



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Maybe We Should Not Read the Bible John 15:1-8; Acts 8:26-40

I realize that the title of this sermon may have all of you shaking your heads. The mere suggestion that “maybe we should not read the Bible,” will leave some of you shaking your heads in disbelief, convinced that I am clearly off my rocker. Others of you may be nodding in agreement, happy that someone has finally released you from that tinge of guilt that we feel when we have to admit that we do not give the Bible much attention. Of course, the reality is that very few people read the Bible these days. It remains a bestseller because we like to mark special events like baptisms, graduations, and weddings with special gift Bibles. Biblical literacy, however, is at an all-time low. Preachers can no longer assume that everyone in the congregation will understand a biblical reference. Some of us do not even recognize the names of all the books of the Bible. So the suggestion that maybe we should not read the Bible anymore is likely a relief for a lot of folks.

There are any number of reasons you might give for not reading the Bible. First, you have to decide which translation or paraphrase to read. There are dozens of choices. Anyone over the age of fifty grew up reading from the King James Version of the Bible. Its poetic cadence and lavish imagery are etched into our minds and hearts. Try to say the Twenty-third Psalm in any other translation, and it just doesn't sound the same. We know, of course, that phenomenal research has been done over the past 400 years and a much better understanding of Hebrew and Greek exists today. Modern translations are far more accurate in capturing the original meaning of the texts, and there are plenty of good ones available. Which one is acceptable, accurate, and readable? That choice is the first hurdle.

The second excuse is the most familiar: the Bible is just so hard to understand. The latest books were written around 1900 years ago and the earliest are at least a thousand years older than that. Life was a little different back then. We don't know the area where the stories took place much less how to pronounce all those difficult names. The culture and times were so different. Those folks traveled by foot and donkey. We zoom around the world in jets and look down at the world from spaceships. They communicated by word of mouth and occasional writings on pottery or

papyrus. We talk to one another on cell phones, computers, and satellite feeds. In our country we don't have kings and queens, there are no occupying armies making our lives miserable, we are not a tiny nation being oppressed by a larger, more powerful empire. Very few of us farm anymore so that we are getting further away from understanding the agrarian stories told throughout the Bible. It is just too hard to understand the Bible so we might as well not trouble ourselves to read it. The genealogies are boring, the history confusing, the psalms redundant, the prophecies frightening, and the letters out of touch. It is simply hard for us to understand what the Bible is saying so let us leave it to the so-called "professionals" to sort it out for us.

And then there are those fantastical stories that are just hard to believe. They might fit into a book of fantasy, but they do not seem to sit well in a book that is supposed to teach us about life, faith, salvation, and daily living. For example, did the story I just read about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch sound a little far-fetched? Luke tells us that Philip was minding his own business one day when an angel told him to leave his house and start walking south through the wilderness on the road to Gaza, probably a dangerous journey. He had this encounter with the Ethiopian official, baptized him, and then vanished and found himself in Azotus (formerly known as Ashdod) – probably ten or more miles away! I will admit that to the modern mind Philip's story sounds just as improbable as someone rising from the dead. For many people such stories defy reason and logic and the observable laws of nature and therefore cannot be true and might as well be ignored. Because the Bible is chock-full of ancient stories that do not fit our world-view, some of us choose not to give it much time.

You may think these kinds of stories are what make the Bible difficult or unbelievable or not worth your time to read. Stories like this one, however, do not make me skeptical or dismissive of scripture. On the contrary, they demand my attention. They even raise my anxiety a little because of the things they suggest might be possible in our world. I am not speaking about the mention of angels or disappearing evangelists who suddenly show up miles away. If we are honest, we are not concerned with those details. What does concern me, however, is what happens between Philip and this man from Ethiopia and what that means for my life and yours and for the Christian faith. Let me explain.

Most of the time, when I read this story, I read about Philip, one of the six people who were chosen to serve as table ministers in the first Christian community in Jerusalem. He was one of the first Deacons. I read that God

spoke to him in some manner and urged him to travel down the highway to Gaza. While walking, he came upon a court official from Ethiopia who was reading the scroll of Isaiah. He asked the man if he understood what he was reading and the man answered that he did not because he needed someone to explain it. He invited Philip to join him. Philip began to explain Isaiah's prophesy and to relate it to Jesus. He told him everything he knew about Jesus including how he died and rose again to life. When they came upon a stream or pond or other body of water, the man asked Philip if he could be baptized. Philip knew of no reason he should not so they stopped and he baptized the man. That is what we often read or hear, but that is not all that happened that day.

