

How Can We Understand the Scriptures?

If you've ever driven a long trip on your own, you know how tiring it can be. Maybe you've done like I have and listened, not just to music, but also to books read aloud—either CD's or something you download to an i-pod or smartphone. You might listen for a while to a recording of the Bible as you drive.

But what if you were listening to the Bible and you didn't understand something that was said? If you were reading you could re-read it, and maybe look up other passages if you have a cross-reference. If you're just listening, I suppose you could re-wind and listen to it again. But what if it just doesn't make sense?

The Ethiopian official in our first lesson was perplexed at a part of Scripture he was reading on a journey. God sent his prophet Philip to explain the Bible to the man. Today God provides people who are trained to help us, like pastors and Lutheran school teachers. Really, all of us who are confirmed in the church (like these students) have been trained to explain the Bible. From our study of how God helped the Ethiopian man, we'll try to answer his question this morning: How Can We Understand the Scriptures?

First of all, we need to look for Jesus in the Bible, because he is the focus of the Bible. That may have been harder for the Ethiopian official to do. After all, the Scriptures which he had were only the Old Testament, written before Jesus was born. But no doubt he had heard that those Scriptures pointed to a Messiah, a Savior who was to come into the world.

You see, this Ethiopian official did know the true God. He was on his way back from worshiping in Jerusalem. The man had traveled 200 miles to worship with the Jews. Very likely he was what they called a "proselyte at the gate"—not born Jewish, but a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel.

Riding in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah, chapter 53, which speaks about the Servant of the Lord: **"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."** That's a tough section, taken all by itself. The Ethiopian asked Philip whether this could be Isaiah writing about himself, or was it referring to someone else?

"Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." Philip told the man that Jesus had been led like a sheep to be slaughtered, not fighting back, not saying a word. He was deprived of justice; he even gave up his life. But it was not in vain. Philip no doubt pointed out other passages in that chapter of Isaiah: **"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."** Jesus suffered pain and death to pay for our sins. He suffered the punishment we deserved. That's why we can be certain that God loves us today. That's why we can be certain our souls will rest in heaven after our bodies die.

And death wasn't the end for Jesus, either. Later on in this 53rd chapter Isaiah says, **"After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied."** Jesus came back from the dead on Easter day. His resurrection proved that he had won a great victory over death. One day we will be raised from the dead and brought to our eternal home in heaven.

We can read the book of Isaiah and understand that it points to Christ. Indeed, we can see that all of the Bible points to Jesus. As we heard a few weeks ago, on Easter Sunday Jesus explained to his disciples how all the Old Testament pointed to him.

In Confirmation class, we make a point of asking the question again and again, in all sorts of ways: Can we do anything to get into God's good graces? Can we earn life in heaven? The answer is a clear No. We are sinful people. But Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, lived perfectly for us and died to save us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus compared himself to a Vine, and we are branches. So long as a branch is connected to its vine, it will be alive, even bearing fruit. But if the branch is cut off from the vine, it will die. We have to stay connected to Jesus, by hearing his Word, receiving his Sacrament, as our confirmands will promise that they will strive to do. And then we will have the power of God to live as God's children each day. It all comes down to being connected to Jesus.

How do we understand the Scriptures? First of all, we look for Jesus. But that means we have to avoid the natural temptation to look for ourselves on the pages of the Bible.

Back in the 1990's, there was a TV show called "Dinosaurs," and that's what it was about: a family of dinosaurs, talking dinosaurs. Actually this family was more like the Honeymooners or the Flintstones. In the first episode, a new baby was born to the dinosaur family. Baby dinosaurs talk right away, and this one wanted its dad to tell a story. "Tell me a story about where I came from, Daddy," the baby said. So the father gave a short history lesson about dinosaurs coming from the jungle and building houses. But the baby interrupted, "Me! Tell a story about me!" So the dad talked about their family and grandparents, only to be interrupted again: "Me, me, me! Talk about me!"

We can all be like that, can't we? Even when it comes to religion and the Bible. Some people come to church in order to be reminded of what a good person I am because of all the good things I've done. And when I have a problem, I might look in the Bible, but just for advice on what I should do so I can take care of myself.

How can we understand the Scriptures? By looking for Jesus, not by looking for ourselves. That can be a real temptation for us, since we all are naturally self-centered. It's even more of a temptation when we have to avoid false teachers who would point us away from Christ.

The Ethiopian official face false prophets too. Looking back one chapter in the Book of Acts, we read about the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It says, "**On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered through Judea and Samaria**" (Acts 8:1). The Jewish leaders completely rejected Jesus. When the Ethiopian official had been worshiping in the Jerusalem temple, he wouldn't have heard that the Scriptures point to Jesus Christ. No, the teachers there would have said just the opposite.

The Bible warns us that there will be false prophets throughout history. We can see that today. There are preachers on TV and in pulpits who open the Bible book of Daniel and talk about modern-day Israel and Iraq instead of the victory of Jesus Christ over the devil's forces. There are churches that point to God's Law and say, "This is what you can do in order to be sure you're saved."

We can thank the Lord that there are true teachers pointing us not to ourselves but to Christ. God sent Philip to that Ethiopian official. God still sends true prophets today, first of all those whom he calls into the ministry of the Word. Our confirmation students are prepared to test the spirits, so they can join a church that teaches the truth.

Yet, even with the true teaching of the Word, there are times when we don't understand a portion of Scripture. We still have questions, about the Bible and about God. But we know the basis of our faith; and even though we can't understand everything, we can rejoice in the knowledge God has given us. How can you understand the Scriptures? By rejoicing in our faith.

Philip rode with the Ethiopian eunuch for maybe an hour, maybe a few hours. Yet in that short time the official was convinced that Jesus was his Savior. When they came to a pool of water, the official asked to be baptized. Philip obliged. Then, **“when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.”** No doubt Philip could have stayed and taught the man for days; but God had other uses for this disciple. And the Ethiopian? He got what he needed: a thorough teaching of the message of salvation. After being instructed in God's Word and made a member of God's family by baptism, the man **“went on his way rejoicing,”** in his new faith.

God made sure the Ethiopian man was instructed in the faith at just the right time. God made sure we were brought to faith too. The Holy Spirit worked through his Word and Sacrament to give us faith. And it is that faith that enables us to read Scripture properly—looking for Jesus, not looking for ourselves.

When we have a question about a particular passage, we can call our pastor, or look in a good reference book like the Catechism. Sometimes as you go through the Bible, you might just mark a difficult passage and go on reading, confident that the Lord will help you understand in the future.

We have our youth spend years studying the Bible so they are strengthened in their faith. The Bible was written to tell us about Jesus, our Savior; the more we know the Bible the more we know Jesus. We spend lots of time training our youth so they can understand the Bible. And we teach them so they can share that faith—not only this morning in their Examination, but every day of their lives.

In a sense, we are all like Philip. God won't send you to meet a chariot; but just like Philip, God will put you in the right place at just the right time so you can tell someone about Jesus. Sometimes you'll be consciously ready for this, like when you think about how you can comfort a friend who lost a parent to death, maybe by telling that friend the Easter story. Sometimes God will place you near someone unexpectedly, like while you're waiting in line at a store, and a person starts talking about how tough life is, and you can say that you know God is working through all things, because Jesus came to be the Savior of the world. Young Christians will have many opportunities to share the Good News.

There will even be people who ask, in one way or another, How Can I Understand the Scriptures? And we can say, first, what does this portion of the Bible say about Jesus? How does it reflect God's wonderful plan of salvation?

Don't look for you, rather look for Jesus. That's how we can understand the Scripture. Amen.