

**"The Spirit & Sacred Reading"**  
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Our lectionary texts for the season of Easter have allowed us to dip in and out of various Gospel stories and now, today, we have the joy of encountering this very dramatic narrative in the book of Acts. I love how commentator Matthew Skinner puts it: "Acts, like Easter, urges [us] to put cautious rationality on the shelf and follow an unrestrained God into the world, wondering as [we] go what else might be possible. Both Acts and Easter want [our] imagination[s] to run wild."

Friends, I don't know about you, but 2021, in a way different than 2020, has been a challenge for me. How I long for the fresh wind of the Spirit to come and help my imagination to run wild. I need the urging of scripture to help me put cautious rationality on the shelf so that I can follow our unrestrained God into the world.

My husband, Kevin, recently shared with me an article in the NY Times entitled "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing." Languishing is the neglected middle child of mental health, and it can dull our motivation and focus. Languishing may be the dominant emotion of 2021. Writer Adam Grant further describes languishing as a sense of stagnation and emptiness, as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield.

I want to suggest that perhaps an antidote for languishing many of us may be feeling this year is a new and guiding experience of the Spirit's power to orchestrate for us relational connections around sacred texts.

After all, our story in Acts is nothing if not a divinely orchestrated discussion between Philip and this unnamed Ethiopian court official. Here we see God's great desire to join people together so that all would truly come to know the gospel as good news.

Acts 1:8 offers a vision statement, of sorts, for the whole narrative of Acts. Jesus declares that his followers will be his Spirit-led "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." By the time we get to Acts 8:26, where our story takes up, the disciples have been in all of those places except one: the ends of the earth, wherever that is. Part of the great drama this encounter on the road that connects Jerusalem to Gaza is that it call to us today to expand our horizons—that we might reach far and to every kind of person.

The story also shows us that we should not be surprised if the Spirit literally interrupts whatever we are doing, and begins to give us directions for engaging relationally with others around sacred texts in order to see the good news come to all.

As many of you know, Westminster finished a church revisioning process in late 2019 that included not only plans to call a designated pastor to assist it its vision of transformation but also hopes to enact a “Hub and Spoke” ministry whereby the church would continue to offer care and support for its long-time members, that’s the hub, but also begin to reach out, relationally, into the community, as spokes coming out from the church. The spokes are members engaging, relationally and meaningfully, with folks out in the community—in your neighborhood developments, in coffee shops and restaurants, community gardens, volunteer opportunities, and more. The intention is to build connection, community, and belonging with folks who may not ever step foot into the sanctuary for worship but who are nonetheless spiritual and desirous of building community and belonging and working for God’s way together.

The hub and spoke model understands there are new spaces where people are engaging together for personal and social transformation, accountability, and connection: fitness communities, community gardens, art and hobby communities and the like. So, today, the angel’s instructions to “get up and go toward the South” might going towards folks who see their “spiritual lives as organic and emerging, responding to the people around [them] rather than structured into dogmatic categories of belief and identity.”

Fifty years ago, “most people in the United States relied on a single religious community to offer connection, conduct spiritual practices, ritualize life moments, foster healing, connect to lineage, inspire morality, house transcendent experience, mark holidays, support family, serve the needy, work for justice, and—through art, song, text, and speech—tell and retell a common story to bind them together” (Casper ter Kuile). Now, all these offerings have become unbundled. So, for those of us still participating in the church, we must continue to ask how can we remain agile and receptive to the leading of the Spirit?

And make no mistake: the leading of Spirit has not changed. God’s desire to join us to one another has not changed. The work of the Spirit is still for Jesus followers to “go over to the chariot and join it.”

But, where are the chariots today? Whose in them? How are we to join?

Let’s consider again what exactly happens to the Ethiopian Eunuch as he was reading scripture. He was asking for a guide to help him understand what he was reading. And as the Spirit brings Philip to come alongside of his reading and help him understand, the Ethiopian begins to see himself in the story of scripture. He recognizes that the sacred text of Isaiah is speaking to him, to his own life experience. He discovers that the sacred text affirms his own worth and dignity as a Eunuch and this propels his desire to be baptized. As Matthew Skinner puts it, “whatever Philip tells him about Jesus, [he] discerns on his own the fitting outcome for him. Inclusion. Participation. Belonging.

Casper ter Kuile, in his book *The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices*, suggests that sacred reading is one ancient practice that can help folks, in this rapidly changing and fragmented time, to connect to their authentic self. How wonderfully aligned Kuile's insight is with what happens in our story. The Ethiopian Eunuch sees himself in the sacred text of Isaiah and then desires to be baptized as an affirmation of his authentic self. Sacred reading is a way to connect to our authentic self—to the self that is inherently full of worth and dignity, that *imago dei* that resides in each person. Again, Kuile suggests that we can treat "a book as sacred not because we're going to believe that the storylines within it somehow explain the mysteries of the universe, but because they help us be kinder, more compassionate . . . curious and empathetic . . . they can help us know who we are and decided who we might want to become."

Friends, let me clarify what I am getting at: if we today want to join the drama of Acts, becoming Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth, then, as we embrace our hub-and-spoke model, let us allow the Spirit to lead us in new and innovative ways of joining up with folks in their chariots who long to connect to their authentic self through the art of sacred reading.

Today, we know that there are new texts that are being made sacred and helping folks connect to their inherent worth and dignity: Jane Eyre, Harry Potter, Louise Penny mystery novels, to name just a few. Kuile suggests that sacred reading brings us home to ourselves. The Ethiopian Eunuch read passages in Isaiah, and explored their meaning with Philip, and he found himself in the good news of God for all people.

Perhaps one way we can begin to envision a spoke in Westminster's hub and spoke vision is through book groups. Many in our congregation joined with Christine Hansvick and myself, along with some others in our presbytery and most exciting of all, with folks in our community, for a few months of sacred reading together. We chose as our sacred text Robin DiAngelo's book on *White Fragility*. The experience, while complex and deeply challenging, was also incredibly transformative for many of us as indeed the text brought us into a deeper awareness of our authentic selves and our role in dismantling white supremacy.

My prayer is that this dramatic story in Acts would inspire us to dare to dream new dreams for community engagement. I hope that it leaves you with a deep and abiding confidence that the work of the Spirit is unchanging. The Spirit is steadfast in directing and divinely orchestrating events that bring followers of Jesus into relational engagements with others who are seeking to know and live the good news in their own lives. I pray that we would connect the drama of the story with Westminster's vision for a hub-and-spoke model for our church. And finally, I hope that you are encouraged to know that the relational approach we might take, by reading texts with folks out in the community, is a true and inspired way to follow our "unrestrained God" into the world. Amen.