

This week we are going to begin an all-church read of the Bible. We are calling it Journey Together: One Word. One Year. Each day there will be set of three readings: Old Testament, Wisdom Literature or Prophets, and New Testament. The reading schedules are printed as a bulletin insert this morning and they will also be available at the information desk in the Fishbowl, as well as posted on the website. I have heard many of you say that you are excited about this opportunity for us to read the Bible together, which makes me wonder, "Have you ever read the Scriptures?" Of course I know you have, at least in bits and pieces, but have you ever read them the way they are intended to be read? Like honey dripping down the side of a jar, or like a rose bud opening slowly in the warmth of the rising sun? I know you've read the Scriptures, but have you ever read them in this way?

Evelyn Wood has become the bane of Scripture reading. Recall she is the woman who introduced us to the concept of "speed reading." She taught us to skim read, eyes flashing diagonally down the page, pausing on key words and concepts, so we can then move on and read more and more pages at an ever faster rate. When we read Scripture that way we aren't really reading Scripture at all, or at least not as it is intended to be read. Someone has called that "Bible Tag." Here it is, the Bible in 50 Words: God made – Adam bit – Noah arked – Abraham split – Joseph ruled – Jacob fooled – Bush talked – Moses balked – Pharaoh plagued – People walked – Sea divided – Tablets guided – Promise landed – Saul freaked – David peeked – Prophets warned – Jesus born – God walked – Love talked – Anger crucified – Hope died – Love rose – Spirit flamed – Word spread – God remained.

Is that what it means to read the Scriptures? Not according to the Scriptures themselves. Psalm 1 speaks of the blessing of *meditating* on the law day and night. Those who meditate on the law "*are like trees planted by streams of living water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do they prosper.*" The Hebrew word for meditating is the same as would be used to describe a cow chewing its cud or a lion devouring its prey. So the prayer for illumination commonly used in the Anglican tradition says, "Help us, Lord, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Your Word." Rephrased: Blessed are those who masticate the Word of God!

Is that what we do? When we open the pages of Scripture does it feel like we are sitting down at the banquet feast of the Kingdom of God, or more like we are making a quick trip through the drive through? Often I know it feels more like the latter, so, I wonder, have you ever really read the Scriptures? And many of us would have to answer, "Maybe not."

Without question the Bible is the world's most remarkable book. If 100,000 copies of the latest novel are sold it becomes an automatic "best seller." Using that standard, the Bible has been a best seller every year since the invention of the printing press. More than a billion copies have been placed into circulation, and I doubt that considers the downloadable electronic versions. Martin Luther boasted that the printing press would promote the spread of the Gospel, so he committed the latter part of his life to translating the Scriptures in to the every day language of the common people, but curiously something quite unexpected happened. Although the Scriptures are much more readily accessible now than they ever have been before, people are less Biblically literate in this post literate age than they ever have been before. Walter Ong states it simply, "While most people can read the Bible, most people don't." Yet if this is God's Word to us, then it is a message we should be hungry to devour.

Many of us would confess that we have tried, perhaps multiple times, to read the Bible, but we just don't get it. In our lesson from Acts 8 today we find the disciple Philip being led by the Spirit of God out into the wilderness on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza, where he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, a well established and influential man who is in charge of the queen's treasury, riding in his chariot, reading the prophecy of Isaiah. Prompted by the Spirit, Philip approaches the chariot and asks the eunuch, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" Quite candidly he answers "*No, how can I unless someone guides me?*" Admittedly when we jump in to reading the Bible we find ourselves in what theologian Karl Barth calls "a strange new world." Gilbert Highet used to say, "Anyone who reads the Bible and isn't puzzled at least half the time doesn't have his mind on what he's doing."

It is true, we do need a guide to lead us into and through this strange new world of the Scriptures if we are going to glean the richness of its treasures, and that guide is available to us all the time, in many different ways. In truth, we never really read the Bible all by ourselves. Even though we may think we are reading alone, we are not alone at all. First, there is the Spirit of God who is active in our reading with us. John Calvin states that it is "the inward witness of the Holy Spirit" that seals the authority of the Bible for

us. In II Timothy we read that “*all Scripture is inspired or God-breathed,*” that means it is alive and life giving. When we read Scripture we are breathing in the breath of God through His Word. This is the work of the Holy Spirit; yet when we say that Scripture is inspired we are not referring only to those who wrote it, that they were touched by the Spirit of God long ago in their writing, but that you and I are similarly touched by the Spirit of God today in our reading. So this Word is ever new and alive.

Beyond the Spirit being at work in our reading, we also read in the presence of the great community of faith who has gone before us. Even when we are reading alone we are hearing the voices of those who have borne witness to the truth of this message through the ages: the apostles, our parents and grandparents, teachers and pastors and friends. All of these shape our reading and understanding of God’s Word. Paul writes these words of encouragement to Timothy, and to us, “*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*” Even in the silence and solitude of your den at night, you are reading God’s Word in the company of a great cloud of witnesses.