First, the Ethiopian Eunuch was the most unlikely candidate for baptism. It is no mistake that the point is made that he was a dark-skinned man from another country. Remember that prejudice is no recent invention. The early Christians struggled with the issue of whether or not the Gospel was for Jews alone. Even when it was admitted that Gentiles (non-Jews) could be saved, some people insisted that they had to convert to Judaism first. Although this man had been to Jerusalem to worship in the temple, he was not considered Jewish nor a convert to Judaism. He held an important position in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia, but he was also a eunuch. The fact that he had given up his masculinity gained him the queen's trust, but not that of the Hebrews. He could visit the temple and worship, but he was not allowed to participate in temple rituals. Furthermore, he was denied the opportunity to fully join the Jewish community as a convert.¹

This Ethiopian was a well-educated man who could and did read scripture. When Philip met up with him, he was reading from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. He did not fully understand what he was reading, however. He had questions. He recognized that there was something else in Isaiah's prophesy about a lamb being led to slaughter. He knew that there was another level of meaning to the story that we as life-long believers too often miss because of its familiarity. Philip helped him understand. Philip explained the scripture to him and revealed the Good News that this lamb was Jesus Christ who had been willingly crucified but had also been raised from the dead, offering eternal life to all people.

¹Mitzi J. Smith, "Commentary on Acts 8:26-40," WorkingPreacher.org; available online at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=5/6/2012.

This is the point at which I get nervous because this man obviously already had faith in God, but he recognized that he did not fully understand all that this faith entailed. His was a “faith seeking understanding.” He was not content to visit the temple a few times a year and offer prayers. He wanted to fully immerse himself in faith in God.

Mitzi Smith suggests that we ought to have faith like this Ethiopian eunuch. She writes, “We should practice a faith that continually seeks understanding rather than an understanding that is seeking faithful followers.”² A faith seeking understanding desires to discover how God sees the world and life and how we fit into that understanding. It is a recognition that we do not have all the answers but God will help us sort out our questions. Such an attitude is in direct contrast to what we so often see and hear day by day. Political, philosophical, and ideological leaders spend most of their time espousing their understanding of the world and wooing the rest of us to follow them. We have plenty of evidence from the current political campaigns being waged in our country. For good or ill, politicians have an understanding about life and they are seeking followers. As Christians, however, our calling is to be faithful followers of Christ and to seek through him a greater understanding of life.

Do you see what happens when someone reads the Bible? Questions arise about what it means. Ideas begin to form. Change begins to take place. I suggest that we might not want to read the Bible because it is a dangerous book. Any random person going down the road can suddenly understand that God’s gift of salvation includes them as well as the rest of us. Who knows where that will lead! It led a dark-skinned foreigner who had given up his masculinity in order to serve his Queen into the waters of baptism. It led a small band of believers in Jerusalem to tell other Jews that the Messiah had come. It led people like Stephen to give up his life for the sake of the Gospel and others like Paul to begin traveling the world to share the Good News of salvation with all people. And just think about the changes that have taken place over 2000 years.

You might not want to read the Bible because not only will it change the world—it will change your life. It will remind you daily of the new life that is yours in Jesus Christ. It will enable you to sing God’s praises in words that are rich and timeless. It will teach you that there is very little new under the sun but that God continues to bear with us and guide us through all of life. It

²Smith.

will call you back to faithfulness time and time again, reminding you of your sinfulness, but offering the forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ. No, you might not want to read your Bible—not because it is difficult or confusing or tedious—but because it can change your life and the world around you. Then again, maybe you should read for it is through the witness of scripture that we learn about Jesus and God’s great love for us. Maybe we should read the Bible . . . and hold on for the great changes in life it will bring to us all! Amen.

May 6, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is the Creator and Sustainer of all that was and is and is to come, we gather around your table to offer our praise for your many blessings to us. You invite us to abide with you and offer us lives filled with an abundance of gifts that give our days meaning and purpose: work and play which allow us to provide for ourselves and use our talents and resources for the good of others, the beauty of your creation which inspires and delights us, friends and family with whom to share the joys and challenges of this journey, your grace which sustains us through our moments of celebration and sorrow. In all circumstances, O Lord, you have been faithful to your promises made to your people generations ago yet still spoken clearly and personally for us today: The promises that you would never leave us and that through your Son Jesus Christ you would offer the gift of your mercy to all who would receive it. For these and all of the gracious gifts which come from your generous hand, we offer our thanks and praise.

We come, too, O God, because we know that in order to bear the fruit of discipleship to which we are called, we must seek your guidance and grace in the daily demands of our lives. Too many in our world live in the midst of violence, unrest and persecution. For these, O Lord, empower us to be messengers of your peace. Too many in our city suffer because of poverty, neglect or hopelessness. For these, O Lord, enable us to offer compassion. Too many of our own number struggle because of sickness or loneliness or worry. For these, O Lord, inspire us to extend hospitality and companionship that will bring healing and comfort. Too many of us live with fear or insecurity or doubt because of perplexing circumstances, strained relationships or uncertain futures. For each of us and all of us, O Lord, grant us grace enough for this day and hope for all our days to come.

As we join our brothers and sisters in this place and believers of all times and places to feast at your table, may we be reminded of the wonder that is ours because we are a people created in your image, the love that is ours because we are a people redeemed, the joy that is ours because we are a people who hold the promises of abundant life now and eternal life with you.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and by the power of your Holy Spirit we make these and all our prayers. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister