit, so God’s Spirit is the surprising, innovative, third character in this story.



I want us to explore that last point a bit more. First, a bit of trivia. In ancient days there was really no such thing as silent reading (reading to yourself). Manuscripts and books were rare items, so from the earliest recorded history up to the Middle Ages, anything read was read aloud. Think about that for a moment. Everything in the bible was meant to be read out loud: the Pentateuch, the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, the Gospels, the Letters from Paul. It was all designed to be read aloud, in a group setting, provoking conversation and discussion and shared reflection. Which means that something is present when the bible is read out loud; a receptive spirit hopefully marks the hearing of God's scripture. To go one step further, God's Holy Spirit is involved; it is the third character present whenever scripture is read in church or in times of bible study. Between you and me, there is always a Thee present, God's Spirit, whenever scripture is read. And that changes things.

Second, there are other spirits present when scripture is read out loud. We bring with us the spirit of our age, of our experiences, hopes, and fears to any bible study exercise. A few weeks ago, I read an article about the proliferation of silly games on Smartphones and iPads. The games we play often reflect the spirit of our age. In the 1930s, during the period of the Great Depression, people played Monopoly and pretended they were wealthy tycoons. In the 1950s, during the Cold War and time of heightened tension over the threat of nuclear war, the military strategy game RISK was popular. In the midst of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Twister not surprisingly became the latest rage. In 1984, during the last years of the Russian empire, a Soviet computer lab worker invented Tetris, with its unceasing, falling blocks that eventually wall you in, making escape impossible. Now what games today reflect the spirit of our age? We've lived through the Great Recession of 2008, the Tea Party protests of 2009, Occupy Wall Street of 2011 – Is it any wonder that the most popular, silly game is one called “Angry Birds”? Use your finger to pull back a slingshot, shooting squawking, exploding birds at green pigs until the structures over them (housing market, financial institutions, halls of government) all come crashing down. In its various forms, “Angry Birds” has been downloaded more than 700 million times.¹ There is definitely something of the spirit of the age reflected in that violent, silly game. So what happens when worldly spirits and God's Spirit collide?

Back to our story: The Ethiopian eunuch was heading home, reading aloud a portion of Isaiah 53. Philip jogs up beside him, hears him, and asks whether he understands the prophet's words. To which the eunuch replies, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” For all his power and authority, this man was an outsider, not trained enough to fully understand the words of the scripture and, because he was a eunuch, the Law of Moses barred him from fully participating in the Jewish life and worship. He was a man doubly pushed to the margins, until he invited Philip and the Holy Spirit to join him in his chariot that day. Then he asks his second question: “About whom is the prophet speaking – himself or someone else?” He is looking for a word of hope, not just a word from history. He is looking for something that addresses his own experience, just like each one of us looks to the bible to speak to us and offer a different spirit than the dominant spirit of the age swirling daily around us. Preacher Tom Long has said, “The



eunuch needed someone who could read the cold ink on the page in the warm light of God's Spirit."²

Remember the two points I made earlier: 1) there are spirits of the age around us as well as the God's Holy Spirit moving in, around and through us, and 2) the bible is meant to be read out loud. The Christian faith was never meant to be a private matter; a quiet, devotional act to break up the busyness of our daily routines. The Christian faith is something to be grappled with openly: read out loud, discussed in our chariots, our cars, buses, on the street corner, and yes, in church. It is something we grapple with together: seeking guidance and wisdom from others, humbly admitting we don't have all the answers, yet regularly being blessed by the stories of how others understand the same bible texts we're reading. It is meant to be counter-cultural. When North Carolina votes in a way that is oppressive, when J.P. Morgan acts in a way that is unethical, when our children act in ways that are risky or our parents endure suffering that troubles us deeply, then we read out loud the scriptures and open ourselves to guides personal and spiritual, to be led by friends and counselors, and led by God's life-giving Holy Spirit.

Our faith promises us this: That Spirit leads us along paths of life and joy. The eunuch learned from Philip about Jesus, who was like a sheep led to slaughter, a Son of God for whom justice was denied. This crucified One became the main challenger to the dominant spirit of his age: the spirit insisting that might makes right, the spirit of law over grace, the spirit of xenophobia and distrust. Christ's Spirit—seen in his healing touch offered to the lepers, the bleeding woman, the outcasts of his day, and Christ's conquering Love seen in the Easter resurrection and Pentecost Spirit—changed everything for the Ethiopian eunuch. What had been impossible before became immediately possible. What had been blocked from him before now became opened and welcoming. Where there had been injustice now came justice and inclusion. So he asked his third question of the day: "What is to prevent me from being baptized right now?" Nothing; absolutely nothing, as by God's grace he soon discovered. Then he and Philip parted ways, but both went forward rejoicing in what the Lord had done in their lives.

We come to church to celebrate who we are as God's children and how we are to live together, guided by God's word, Christ's example, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. For it is in that celebrating and that faithful living we have life in its fullest measure possible. It is here in the bible we read together. It is here in our community of faith and welcome and inclusion. And that surprising Spirit is what helps you find life out there, wherever you go when you respond to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. This is the good news of our faith.

AMEN

¹ Sam Anderson, "Just One More Game", *New York Times Magazine*, April 8, 2012.

² Tom Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B, Acts 8:26-40, p. 456.

