

Acts 8:26-40 N.T. 119 (NRSV)

²⁶Then 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.) ²⁷So 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 ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now 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. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As 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?” ³⁷ ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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. ⁴⁰But 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.

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“Disciples Disciple”

Opening Prayer: Please pray with me. O God, our God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight today. **Amen.**

Introduction: **This book** I hold in my hand has been called the “good book” because it reveals God’s desire to live in a loving and eternal relationship with all who desire to love and live with God in return. **When a German goldsmith** invented the printing press back in 1440 A.D, the very first book printed on that press was the now famous **Gutenberg Bible**. No one knows for sure how many copies of the Bible are in print today, but some sources estimate the number at around 7 billion. That’s one Bible for every man, woman, and child living on the face of the earth today. But before the invention of the printing press, **artisans painstakingly made** every copy of the Bible by hand. This meant that only the wealthy could afford the luxury of owning a Bible. **A few years back**, at Saint John’s University in Minnesota the first handmade illuminated Bible created in over 500 years was dedicated to the glory of God and the benefit of all humanity. Let’s watch a clip from that dedication:

{Play Video “Saint John’s Bible.wmv” [0:53]}

The *Saint John’s Bible* took a team of calligraphers and artistic illustrators twelve years to create at a cost of over \$8 million. Only the wealthy could ever own such a Bible. But once again, through the marvel of the printing press, **you can have your very own reproduction** of that handmade Saint John’s Bible for the bargain basement price of **\$395** for the complete seven-volume set. That’s only five one-hundred-thousandths of the price of the original. **Or you could upload the Kindle version** of the English Standard Version of the Bible from Amazon.com for free.

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Move I.

It's not enough to own a Bible you have to read it. While it's true that some Bibles, like the Saint John's Bible are works of art that you can admire from afar, you need to open the covers and read the words inside to discover its true treasures. I'm pretty sure everyone here today owns at least one Bible. In fact, most of you have more than one. According to ChristianWeek.com, **the typical North American household** has an average of three Bibles. Raise your hand if you have at least three Bibles in your home. (Raise hand.)

Now I don't think this will surprise you, but I actually have ten times that many Bibles. **I did a quick count** and between the Bibles I have at home and the ones I have here in my office at the church I have **35 Bibles**, and that doesn't include a little New Testament I sometimes carry in my pocket when making hospital visits, or **this Bible** I sometimes read from when I'm preaching which is normally by the couch in the living room. Nor does it include the Bible on my laptop or my surface or the **Bible I have** on my smartphone. Now everyone expects pastors to have a lot of Bibles, maybe not 35, but a lot. But what might surprise you is that I owned most of those Bible even before I sensed a call into ministry 18-years ago. I have always owned a lot of Bibles.

But there is one Bible that means more to me than all of the rest. It's not one of the Bibles I bought, or even one of the Bibles given to me as a gift; **it's a Bible I inherited**. (Hold up dad's Bible.) This is the Bible **my dad used** for years when I was a kid growing up. I inherited it after he died in 1992. It's a King James Version of the Bible printed by Cambridge Press in England back in the 1960s. It's rather small and unpretentious, but as you can see, it's well worn.

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Now I'm not sure you can tell from where you're sitting, but there's something unusual about this Bible, something that would have been very rare 50 years ago. Can you tell? What color is the cover of this Bibles? Yes, it's red. My dad special ordered this red leather covered Bible to make a point. When he was preaching he would often hold up his red covered Bible and say, "*This Bible is red, because the Bible should be read.*" Well, this Bible certainly was read. **You can see** it's all dog-eared, the spine is broken, and some of the pages are falling out. I can remember getting up many a morning and seeing my dad sitting in the living room reading this Bible and taking notes. In fact, one of his pages of **handwritten notes** is still folded up inside. This week when I unfolded the note, which I hadn't looked at in years, I was surprised to see that one of the notes he'd written actually dealt with how people should use the Bible. My dad wrote, "**Show case,' put it out for display. Meditate on the Word of God and do what God wants you to do.**" **Yes, it's not enough to own a Bible, or even many Bibles, you do have to actually read it,** and then do what it says.

End I.

Move II.

But we don't always understand what we read. The Bible is a good book, but you have to internalize the words found on those gold gilded pages between those soft leather covers to receive that good. And you can only internalize those words if you can understand them. Supposed you didn't grow in a Christian home and you hadn't ever been part of a church. You've heard that the Bible is a good book, in fact so good that people claim it changes their lives. So you go to the **Barns & Noble bookstore** up on Peach Street, head downstairs to the religion section, find a Bible, and take it to one of those **nice comfortable chairs** they have so you can curl up with this good book. Ahh, where should you begin, well at the beginning, right? **Genesis 1:1 (NIV), "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."** Wow that's pretty controversial, **isn't it?** What about evolution? Are the scientists all wrong? Or is evolution just a process God uses when creating? You've only read the first sentence, and already you have questions about what it means.

