

Acts 8:26-40

Today, we continue to move through the Book of Acts, following the movement of the Holy Spirit and God's kingdom from Jerusalem out toward "the ends of the earth" as recorded in the opening chapter of Acts. Our story follows the story of a co-worker of Stephen, whose witness, stoning and martyrdom, we recalled last week. Philip was one of the seven (alongside Stephen) who were selected by the community and set apart by the apostles to help run the community, to "serve tables." But, just like Stephen, Philip did not remain a table-server, but became a travelling preacher, proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom through Jesus in Samaria.

Today's story is one of the more delightful ones in Luke's arsenal of good stories. Whether or not Luke was a physician of one sort or another, he was certainly a talented First century raconteur. He writes his Acts under the influence of the risen Jesus' promises to his apostles, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." What the "ends of the earth" meant in Luke's geography certainly included Rome, considered the "centre" of the earth in the First century, but most likely included "Spain," Paul's ultimate missionary goal, as his Roman letter makes clear. In short, the Book of the Acts will follow this trajectory, beginning in Jerusalem and ending with Paul preaching openly in Rome. To follow this arc, Luke will sprinkle his writing with lively and engaging tales of Christianity's growth and expansion, due primarily to a band of hardy evangelists, who find

themselves again and again in various sorts of hot spots, forced to perform astonishing acts of theological exploits.

And today's story is one of those sorts of tales. Fresh from evangelistic triumphs among the Samaritans, Philip is given a new assignment by no less than "an angel of the Lord," who commands him, "Get up and go towards the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Luke wants us to know "this is a wilderness road," meaning that it is wild and dangerous, far from the safest route one might take upon leaving the sacred city of the Jews. Without comment, Philip "got up and went." We note that the call of the angel did not bother to tell Philip just exactly what he was supposed to do on this wild road, cut through the western deserts of Israel, but Philip, like all his evangelistic brothers and sisters, is alert to the sudden and mysterious call of angels, the Holy Spirit, or even the Lord himself.

Philip is led by the Spirit down a specific path for a specific purpose. Apparently, the Holy Spirit had set up a faith formation experience along a wilderness road. Faith formation is every action, experience, or relationship that nurtures a relationship of trust with God and shapes the way we see and interact with God's world. Faith formation is the very mission of God's church, to equip followers of Jesus Christ and send them out into the world to spread God's kingdom.

This is a story about a dramatic and untraditional experience of faith formation. In "traditional evangelism," the evangelist has the faith, the good news, and brings it to one who does not have it. Faith formation is not supplying faith where there is

none, nor is it a one-sided interaction. At its best, faith formation is about sharing – sharing about God using each participant in the experience to form and transform every other participant.

Of all people, Philip is shown an Ethiopian eunuch, a very high official in the court of Queen Candace where "he was in charge of her entire treasury." Several facts need to be noted about this travelling Ethiopian. His nationality triggers a number of memories from the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah promises a future day when "YHWH's hand will be extended a second time to recover the remnant that is left of God's people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coast lands of the sea." This prophecy is found with the marvellous promise of "the shoot from the stump of Jesse," and the classic portrait of "wolf lying down with lamb," being led by "a little child," pictures that play such powerful roles in the formation of the early church's belief in Jesus. Plainly, this Ethiopian represents for Luke the beginning of the fulfilment of this ancient promise.

In addition, he is a eunuch, a physically mutilated man, many of whom became significant political figures in a number of ancient courts. In the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew word "eunuch" is translated in Luke as "official." In Deuteronomy it says plainly that "no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of YHWH." In other words, this eunuch, according to Jewish law, can never be a full member of a Jewish worshipping community. This eunuch may have just returned from worshipping in Jerusalem, but his complete

participation is precluded. It is true that Isaiah does promise that "eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths" and God's covenant would some day be granted a place in God's house, but even that language sounds a bit grudging — just what sort of "place" will a eunuch be granted? A back pew? A spot in the balcony? A eunuch room?

