

**Sound Bites**  
**Preached by**  
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**United Church of Fayetteville**  
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**For reflection:** *Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian.* Aiden Wilson Tozer

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** Psalm 119:105-108; 111-112

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.

I am severely afflicted; give me life, O Lord, according to your word.

Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord and teach me your ordinances.

Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever to the end.

**Gospel Reading:** Acts 8:26-35

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. Seated in his chariot he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in beside him. Now the passage of the scripture he was reading was this:

Like a sheep he was led to slaughter and like a lamb silent before his shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

**Sermon: Sound Bites**

A child asks, "There are no dinosaurs in the Bible. Does that mean there really weren't dinosaurs or that the Bible is wrong?" We are trying to make a difficult decision about our marriage or our vocation. We would like a sign from God; there aren't a lot of reports of angels or fire in the sky these days. We wonder if maybe God has stopped speaking or if the Bible has got it wrong. Inside and outside the church, people use the Bible to support both sides of arguments on questions like these: Should we have open borders and how should strangers among us be treated? What punishment is appropriate for people who commit violent crimes? Is there a word about the poor, the loss of privacy, the lack of intimacy, the isolation of people, households and nations or the care of creation? We hear the Bible quoted in apparent opposition to itself so often, we wonder whether it provides any guidance at all.

What is of more concern than these questions is the way some of us try to answer them—by employing sound bites, pieces of biblical wisdom pithy enough to be embroidered on a pillow. Quoting experts and authority figures is a time honored means of debate, but too often quoting the God-inspired Bible is confused with quoting God. As a result, we have difficulty sorting out the authority of Scripture in our own lives or how we might determine its guidance.

In the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a Coke bottle falls to the ground from a plane, landing unbroken amid a group of indigenous people. Because it had dropped from the heavens, they assumed it was a gift from the gods. While wanting to respect the gods, they weren't really sure what to do with the gift. They eventually threw it off a cliff. They found it useless—too difficult to take care of and too great a source of trouble.

At times we treat the Bible like that Coke bottle—a gift from God to be sure, one we happily present to our third graders, but as adults find it cumbersome and awkward, banishing it to a dusty shelf or unopened nightstand drawer.

Many of us abandoned its serious study not long after confirmation. Before we toss this gift from God, let's talk about how we understand its meaning and interpretation from our traditions' perspectives. Let's talk about how adults use and study the Bible or ought to.

The Bible doesn't come with a user's manual, but we are not left without assistance if we to listen to what it does and does not claim for itself. How does the Bible speak of its own inspiration—the inbreathing of the Spirit? The psalmist says, "Accept my offerings of praise, O lord and teach me your ordinances." This is one of many scriptural reminders, that simply knowing how to read, is not enough. Fred Craddock, a legendary preacher and teacher of preachers says ... *"one could argue that the accent on inspiration has more to do with getting the word off the page than on it, more to do with the Spirit's work in keeping the past words present, active and functioning in the community. But now inspiration has increasingly come to refer to the Spirit's work in getting the words on the page, written accurately, errorlessly, recording precisely the facts as what was said and what was done."* Each week just before the sermon is preached, we pray a brief prayer, asking for the same thing: Lord, help us, hearers and preachers, to get the words off the page. Help us make the words meaningful and powerful today.

Yet knowing how the words came to be on the page and for what purposes is important. The Bible itself does not claim that one can simply read it and understand without assistance, not only from the Spirit, but from other humans. Listen again to part of the exchange between Philip and the Ethiopian: *Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"*

Who are the guides? We are guides to one another—that knowledge, insight and the Holy Spirit are gifts given to every one of us. Our faith calls us to study and to share with one another and with the world what we know and what we have experienced.

The exchange between Philip and the Ethiopian continues. They read a passage of Scripture together, then: *The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"*

Like the Ethiopian, we need to ask questions of the text, not an easy task for those of us who are the inheritors of generations of interpretation. Like Philip we need to be prepared to be interpreters. Christianity is a faith of head and heart. We are not asked to leave our minds on the doorstep of faith, ignoring challenges and inconsistencies, as if to do so would make us more faithful.

We acknowledge that the books of Scripture were written by humans who experienced God's presence and purpose in the lives of God's people. With rare exceptions we don't know who the individuals writing were, so we can't say for sure what their intentions were. But some things we do know. Written by people of faith for people of faith, the Bible is a collection of short stories, oral traditions, poems and letters. Only one book even claims to be a history. (Luke-Acts, written as a single document.) If the authors of Scripture themselves don't claim to be writing biology, geology, science or history, we need to be very cautious about using their work in those ways.