Once a neighbor of a woman, who was in a Bible study group I was leading, told her that he had recently decided to **start reading the Bible** for the first time. He too opened to the beginning of the book and stared reading in Genesis. Fortunately, he managed to read beyond the first sentence and actually read though several chapters. When he next saw the woman from my Bible study group, he told her, "*I started reading the Bible, and you know what I've discovered. **God's pretty mean.***" Yes, here we are just seven chapters into the "good book" and **God has already** whipped everyone out in a flood. I gather, for the moment, the woman's neighbor had given up his reading in despair. All reading has managed to do is confirm his worst fear, "**God is mean.**"

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What advice would you give this woman's neighbor, or the fellow beginning to read the Bible for the first time there in Barns & Nobel? You'd probably say, "*Don't start with start with Old Testament start with the New.*" Ok, **Matthew 1:1 (NRSV) "**An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**" And then it carries on with at least a half page with a whole bunch of who begat who all the way from Abraham to Jesus. Yep, this sure is a "good book" all right, **a real yawner**. Maybe we should have had them start with another one of the Gospels. **How about John**, that's my favorite gospel. **John 1:1 (NRSV)**, "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**" Now I want you to take that sentence at face value for a moment. Think as if you were reading it for the very first time and that you don't know anything about Jesus. The sentence sounds like a bunch of twisted double speak. You'd read it and say, "*It's all Greek to me,*" and of course John was writing in Greek. It's one thing to read the Bible, it's something else altogether to understand it.**

That's exactly the problem the Ethiopian eunuch is having in our Bible lesson today. Because of his privileged position as the treasurer for the queen of Ethiopia, he has access to one of the scarce hand-copied parchments of the prophet Isaiah and he's even learned how to read its language, which isn't his native tongue. But as privileged and educated as he is he still doesn't understand what he's reading. He asks, "**About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?**" (Acts 8:34b, NRSV). **But we really don't always understand what we read.**

End II.

Move III.

So, God illuminates the Bible's meaning. God doesn't leave any of us to have to sort out what the Bible says in isolation. **God didn't drop** the Bible to earth by parachute and then leave us down here all alone to figure out what the Bible means. God's Spirit has been actively involved through the entire process. First God's Spirit inspires the Bible writers to say what God wanted said. And then God's Spirit helps the reader interpret what they read so they can get what God wants understood. It was the great protestant reformer, **John Calvin**, who explains this best. *"Inspiration of the Scripture is not enough to effect salvation and knowledge of God's character. Illumination of the inspired Scripture is necessary."*

The Saint John's Bible that I spoke about at the beginning of this message today is a very special type of Bible called an *"Illuminated Bible."* Before the printing press, **most Bibles** were illuminated Bibles. Rather than simply putting text on parchment, the calligraphers added graphical illustrations of what the words said. They gave the words a divine splendor. They did this because in those days most people couldn't read. **This is the same idea** that was behind Orthodox iconography **and also behind** the magnificent stand glass windows that adorned many medieval cathedrals. It wasn't cheap. Copying the text on paper is primarily a left-brained activity but adding the graphical illumination; that's a right-brained activity. **Most of our Bibles today** are simple left-brained renderings. But people have whole brains, not half brains. **So an illuminated Bible** like the Saint John's Bible speaks to the entire brain. Written words aren't enough. Spoken words aren't enough either. Only illuminated words truly come to life. **Jesus Christ is the illuminating of God's Word**, he is the Word became flesh who makes his dwelling among us. That's why I don't only speak words in my messages; I show visual illustrations too. God's message is never just words, it's always meaning.

In our Bible lesson today about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, it's important to notice that **God's orchestrating** everything that's going on. **See the hand of God** reaching down **and the angel of the Lord** keeping watch. God dispatched Philip to that desert road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza and God spirited Philip on to his next assignment after he'd illuminated the Bible to that Ethiopian man. God used Philip to illuminate the meaning of the Bible. Philip was a disciple, one of the original twelve, and he helped disciple the Ethiopian eunuch, who was very much a Gentile.

That the Ethiopian is a eunuch isn't just an extraneous detail in the story. It has meaning to first-century Jews that flies right past most of us today. God has made it clear that his desire to live in a loving relationship with people wasn't just limited to the Jews, **but extended to people** of every kindred, tongue, and nation throughout the earth. The Ethiopian was a eunuch **because in his official capacity** he had unprecedented access to the royal household. As a castrated man, he posed no physical threat to the Queen he served. But his castration made him unfit to enter the Temple in Jerusalem. You see, to convert to Judaism, a man must be circumcised; **and a castrated male can't be circumcised**. The Ethiopian eunuch was beyond redemption under Jewish law. **But the good news of Jesus Christ** allows the Ethiopian eunuch to be a disciple too.

I love these illustrations of Philip and the Ethiopian reading the Bible together; one disciple is discipling another. **That's what God wants** all of Jesus' followers to do. To spend time reading and illuminating God's Word together. **That's why small group ministry** is vital to being an engaged Christian. Every Christian needs to be engaged in studying the Bible together with other Christians. Disciples disciple others because **God's Word has the power** to transform everyone's life. **So, God is always engaged in illuminating the Bible's meaning.**
End III.

Conclusion: The original of the Saint John's Illuminated Bible is on display in museums around the world. But you have to do more than admire the Bible from afar. **Yes, it's not enough to own a Bible you do have to read it.** My dad's Bible was red because the Bible is to be read. Showcase the Bible, put it on display in your life. **But we don't always understand what we read.** Like the Ethiopian eunuch, we ask, "how can we understand unless someone explains it to us?" **So, God is always engaged in illuminating the Bible's meaning.** God inspired the writes and he illuminates the readers of the Bible. God wants Jesus' disciples to read and intrepret the Bible together. *"Disciples Disciple."*

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Almighty God, thank you for revealing your desire to love us and live with us forever though your Holy Word. May we meditate upon your Word together so we may be who you've created us to be and do what you've called us to do. **Amen!**

Communion: *"The Great Thanksgiving for Easter Season"*

10:30 Closing Hymn: "O Master Let Me Walk with Thee" Red Hymnal No. 430
All Four Verses

Sending Forth: Does reading the Bible leave with more questions than answers? Then pray for the illumination of God's Spirit. Go forth as disciples who disciple by reading and studying the God's Word together. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**