Whatever his acceptance may or may not have been in Jerusalem, this eunuch has performed his religious duty to worship in Jerusalem and is now going back to the court of Ethiopia. He rides in a chariot large enough for him to be seated, further suggesting his great status and wealth. He passes the time during the long journey by reading the prophet Isaiah.

In biblical studies, the main character of this story is often called the Ethiopian eunuch, and that is mostly how Luke refers to him in this narrative. That description names him by a characteristic of his body and his social standing, which in light of the gospel is not nearly the most interesting thing about the man. Others have called him the Ethiopian treasurer, which gives him higher standing in society — but still not the most important thing about him. We learn in the story that the Ethiopian is a genuine seeker after God. He is a God-fearer who makes the long journey to Jerusalem to worship, and then continues to study and meditate on scripture on his way home. He is seeking the truth, he is seeking God.

If nothing else, this small point in the story and its reception history can call us to question how we describe those to whom God sends us and who are placed in our path. How do we see them? Do we see them in terms of social, economic, racial,

ethnic, gender, or other identity markers? Or do we see unique persons created in the image of God, in whom God is already at work? Do we see people who are seeking Christ and who have already been found by Christ — though they may not know it yet? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to not call this man the Ethiopian eunuch ... but rather the God-seeker whom God was seeking.

It would be a mistake to think that the Ethiopian traveller did not have an active, vital faith. After all, despite not being a native Israelite, he was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem. This took a large amount of faith to pilgrimage all the way from Ethiopia, especially since, as a eunuch, he was not even allowed in the temple. It would have been very rare for someone to have a scroll at all, so not only did the traveller have a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, but he was taking the time to read it on his travels. This is a person with a faith that has been forming over a long period of time. But, despite his wealth (or access to wealth), influence, education, and faith, he still had questions he couldn't answer. What did this mean? Who was the afflicted man?

For this, the Spirit brought along Philip, about whom we know very little. Judging from what was not said about him, Philip was probably like most of the early disciples and not a man of wealth, influence, or education, most likely from the working class. But, he also had a deep faith, and had all sorts of faith formation experiences in the Jerusalem community and beyond.

Philip sees the large chariot, and now the Spirit (not merely an angel)

commands him to "go over to the chariot and join it." Philip runs over to the chariot and overhears the eunuch reading Isaiah. (Reading in the ancient world was almost always aloud. Some 300 years later, Augustine will say in his Confessions that he finds it very odd that bishop Ambrose is found reading silently!)

Apparently still running, he asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He asks a question that all readers and lovers of the Bible have asked ever since: Do we get it? And the Ethiopian responds, again echoing millions of later Bible readers, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

The eunuch invites the (exhausted?) Philip to join him in the large chariot to help him with Isaiah, one of the most important passages for early Christians: *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.* It is part of Isaiah's fourth so-called Servant Song, describing the mysterious figure who was slaughtered and humiliated and whose life was "taken away from the earth," as Luke gives the text to us.

So, to answer the eunuch's question - who is this servant - Philip replies that it is no one other than the resurrected Jesus. And like Jesus before him on that road to Emmaus, Philip proceeds to speak, "and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." In joyful response, the eunuch immediately asks

Philip to baptize him into this faith of Jesus. And "both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him." In most translations verse 37 is missing: *Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may."* *The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."* Only one family of manuscripts has the verse that demands a confession of faith from the eunuch, something in the very early days, demanded of any who would be baptized. The verse is very clearly an addition, made to conform this baptism to the emerging practices of certain communities of Christians, that most translators leave out as not part of the original story. The verse has caused considerable controversy among those who want things done right and in the right order.

There is little doubt that Luke records this question especially because this is a loaded question. What is to prevent anyone from being baptised? Can wealth, race, sexual status, piety, understanding and so on and so forth prevent someone's baptism? The good news is for all and all are invited to share in the fullness of life with God and each other! This is part of the essence of the good news in Jesus. God breaks down barriers to include all people in God's family. The response of the eunuch to the message is automatic – baptise me! God is at work!

