

This coming November will mark 10 years of ordained ministry for me. It's not very long, really. I love what I do. I hope that's obvious, mostly to you. And I hope to be doing it for a long time to come. 10 years of ordination is long enough, however, to figure out a few things and one of the things I've come to figure out is that people read the Bible for all sorts of reasons. When I was growing up, it seemed to be part of the tradition of my little church that we read the Bible for answers. If we had a question about how we ought to live or how we ought not to live, the Bible had an answer. If we wanted to know God's thoughts on abortion or marriage or the role of men and women in church and home, the Bible had answers for all this as well. The Bible was authority without error. As such it was good for finding answers. Granted, I'm older now, and I'm finding that the Bible doesn't have answers for all my questions, or maybe I'm just not as satisfied with the answers as I once was. Either way, I've been glad to discover that there are other reasons people read the Bible. Some people read the Bible not in search of answers but in search of questions.

One such person was the Ethiopian eunuch. We meet him in the Bible itself, in the book of Acts. He is traveling from Jerusalem down to Gaza when he pulls his chariot over to the side of the road next to a lake of water. Luke, the writer of Acts, tells us that he was in Jerusalem worshipping, but we know that's not really true because an Ethiopian eunuch would never have been allowed in the sanctuary to worship. It's more likely that this eunuch, who is probably a servant to a wealthy king or queen, stood outside the doors of the sanctuary while his master went in to worship. The text in church that day was Isaiah chapter 53:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its 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 must have had his ear pushed up against the door, listening through the peephole, picking up every word the preacher had to say and wondering, who's he talking

about? Who is this sheep that was led to the slaughter, this sheep that was told to go away, to stand outside and be quiet? Who was this sheep, because this sheep sounds an awful lot like me?

It's outrageous that some people will stand outside the doors of the church and pound the wood until their knuckles are bruised and bloodied, refusing to go away, refusing to believe that what's being said on the inside isn't also for those on the outside.

So, sitting in his chariot, miles away from the sanctuary, the eunuch is now reading Isaiah for himself, when along comes Philip, who asks him if he understands what he is reading. "How can I?" says the eunuch, "without someone to help me." And Philip climbs up into the chariot next to the eunuch and tells him about the sheep and how God has a special place in God's heart for those who have been pushed to the margins. This of course forces a question for the eunuch: "What is to keep me from being baptized then? What's to keep me from being numbered among those whom God loves?" And because Philip can't think of an answer to the question, he baptizes the eunuch right there on the side of the road. Philip opens the door of the church and invites the eunuch in.

It's not hard to imagine this scene playing out very differently, though it might be hard for *you* to imagine it playing out differently, because you are the church of a thousand open doors. I asked Brenda if I could share this story with you. Brenda and her husband Jim, along with their grandson Lincoln, have been worshipping here with us for about a year now. They started coming here right after Brenda asked if Lincoln could be baptized here. "We grew up Catholic and have attended a Catholic church for a long time," Jim and Brenda told me the first time we met. "We respect and love the Catholic church, but we know, for reasons deep and personal to them, they won't be able to baptize Lincoln. Might he be able to get baptized at Four Corners some day?" I told Jim and Brenda what I have told dozens of other families just like them, I told them that this church doesn't own the rights to baptism. I told them that if the story of the Ethiopian eunuch is true, then who are we to say no when God has said yes? I told them that even though this church didn't know them at all, on the day Lincoln is baptized we will promise to love him like he is one of our own. "How much will it cost and how long does it take for him to be approved?" they asked me. I told them, "Nothing, and, no time at all." Brenda said that's pretty amazing. I said, I find this church to be pretty amazing myself.

But of course, I do not mean to speak this morning only of amazing things but of violent things. For we know that for every time one person gets told, no time at all, someone else is still asking, how much longer? Habakkuk. To be honest, it was not the story of the Ethiopian eunuch that I went looking for this past week but the story of Habakkuk. Habakkuk was one in a long line of prophets who had been called by God to stand in the midst of a world hell-bent on its own destruction and to preach that all was not lost. It was not an easy assignment, for it never is. To tell the poor that God is with them, even as the rich get richer. To tell the peacemakers that God loves them, even though there is no peace. To tell the mournful that they will be comforted, when right now all is sadness and loss. To tell the victims of racial hatred and religious bigotry that God is on their side, when no one in power is protecting them. To keep on believing in the goodness of humanity, to walk the streets freely, to trust the stranger still, when it seems the innocent could get shot at just about anywhere, anytime.

I feel like I get what Habakkuk is up against and why, after years of standing in the pulpit and trying to speak for God, he one day walks himself down into the middle of the congregation, and taking a folded piece of paper out of his pocket on which he has written his complaint, he says to God what everyone is thinking: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, Violence! and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention all around. The law has become slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous. The powerful abuse their position and pervert what is good. The enemy drags us around like we are on a hook. We are nothing but sacrifice. Is the enemy just going to get to keep on destroying? Is there no mercy? I will stand my watch and station myself where I am needed. I will keep watch to see what you will say to me, and what you will answer concerning my complaint. But how long will it take, O Lord? How long?"

58 lives killed this time. 49 last time. 33, 21, 24, 13, 17...all gone. And we would not forget what you have told us, to pray for our enemies, to not be overcome by evil but to overcome evil with good. But how long, O Lord? And no sooner does God answer us back saying, "How long? How long have I been knocking on the door of your hearts asking to

come in? My knuckles bruised and bloodied. I've died a thousand deaths waiting for you.  
And have I given up on you? Never," says God, "not ever."