

The Art of Reading Scripture

Isaiah 55: 8-13 & Acts 8: 26-40

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 28th September 2008

It's odd text for a Gentile to be reading. We learn earlier in chapter eight that Philip arrived, "preach[ing] good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ." The good news was proclaimed, people were baptized, welcomed into the community of faith, and their lives were never again the same. In the book of Acts the main character in the unfolding story of the gospel is the Holy Spirit who moves the flow of the narrative. In this chapter, Philip receives his orders from the Head Office; the Holy Spirit directs him to head south down the Gaza road, not knowing why. So he goes and in time comes across a man in a chariot reading out loud. He's an official in the court of the Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, and he's a eunuch. The Ethiopian eunuch is returning home after time in Jerusalem, probably on official state business. He was seated in his chariot (because someone else was driving) and reading aloud, as was the custom. What was he reading? A portion of Isaiah 53: "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation?" What an odd text for a Gentile to be reading.

It's doubly odd knowing that the Hebrew Scriptures did not welcome eunuchs into the community. Judaism was ambivalent toward them. Eunuchs were never welcomed into the inner temple in Jerusalem. In fact, eunuchs were grouped along with foreigners and other social outcasts who could not worship in the inner precincts of the temple.¹ Why was he reading Isaiah? We know that many cultures beyond Israel had immense respect for Yahweh, the God of Israel. There were religious seekers who wanted to follow Yahweh and read Hebrew Scriptures, but never became fully Jewish.

Seeing this as an opportunity to share the gospel, because this text points to the coming of a suffering Messiah, Philip says, "Do you understand what you're reading?" To which the eunuch replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Philip unpacks this text, showing how it foreshadows Jesus. Philip is such an effective communicator that the eunuch wants to be baptized into the kingdom. Philip is then snatched away by the Spirit and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing – full of joy! All because someone opened the scriptures for him.

"Do you understand what you're reading?" Philip asks us. When it comes to scripture, all of us are eunuchs lacking insight, cut off from the Holy. "How can I unless someone guides me?" This simple exchange captures the perennial problem we have interpreting scripture. We go to religious texts to deepen our understanding of God, ourselves, our neighbors and the world. We believe these texts are inspired and should have authority. The Bible is a priceless treasure. We give copies to our children when they're very young. But do we really understand it? Who opens the scripture for us?

We value the Bible, but we're also a little intimidated by it. For many, it's is just too overwhelming to comprehend and too difficult to read. My guess is that many Christians feel a

¹ See Isaiah 56:8 ff for a reversal of this attitude.

little guilty they don't read it as often as they want to, or feel embarrassed that their knowledge of it is not where it should be for one who's been in the church for decades. Many feel wholly inadequate and have given it up to the experts, the professionals, the scholars to interpret. "Do you understand what you're reading?" The answer is, "No, that's why we're paying you and Dorothy the big bucks to tell us – you're the experts, you're the scholars, you can read Hebrew and Greek, you know what it 'means'." "How can we understand, unless someone guides us?"

There's something inherently wrong with this approach. *Scripture is for everyone*. We tend to equate *understanding* with *knowledge* and therefore assume that people that know more than others about this text (clergy, scholars) are the ones best equipped to understand it. Therefore we turn to the "experts." This makes the Bible into a secret text whose meaning is known only to an elite few who guard the meaning of the text. This also produces an even greater sense of inferiority in the pews and the wider public who believe that an intelligent reading of scripture is just beyond them. So they give up and wander aimlessly through life looking for God everywhere else, in every other text except in the text that claims to speak the Word of God. *Scripture belong to the church, to the people, given for the edification and empowerment of God's people to live faithful and committed lives, given so that we can encounter God.*

Instead, we're slowly losing our ability to read the Bible and to have it *read* us. We're losing our ability to interpret it and to allow it to interpret us, that is tell us who we are and what we're called to do and be. As this happens, the world of scripture becomes an alien, foreign world, distant and removed, not unlike the One who speaks through its pages. And we wonder why God is missing in our lives.

The Bible has lost its grounding in the church and the culture. Conservatives tend to read the text literally and then use it as a weapon; liberals, well, often don't bother reading the text at all. I'm exaggerating here, but only slightly. We have Bibles everywhere, there's such a surplus of Bibles that there are actually Bible Factory Outlets scattered across the country – discounted scripture, scripture cheap.

But who has the authority to interpret it and tell us what it means? The theological and cultural divides facing the church and the culture today (especially during this presidential campaign) really comes down to how scripture is interpreted. That there are so many interpretations out there is a signal that something has shifted and is shifting within us and it is worthy noting. What we have, basically, is a problem of interpretation.

I want to point to three signs of this change, this crisis of meaning. *First*, we need to go back to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century – actually further back to 1440. That's when Johannes Gutenberg (c.1398-1468) created the printing press with movable type out of an old winepress. This meant that books could be made faster and cheaper. The printing press was critical to the success of the Reformation because it allowed sermons and tracts to be printed and share throughout Europe. It also allowed the Bible to be printed, in one's own language, to read for oneself, with the church, but also alone. Not surprisingly, literacy rates spiked throughout Europe. Prior to this time, the Roman Catholic Church controlled the message, as it were; the Magisterium read and interpreted scripture, that's because most people

couldn't read. During the Reformation, interpretation shifted away from the Church, to groups of Christians, and eventually to the individual with his or her own Bible. Reading and interpreting could be done through the church, but also alone.

Now this was fine until the Enlightenment of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when people stopped reading the Bible literally, as scholarship (inspired by various sciences that emerged as a result of the Reformation) showed that the Bible is far more complex than we ever imagined. In time, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) stirs things up quite a bit. Slowly, over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bible moved away from the church into the university where scholars ripped it to shreds.