When the two come up out of the water, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away," but the eunuch hardly noticed, apparently, since "he went on his way rejoicing." These wild prophetic gyrations should sound familiar. Like Elijah before him, Philip was addressed by an angel, carried about by the Spirit, and finds himself running down the road after a chariot of a most powerful official. Philip now finds

himself in "Azotus," a community on the coast on the way to the Roman city of Caesarea, and "as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns," which is what a prophet always does.

The story was recorded because it was meant to inspire hope that the message of Jesus was going forth into the world as promised, even in the face of persecution and difficulties. And we can find hope from this as well, as our story connects with the same God who spoke in the desert to Philip and through him to the Ethiopian Eunuch.

It is hope that we experience in our story as a community of faith in the face of our own adversities. It would be easy for us as a congregation to look around Sunday by Sunday and be despondent – too many empty pews, too many elderly faces, not enough energy. Yet, to focus on these things is to forget God's faithfulness to us as God's people – new opportunities in ministry opening up such as the Olive Branch; new renters helping to support our ministries - God's faithfulness is ever present to us.

It is a hope we can see that unfolds in the compassion of the world around us. The past weeks we have heard the news of the terrible lack of food in Africa, starving people in Sudan, and the capacity of people to respond: communities countries and individuals donating money, sending people and supplies. Not wearied by the constancy of need refugees around the world - refugees risking their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean in flimsy boats, refugee camps growing daily, desperate

people looking for hope - once again people, the CLWR, respond when the need is great.

It is hope that we can see in our own lives and our own encounters with God in others. Take a few moments to reflect on the last few days and consider where have you seen acts of kindness, where have you come to understanding or seen others being enlightened, where have you see reconciliation achieved. How do you make sense of these things in light of your faith? How have you been able to help others to see those connections?

“Do you understand what you are reading?” It’s a great question for all of us because sometimes we fail to make the connections that we should. We need Philip to come trotting alongside our chariots to help us to understand.

Yet, more importantly for many of us who already follow Jesus we are called to be the Philips of this world, opening up people’s eyes to God’s faithfulness and work among us. Joining the dots of what people read and experience in their own lives – in other words sharing our faith - being fishers of people! Consider the times when a person like Philip has helped open your eyes and also to consider whether or not you are taking the opportunity to be like Philip and help others know God by sharing your faith.

This story is not the beginning of the Gentile mission; that starts with the grand story of Cornelius that occupies fully six chapters of Luke's book. Today’s story is about the marginalised brought into the community, a new community that God is

forming from every nation, the new community of Jesus. And we, like the prophet Philip, are called to proclaim that new community "to all the towns." The radically inclusive nature of this community is here announced, and will not be denied. When Ethiopian eunuchs are found in our pews as full members of Christ's body, who are we to exclude him or to relegate him to some second-class position?

The story of Phillip and the Ethiopian seeker is rich with insight and possibility for how we share the gospel in this postmodern and post-Christian age. It has the potential to open our eyes and spark our imaginations to new and faithful ways of authentically confessing our faith.

The Spirit had found the Ethiopian long before Phillip arrived. Phillip was sent to meet him on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. First, God's messenger is sent to go out to meet the one who is seeking God. This in itself is a paradigm shift for many churches, who believe — implicitly or explicitly — that the seeker will find God when the seeker comes to the Christian community, when the person shows up at a worship service or meal or event. But what if God intends the community to go out to meet the seeker, to find her where she is and join her there?

Where does proclamation happen and who does it? In a Sunday morning pulpit or on a stage? On TV? In a stadium or arena? Yes, that's proclamation ... but there is so much more! Most proclamation happens like Phillip's conversation with the Ethiopian. It is most often a quiet conversation between one person and another on the road, often about life's deepest questions. Phillip had no idea where this

whole encounter would go; he didn't strategize it or plan it. He simply followed the Spirit's lead, joined the man on his journey, and confessed his faith when the conversation went there. This is the proclamation that the whole church shares, and for which the whole church is empowered and sent!

Amen.