If the Bible doesn't claim to be those things, what does it claim to be and what does the church claim for it? Scripture itself makes no single or clearly articulated claim. Rather, through various modes, it retells the story of peoples of faith as they saw it and as they interpreted it. As they saw it and they interpreted it.

The church claims that Scripture reveals God's presence and purposes. It bears authority in matters of faith and life. We do not claim that the people who wrote it were able to predict what the world would look like 300, 1300 or 3300 years later. Is it then reasonable to assume the Bible can provide guidance a world never pictured by its authors? It is because the God who inspired those authors, is still alive and working in this world and in Scripture?

Like Jewish tradition and Philip before it, the church has recognized that Scripture needs interpretation—that questions will arise that do not have a ready-made sound bite answer. In fact, that interpretation is part of Scripture itself—one prophet quotes another, emphasizing different points. Jesus interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures. The writers of the letters re-interpreted Hebrew Scripture yet again in light of Jesus' life and death. Why? Because even within Biblical times, the world changed, the questions changed and the experience and knowledge of people changed.

Nor are we the first people to notice that the Bible doesn't always agree with itself: that the same apostle who wrote women should keep silent in the churches also wrote in Christ there is neither male nor female; that there are two stories of creation; or that the same Bible which holds books describing enormous act of faith and courage holds Ecclesiastes' cynicism; that the Proverbs' suggestions that the good and the bad get what they deserve are countered by Job's story of undeserved suffering.

That there always have been and continue to be differences of viewpoint and understanding among people of faith does not invalidate that faith. Rather, the inclusion of these differences validates and affirms the need, even the

obligation to struggle with the questions. Faithful consideration of the questions calls for three things: seeking the guidance of the spirit, seeking the guidance of our family in faith and asking questions of the text.

To engage in faithful discussion is to resist taking the easy way out at either end of the spectrum. It is to resist the temptation to use sound bites or quotes that support a viewpoint, ignoring both context and other views. While Scripture can be and is applied to situations beyond itself, we need to be cautious about how we do that. Scripture provides guidance, not easy answers. The psalmist called Scripture a lamp, not a roadmap.

It is not enough to be educated about the context of biblical stories and quotations. There is more to taking Scripture seriously. To engage in faithful discussion is to resist the temptation to say, "The world has changed, this doesn't apply anymore," or simply throw out the parts we don't like. It is to resist the temptation to say, "This is hard, we quit." Seeking the guidance of scripture in matters of faith and life is a demanding task. We must make ourselves biblically literate, not biblical literal. We must make ourselves biblically literate, not biblical liberal.

It is a fine line to walk. We come to this task with many resources. We have the guidance of scripture and the Holy Spirit. We have a community of faith inside and outside these walls. We have our God-given gifts of heart and mind, the ability to make sense of our experience, to feel and to think. We understand that our prayerful, communal study is the best we can do at any given time and place to interpret through Scripture; God's will for the world in this time and place.

We recognize that we are always waiting for more of God's light to be revealed. It is an attitude of faithful hope in the future. We know questions answered for one age does not mean the questions are answered for all time. We know too, that we live in the world, not above it or outside it. The life beyond these walls offers both questions and answers. When our tradition and our world come into conflict, it is not Scripture that we question, but our interpretation of it. Fred Craddock puts it this way: "To make the language of faith of a given period, even that of the New Testament, absolute, would be to deny that Jesus is the lord of all history, including our own."

Whatever conclusions we reach—to reach out in reconciliation or with a call for justice; to depart from tradition or not: we must remember—we are not unfaithful because we have been mistaken. We are unfaithful when we refuse to consider the possibility. We are not unfaithful when we ask questions of Scripture. We are unfaithful when we refuse to allow God who is always doing new things, to do new things in us. Our ancestors in faith gave the questions of their time their best effort. Let us not do any less.

Let us pray: Lord, help us to be as happy that you have given us as adults the gift of your Word as we are to present it to children. Help us to be your more faithful people, open to the freshening breath of your spirit. Help us to get the word off the page and into our heads and our hearts and hands. Amen.

### **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Gracious God:

We come before you a people in need praying for a world in need:

We pray for people who think violence is the answer – that guns and bombs in the mail are an answer to anything  
 And we especially pray for the people impacted  
 those wounded or made afraid  
 who have to be on their guard all the time  
 the ones who mourn the dead  
 the first responders who see sights no one should see

we pray for all the ones affected lesser affronts to human dignity that seem to ever open the doorway for more and more violation

for ones who can not enjoy a meal in a public place

for those bullied on social media or in person

for those who are victims of the abuse of power

Lord,

give us a word

give us a way

to do the healing, reconciling, justice making ministry to which you call us.