

When I was in the discernment process for ordination, there were lots of rumors about the type of questions that one would be asked along the way. Especially feared were the questions that the bishop would ask and of course these might be asked at any moment, whether you were in the bishop's office for an interview or just casually greeting the bishop after a service. The rumors didn't involve vague questions either – they were specific and the one I feared the most was this one – Can you summarize the Bible in 5 min? 5 min? I didn't think I could summarize it in 60 min. I was a life long Episcopalian and we Episcopalians have a tendency not to know scripture too well. I knew lots of the Bible stories, but to give a summary of the Bible in sequential order seemed to be quite hard. The assistant priest at my church suggested a comic strip summary of the Bible. I went out and bought lots of books – Bible Basics, Don't Know Much About the Bible, and even The Bible for dummies. Of course the bishop never asked any such question and I went to seminary, took my Bible courses and got a much better knowledge of the Bible. I still think that a good short summary of the Bible is a pretty tall order.

Scripture is a central part of our lives as Christians and yet many of us find it daunting. We don't know it or know how to interpret it. We skim around the Bible making little inroads here and there, knowing we are missing something. For many years, I remember having this frustration. I tried doing daily readings of short passages and felt I was reading bits of wisdom that didn't stay with me. I tried reading the Bible from start to finish, and didn't get much past Genesis. Struggling with the Bible is not new and it is what is happening is this morning's story from Acts. An Ethiopian eunuch is trying to understand the scriptures. He is reading from Isaiah and is having trouble. He is reading aloud as was the custom and Philip, who has been directed by the Spirit to be on that road, hears the Ethiopian reading. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" and invites Philip to get in and sit beside him. Philip begins to explain. He is a guide.

Guidance – we all need it in some form especially when it comes to reading the Bible. I think that there is the expectation that we can just pick up the bible and understand it. It seems as if many people around us are able to. I don't know why we expect to understand a book whose most recent parts were written 2000 years ago. Would we pick us a book from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and expect to understand it without putting in some work? We wouldn't get the references or the way of talking unless we did some preliminary study. Even things we hear today, can leave us confused. Here is an example that illustrates how tricky the interpretation of what we hear can be. It is a set of directions to a hall where someone had to officiate at a service. They went like this. "Look for a big building, the biggest in these parts. You cannot miss it. Drive on out the old highway past the cemetery until you come to the Smith farm. It is across the road from where that old school burned down about thirty years ago. Turn left on the gravel lane there and go down to where you see a great big oak tree. There is a road to right. Anyway, don't turn there, just keep on going. When you get to a place with some mail boxes, I guess there must be six or seven of them, well maybe eight, because old man Johnson s son moved onto his place last year and built his own house. There is a road around the bend from there about a quarter mile. After you cross the bridge that the Simpson girl ran off of in the flood of 61, you will see a dirt road. Take it on down to the hall."<sup>i</sup> As you can imagine, the person trying to follow these directions had to stop several times to ask for help. Sometimes, this is exactly the sort of help we need with the Bible.

It is the sort of help that the Ethiopian asks for from Philip and Phillip gives it. The Ethiopian had been reading from Isaiah 53 - a passage known as the suffering servant hymn. It tells about

God's servant who is like a sheep to be slaughtered, who in humiliation was deprived of justice and whose life was taken from the earth. Philip explained that the passage as a prophecy of the crucifixion of Christ and tells the Ethiopian that that the one who was spoken of in Isaiah was actually the one who died for us. He told about the astonishing Good News - that from this unjust death, God raised the suffering servant to be the savior of the world. Philip told him about the power of this dying and rising, and that this Resurrection and transformation happens in human lives and human relationships. The Ethiopian is touched – something resonates within him and when he sees water, he asks to be baptized - then and there. After Philip baptizes him, the new Christian goes on his way rejoicing. This is the kind of transformation that the Bible can bring about – even today.

Walter Bruggeman says - The Bible is not a fixed, frozen and readily exhausted read; it is a script always reread through which the Spirit makes all things new.

Barbara Brown Taylor one of my favorite preachers says - I cannot think of any other text that has such authority over me, interpreting me faster than I can interpret it. It speaks to me not with the stuffy voice of some mummified sage but with the fresh lively tones of someone who knows what happened to me an hour ago.<sup>ii</sup> How can we get this sort of feeling when we read the Bible? How can we experience this sort of transformation? Does it require years of study at seminary? Thankfully the answer to that is no even though one of my reactions in seminary bible class was that it would be really helpful if everyone went through this. When it comes to figuring out how scripture can transform our lives, there is no one right way. We all require different sorts of guides, but we won't find the one that works for us if we aren't out there searching for it. We also have to be open to the movement of the Spirit.

One of my first and very significant faith transitions happened through scripture and a book by Martin Smith, *The Word is Very Near You*. This book shows how one can pray through meditating on scripture stories and it kindled a real love of scripture within me. It works differently for a friend of mine. She says that when she reads the Bible by herself, she doesn't get much out of it, but when she works on scripture in a small group, new and transforming things are revealed. The other thing is that even after our initial discovery of the transforming nature of scripture, we continue to need guidance – we continue to have to look for ways that scripture is central and present in our lives. We don't know what happened to the Ethiopian after his baptism. When he returned to his homeland, we don't know if there was anyone to continue guiding him. If not, we must wonder how well he could continue his new found faith without any one to continue leading him in the way of Christ. Each of us is like the Ethiopian. We all still need guidance and to look for ways that scripture can continue to feed our souls. We are also to guide as Philip did – to help others along in their journey.

This life as a Christian was not meant to be traveled alone, which is why our Christian community is so important to us. Our community helps us to be aware of the presence of the Spirit. It is in community that we are guided and guide others. We are guided right here at Epiphany when we worship with each other, when we struggle with scripture in "Getting Ready" and other formation classes, and when we work next to each other at the Welcome Table breakfast. Scripture is "in" our lives as a Christian community. It is in the words we say from the prayer book. It supports our commitment to reach out to the poor. Scripture informs our lives. Scripture is an amazing gift that God has given us. Scripture is full of wild stories – some so wild that you can barely believe they are in the Bible. Scripture can be a source of comfort in times of

distress and grief. Scripture contains stories of regular people like us- take the disciples for instance, who doubted and blundered around.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that, “The Bible is my birth certificate and my family tree, but it is more: it is the living vein that connects me to my maker, pumping me the stories I need to know about who we have been to one another from the beginning of time, and who we are now, and who we shall be when time is no more.”<sup>iii</sup> Scripture is essential to our lives as Christians. In our reading from Acts, the Ethiopian eunuch picked up a scroll, read it and his life was changed with a little guidance from Philip and the movement of the Spirit. We too are called as Christians to know this book God has given us, to let ourselves be formed by its teaching and to open ourselves to its transformation. So go forth fellow Christians at Epiphany with your Bible in hand and see what happens next.

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<sup>i</sup> The Rev. Kenneth W. Kasselus, *Worship that Works*, Easter 5, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p. 52

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