

Today we begin a fall series exploring biblical studies. The bookS upon which we are loosely basing the study is authored by Peter Enns and entitled, *How the Bible Actually Works*, and I really love his second title: *In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather Than Answers—and Why That’s Great News*. I suspect some of the energy for this sermon series is connected to the responses we have received when Susanne and I unpack some of mysterious imagery which appears in our biblical texts. It would not have been mysterious to those who wrote, read or heard the texts in the 1st century, but that was nearly 2000 years ago in some cases and more distant when looking at the Old Testament. 2000 years is a long time, and things change. Governments, borders, houses, topography, occupations, agricultural and ranching practices, gender roles and identities and so forth—all of these change through the centuries. John’s Revelation is a recent example of our efforts to make legible the more cryptic, and we both heard very positive responses for the effort we put into the task. A study on biblical study seemed a natural continuation of something which both Susanne and I enjoy and also something which this congregation values.

The bible has been very important for Jews and Christians though the centuries. In his commentary on the Psalms, William Holladay writes, “[f]or over two thousand years the book of Psalms has been a “primary vehicle” shaping “the public and private worship of Jews and Christians”.¹ The bible became a central focus in the Protestant reformation of the 16th century, and it was in that movement that the Anabaptism and the Mennonite tradition came into being. A major difference between the Mennonite branch of the Reformation, as compared with Lutheran or Reformed wings, is that the Mennonites opened up biblical studies to everyone: male, female, the learned and uneducated. Court documents, for example, reveal extensive biblical literacy among Anabaptist on trial for the crime of not attending the state sponsored church.² Margaret Hellwart of Beutelsbach was a particularly gifted instructor of bible and theology; Katharina Koch testified that she did not need to go to church because Margaret Hellwart taught her all she needed to know.³ The *Martyrs Mirror* is filled with correspondences saturated with biblical citations. The Bible was really important to these pioneers of our faith tradition. I wonder if it is this important for us. And this reality, or my perception of reality, reminds me of a story.

¹ William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.1

² C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, ON: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1996), 368-370.

³ *Ibid*, 66.

It is a famous Hasidic tale which appears in Eli Wiesel's *Gates of the Forest*. Wiesel was a survivor of the WWII concentration camps.

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening [his people], it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the mis-fortune averted.

Later when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: Master of the Universe, listen! "I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And, again, the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire; I do not know the prayer; but I know the place and this must be sufficient. It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel Ruzhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his arm-chair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.⁴

I am not a Margaret Hellwert. I am not a Perry Yoder or Mary Schertz or Jacob Elias who taught me the foundations of Biblical study at our Biblical Seminary. I am not Vern who knows much in theology and biblical studies. We have what we have, and it must be sufficient, and it will be sufficient. So we begin.

A foundational question we must ask is "Why?". Really. Why take time to study the bible? Bible wielding Christians have used our sacred texts to justify genocide, violent punishment of children, patriarchy, and other unsavory things. Some have argued that given the track record of Christianity we might do better with less bible study than more. Why? Why study the bible? I can not answer this question for any of you, but I can answer it for myself.

Biblical study is important for at least three reasons. It allows me to be intelligently in conversation with those who I feel are mis-interpreting the scriptures. This is reflected in the court documents from the 16th century Anabaptist trials. Our spiritual ancestors knew their bibles and it gave them the strength to be in conversation with those who interpreted the bible differently. A real example of this appears in the manner that we make sense of suffering. Is

⁴ (PDF) Nehemia Polen, "Yearning for Sacred Place: Wiesel's Hasidic Tales and Postwar Hasidism," in Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen, eds., *Eli Wiesel: Jewish, Literary and Moral Perspectives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 69-82 | Nehemia Polen - Academia.edu

suffering punishment by God? In a 2022 *Christian Century* article Presbyterian minister Mihee Kim-Kort quotes Arland Hultgren that suffering as punishment is “one of the most widely held ‘theological propositions’ that exists in popular thinking” among Christians. “It is the quick remedy to explain illness and death,” he writes. Kim-Kort goes on to detail the manner in which the Jesus of the New Testament does not operate on that one-to-one correspondence.⁵ We must know the parables of Jesus to engage in such theological and biblical misinformation. This is very compelling reason to take on biblical studies.

Biblical study also allows us to be intelligently in conversation with those of other faiths, agnostics and atheists. When someone declares to me that they are an atheist, I am always intrigued by the God in which they do not believe. More times than not, I don’t believe in that image of God which they describe. This acknowledgement brings on a look of confusion with my conversation partner. A statement usually ensues and is some derivative of the following: “Well then, tell me about the God you do believe in”. When put back into my court, I really need to have an alternative concept of God. For us, that alternative image of God is reflected in the Jesus of the scriptures. So, it is good for us know this Jesus.

I will come to my third point in a bit, but I want to first consider our scripture passage of the morning because it connects to a deeper understanding of the Jesus story. Not only that, it would seem odd to spend all of a sermon talking about the value of biblical study and not spend a bit of time *in* biblical study.

As we tuck into the text, I really need to offer a short primer on some of the tools of biblical study. You see, the bible writers employed certain techniques to make a story or teaching more easily memorized to be repeated. The Psalm of the day, for example, is rife with literary technique. It is an acrostic, meaning that in the original language there were twenty-two sections corresponding to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet blocked into groups of 8 verses; each section begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And there is parallelism throughout each section in which the second sentiment restates or elaborates on the first section; separated by a semi-colon in our Psalters.⁶ In our New Testament text from Acts we have a chiasm which is more of a Greek literary technique. “Chiasm” is a term based upon the Greek letter which we call “X”. The center of the “X”, marks the spot upon which we invited to focus. The fancy folk call it the kernel. So, off to Acts 8 we go to find a kernel of wisdom.