And third, we are called to read this Word together in the company of God’s people. Just as our faith is never intended to be experienced alone, so neither are the Scriptures intended to be interpreted alone. This is one of the great benefits of our all-church read of Scripture together. We are the People of God and this is God’s Word to us, so we are people of the Book together. I will confess that I am much better at reading Scripture with you than I ever am alone. I am more disciplined in my reading with you. I am more attentive to what I am reading with you. I gain more insights, and quite honestly, I am more interested when I read Scripture with you, than I ever do when I am alone. So, if you find Scripture hard to get in to or difficult to understand, join a Bible study or a small group, let’s talk about what we are reading together. In our lesson from Acts, Philip asks, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” The eunuch answers honestly, “*How can I unless someone guides me?*” And with that invitation, Philip comes along side him and reveals the Good News of Jesus, starting with this prophecy of Isaiah. We were not intended to navigate our way through this “strange new world of the Bible” alone. Like Philip and the eunuch we are intended to come alongside one another on this journey.

A most remarkable thing happens when we read the Scriptures in this way, we suddenly “find” ourselves in this story. Many have spoken of this experience through the ages. I recall a young woman who was participating in a Bible study I was leading several years ago. She came into class one evening very animated and alive. I asked her what was going on. She said, “I finally got it! I was sitting at my kitchen table this morning reading our lesson for tonight and for the very first time I realized ‘I’m not reading their story, I’m reading my story.’” In that instant she found herself in Scripture because, for the very first time, she was really reading it.

Eugene Peterson says that people come to worship asking two questions: first, “Is there a story?” (Is there some larger truth, meaning and purpose to life? Is God really active in the world and doing something?) “Is there a story?” And then, “Am I part of it?” The answer to both questions is an unqualified “YES”. Yes, God is at work in our world. Yes, He has a plan and a purpose that all people, in every time and place, might come to know His transforming love and saving grace. All of that is laid out for us right here in His Word, but we will never discover it for ourselves unless and until we crack open the Book and really read the Scriptures.

This book is unlike any other we will ever read and it is given to us for a very definite reason. Again, we read Paul’s instruction that “*All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.*” At first these all seem to be saying the same thing, but upon closer reflection the Scriptures are like a Swiss Army knife, every tool has a different purpose. First, Scripture is useful or profitable for *teaching*. We understand this one. Scripture is our teacher, our mentor, our tutor, teaching us about the ways and character of God, and telling us the stories of God’s people through the ages. No child is too young, no adult too old, to be taught the stories of Scripture.

Second, we are told that the Scriptures are useful for *reproof*. This is a less common term for us, but it comes out of the legal world. It is the argument that can be used to refute a falsehood. We live in a world that is awash in falsehood, so Scripture becomes our defense. Third, it is useful for *correction*. This is a medical term. It is the same word that would be used for setting a broken bone. A displaced bone needs to be corrected in order for it to heal properly. Scripture becomes that corrective, not for punishment, but for spiritual wholeness. Which leads to the final point, Scripture is useful for *training in righteousness*. Scripture is the plumb line in a “crooked and perverse generation.” It is the trellis around which the vine is intended to grow. It is the God-given pattern into which we desire to be conformed. So

essential is this pattern to the Christian life that we would be safe in saying that we are not Christian unless we are living according to the standards and teachings of Scripture. This is the measure by which we all will be measured.

In 1934 the underground Confessing Church in Germany spoke out against the terror of the Nazi regime under Hitler. The opening sentence of the Barmen Declaration states their firm dependence on the teachings of Scripture. It reads, "If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us! But if you find that we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience." This is our source for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.

When the Ethiopian eunuch finally read the Scriptures with eyes and heart wide open he said to Philip, "*Look there is some water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" We will know when we finally, really read the Scriptures because they always call us to action. God doesn't want us just to nod our heads in agreement when we hear His truths; He wants a response. He wants action. Every year, really since the invention of the printing press, the Bible is being translated in to increasingly more languages. The Scriptures, in full or in part, are now available in over 2,200 languages. But what is really needed are not more Bibles to be printed, but more people to really read the Bible and then do what it says. I love the way William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army put it, "I want to see a new translation of the Bible into the hearts and conducts of living men and women. It is of no use making correct translations of words if we cannot get the words translated into life." Friends, this is our calling, to translate these words into our lives; but be aware, that is dangerous business. When we open the pages of Scripture we are entering in to a strange new world that commands us and compels us to love our neighbor, to forgive our enemies, to stop putting our trust in things that will rust and rot or where thieves break in and steal. If we read the Scriptures, I mean really read them, life will never be the same for us again.

Novelist Annie Dillard reflects on her childhood growing up in Pittsburgh where she first encountered the strange, new world of the Bible and was confused by it. She writes, "When I was a child, the adult members of Pittsburgh society adverted to the Bible unreasonably often. Why did they spread this scandalous document before our eyes? If they had read it, I thought, they would have hidden it. They did not recognize the likely danger that we would, through repeated exposure, catch a dose of its virulent opposition to their world. Instead they bade us to study great chunks of it and think about those chunks and commit them to memory, and then ignore them. This Bible, this ubiquitous, persistent chunk of a best seller is a singularity, a black hole in which our rich and multiple world strays and vanishes. We crack open its pages at our own peril."

She's right. It is true. This book has the power to explode our safe little world in a myriad of different ways: it confronts our apathy with God's love; our desire for revenge with His forgiveness; our selfishness with His selflessness; our endless march toward death with His promise of eternal life. This Word holds the power to dynamite the only life we've ever known and then offer us the only life that will ever be worth living. In this Word God speaks, boldly and clearly. Which then begs the question of us: have you ever really read the Scriptures?