We gained a lot through the scholarship of the last two centuries. I don't want to return to that pre-critical time. But we also lost a lot. Protestants placed the Bible into the hands of the individual and yet the individual wasn't equipped to read it, to interpret it. Many read it uninformed by critical scholarship and turned the text into something else, making the text into a projection of oneself, saying more about the reader than what is read. A cartoon in the *New Yorker*, captures this; it shows a man making an inquiry at the information desk in a large bookstore. The clerk, tapping on his keyboard and peering intently into the computer screen, replies, "The Bible? ... That would be under self-help."²

Combine this self-centered reading with a *second* problem, the problem of language. We talk too much and we're bombarded with words today. "We live in an age of glibness. It is hard to imagine that in all human history words have ever been so plentiful, so lightly considered, and so deceptive as they became in the course of the twentieth-century. A survivor of Auschwitz says that all words have become for her suspect or ridiculous – not just the calculated rhetoric of political camouflage but ordinary expressions that seem to require no thoughts [such as]: 'I'm dying for a cup of tea.'"³ Are we really "dying" for a cup of tea? As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "our language is broken."⁴ And we broke it. Mass media, journalists, politicians, academicians, clergy, all speak and write copiously. How much of it is read or heard, digested or understood? Isn't there a suspicion about words, a distrust of rhetoric, preferring action or experience? This is because we don't trust the words we use to bring us to the truth or to justice or to beauty. "Our language is broken."

This leads precisely to the *third* point, what philosophers and theologians call a *hermeneutic of suspicion* – hermeneutic is a fancy word meaning interpretation.⁵ We're all drowning in it, this hermeneutic, this interpretative filter that suspects everyone and everything, doubts everyone and everything. The first Obama-McCain debate on Friday evening is a good example of this. CNN had a whole team of fact-checkers to test the truth claims of each candidate, doubting the veracity of their statements. In our skeptical age, we don't believe anyone is telling the truth, because we've seen words used too often obscure or even deny the truth. After the Nazi death trains brought the Jews to Auschwitz they entered through gates with

² Cartoon by Peter Steiner, *New Yorker*, 6 July 1990, 33.

³ Ellen F. Davis, "Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church," in Ellen F. Davis & Richard B. Hays, eds. *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2003), 14-15.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor argued this in her Beecher Lectures (*When God is Silent*, 1998), cited in Davis & Hays, 15.

⁵ Term first used by the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur 1913-2005), see *Freud and Philosophy* (1970).

these words overhead: *Arbeit Macht Frei*. “Work is Freedom.” We’ve seen how words can hurt and destroy.

What does all of this have to do with the Bible? Much. For many the Bible is just a collection of texts, of words and like all words approached with considerable suspicion. Can it be trusted? How can we build a life upon words? Spend some time with high school and college students, one of the biggest obstacles to faith is trusting the integrity of the text. It’s difficult speaking around their hermeneutic of suspicion. It’s not their fault; it’s in the air in this skeptical age. Are the authors reliable witnesses? Why were there books excluded from the Bible? What do we do with the parts of the Bible that I disagree with? How do we know what we have today is the original version? Where is the original version?

“Do you understand what you’re reading?” “How can we without a guide?”

Maybe we need to stop thinking of Biblical interpretation as a form of knowledge (*scientia*). Biblical interpretation is not a science. It’s less about science as it is about *art*. Reading scripture is really an art – “*a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination.*” As an art form, it’s not easy. To become an artist you have to work at it, practice. It requires study and reading. “Jews have always revered the reading of Scripture as the greatest and most difficult of all art forms.”⁶ And we can’t do this alone – we to read scripture as a community, in Bible studies, in worship.

Why art? Well, what does art *do*? It breaks open reality and leads us to something new. When we have been captivated by an artist’s vision of the world we come to have a new vision of the world.

What is the value of art? It leads us to *beauty*. Like every other form of art, “reading Scripture has the potential for creating something beautiful. Interpretations of Scripture are not just right and wrong... perhaps ultimately a more adequate way of judging our readings is the way we judge works of art – according to the standards of beauty.”⁷ We need less knowledge and more imagination, setting skepticism aside and then leaping into the strange and wonderful world of the Bible, putting ourselves into the strange and wonderful world of God we find in the Bible.⁸ We need to imaginatively engaged with the characters, the settings, the poetry, the beauty of scripture, to enter into the story of God’s redeeming love, of God’s faithfulness, of God’s forgiveness, of God’s hopeful vision. It’s God’s world, strange and different to us, requiring imagination and creativity and risk to envision and enter, what we find there. When we enter that world, then our worldview changes, along with our hearts and minds. “Imagination is the capacity to envision the existence of something that does not yet exist.”⁹ This is the imagination

⁶ Cited in Davis & Hays, xv, xvi.

⁷ Ellen F. Davis, xvi.

⁸ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin, “We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory, God’s incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God! Not the virtues of men but the virtues of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Not human standpoints but the standpoint of God! ... within the Bible there is a strange, new world, the world of God.” Karl Barth (1886-1968), “The Strange New World Within the Bible,” *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton, trans. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978[1928]),

⁹ Davis & Hays, xvi.

of the artist; it's what artists do. Seeing God's imaginative acts in Scripture will expand and transform our imaginations.

To what extent do our readings of scripture draw us toward something beautiful, more gracious, more excellent, more noble? Do they move us toward a richer, fuller, more majestic awareness of God and God's glory in Christ, in the world, in the church, and in us? Does it fire our imagination? Such a vision of scripture has the potential to claim us and make us into new people; it can renew the church; it will change our lives because the beautiful has the power to lure us into a God's new world, a new place of depth and insight, into the very presence of God – which will send us on our rejoicing.

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