⁵ Mihee Kim-Kort, “Living the Word” in *The Christian Century* (March 9, 2022), p. 18.

⁶ Robert Bratcher and William Reburn, *A Handbook on Psalms* (New York: UBS Handbook Series, 1991), p. 996.

Acts 8:26 Then an angel of the **Lord** said to **Philip**, “Get up and go toward the south to the way that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a *wilderness* road.) **27** So he got up and went.

Now there was an **Ethiopian eunuch**, a court official of the Candace, queen of the **Ethiopians**, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning home; seated in his **chariot**, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

29 Then the **Spirit** said to **Philip**, “Go over to this **chariot** and join it.” **30** So **Philip** ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

31 The **eunuch** replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited **Philip** to get in and sit beside him. **32** Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

34 The **eunuch** asked **Philip**, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”

35 Then **Philip** began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about **Jesus**. **36** As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the **eunuch** said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

38 He commanded the **chariot** to stop, and both of them, **Philip** and the **eunuch**, went down into the water, and **Philip** baptized him. **39** When they came up out of the water, the **Spirit** of the **Lord** snatched **Philip** away; the **eunuch** saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

40 But **Philip** found himself at *Azotus*, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

A chiasm follows a stair step pattern in which persons, geography or other information are mirrored on both sides of the kernel. In the case of this section of Acts 8, a grand story, we find in the first and last paragraphs references to Phillip being on the move. “Get up and go to on the way to Gaza”. Just a small point here-- the NRSV says to go on the road, but actually the Greek says “way”; which is important in Acts because the fledgling church is often referred to as “the Way”.⁷ What Phillip is commissioned towards, the author is suggesting, is nothing less than the Way of Jesus. Gaza, one of the five major Philistine cities of Old Testament times is paired with Azotus—which is the Greek version of Ashdod⁸ in N.T. times, also one of the five major Philistine cities of Old Testament days. Oh dear, are there Philistines invited to this emerging Christian party? There is serious movement in both paragraphs—Geographic and theological movements.

Quite fitting is that in the second blocks on our Way to the mark is that we have a eunuch in a chariot. Eunuchs herald back to Isaiah 56:3-8 in which God grants them to be part of the greater fellowship. But this stands in contrast to Deuteronomy 23:1 in which eunuchs are excluded from the gathered worship. Imperial powers, at the time of the writing of Acts, were the only ones to have chariots. The imperials were not kind to the Way. And then Phillip goes to the chariot and “joins it”. What now are we talking about? Phillip has joined himself and the gospel of Jesus Christ to this chariot driving eunuch who should by all means not enter the presence of God Almighty? Hmm: what do we make of that? Note, also, that the Water of Baptism is paralleled with the reading of scriptures. There is a type of conversation which happens when we allow the scriptures to read us though the lens of Jesus Christ..

In the next level of the chiasm, the Eunuch asks questions. How can I understand unless someone guides me? About whom does this prophet speak? Questions will abound as chariot driving Ethiopians and Eunuchs come to internalize the story of Jesus Christ. In each generation we ask similar questions of who is able to enter the congregation in their most authentic self. The response from the scripture which the Eunuch was reading is the kernel of our text.

“In his humiliation, justice was denied him” (Isaiah 53:8). According to the Greek version of the O.T which he was surely reading, it translates as “he was lifted up”—not justice denied.⁹ Was not Jesus lifted up? Does Micah 6:8 speak about doing justly and practicing mercy? Does Jesus not tell us that blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy? In his humiliation, God lifts the Eunuch up.

⁷ See Acts 16:17, 18:25-26, 19:9, 22:4, 24:14.

⁸ John r. Kohlenberger III (General Editor), *NIV Nave's Topical Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p.59.

⁹ Robert W. Wall, “Acts” in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*— volume 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), p 144.

Why study the Bible? Because we all need to be reminded again and again that the image of God resides with every person; that the image of God resides in us; that the table and house of God are open to those most humiliated in our society. This is a different image of organized religion than which most people have. We are invited to own this story and extend this story to others. There ends my short biblical exposition of this section of Acts 8. Biblical study has the capacity to transform our attitudes, policies and actions.

My third point on the significance of biblical study is along the lines of the Ethiopian eunuch. It has to do with personal transformation. I know of no better way to communicate the gift of the bible than through a story. Eldridge Cleaver was a leader within the Black Panther organization in the U.S. during the 60s and early 70s. It was a violent wing within the civil rights movement. He had fled to France to avoid arrest after a shoot-out with police in Oakland, California. In deep depression one night he describes a type of conversion, or reconversion.

I just crumbled and started crying. I fell to my knees, grabbing hold of the banister; and in the midst of this shaking and crying the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm came into my mind. I hadn't thought about these prayers for years. I started repeating them, and after a time I gained some control over the trembling and crying. Then I jumped up and ran to my bookshelf and got the Bible...I discovered that my memory really had not served me that well. I got lost somewhere between the Valley of the Shadow of Death and the overflowing cup. But it was the Bible in which I searched and found that psalm. I read through it. At that time, I didn't even know where to find the Lord's Prayer. I looked for it desperately. Pretty soon the type started swimming before my eyes, and I lay down on the bed and went to sleep.¹⁰

Why study the bible? It helps us return to the ground of our being who is none other than the Prince of peace; not the Prince of Whales, but the Prince of peace. We study the bible because it equips us to engage constructively with the biblical disinformation out there. We study the bible because there are people who look at the bible and ask that capable guides show them the Way. That is, the way of Jesus. May God grant us humility and understanding as we once more set out on the Way. Amen.

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¹⁰ Eldridge Cleaver, quoted in William Holladay's *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, pp 6-7.