

April 29, 2018
Acts 8:26-40
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“Can I Get Some Help?”

Good morning! Our text today is from Acts; a story which you might not have learned in Sunday School because there are some things in it which could be a little complicated to explain to children. But as with any reading from Acts, a safe question with which to approach the text is this: what is the Holy Spirit up to? The story of Philip and the Ethiopian comes from Acts 8. The epi-center of the Spirit’s activity is Acts chapter 2 and the day of Pentecost; the rest of the book radiates out from that event.

We’ll get to Acts 2 in a couple weeks, but today we’re going to start with Philip and some directions from an angel of God. First a little back story on Philip: Philip is one of seven Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who was appointed by the apostles to take care of those in need -- especially widows -- among the Christians who speak Greek. Earlier in Acts we’ve been told about a Pharisee named Saul who is persecuting Christians -- this guy Saul approved of killing of Stephen, a martyr who was filled with the Holy Spirit even as he was being stoned to death. The believers scattered away from Jerusalem after Stephen was killed, and Philip went to Samaria, where he made many converts. He was known as Philip the Evangelist.

While Philip is in Samaria, he gets a call -- to go out on a desolate road at high noon. What kind of showdown is about to happen? Because this call comes from an angel of the Lord, Philip gets up and goes to the desolate road as the angel directs him. And on this road, in the middle of nowhere, he meets a man riding in a chariot and reading the book of Isaiah. Now, either one of those things separately would have been noteworthy: chariots were a form of transportation only for the wealthy -- the sports car of the ancient world -- and only the very wealthy could afford a collected writing such as an Isaiah

scroll. But to have these two things happening together, in what is surely one of the earliest cases of texting and driving, would have been extraordinary. This guy in the chariot is driving through the middle of nowhere reading out loud to himself.

So, just to make it a little weirder, the Spirit says to Philip, "Climb into the chariot." OK. So Philip sprints alongside this horse-drawn vehicle and to kind of break the ice he says, "Hey! Do you understand what you're reading?" And the driver answers, "How can I without some help?" and they guy invites Philip in to the chariot.

We don't know the chariot driver's name, but we're told a couple pretty interesting things about him; things which are important to our story. First, he's from Ethiopia. For the Jews, this would have meant any African country south of Egypt -- essentially he's from far away. We're told he had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, so he was probably a believer in Judaism; at very least he's trying to learn more about it, since he has an Isaiah scroll. This man is a high-ranking officer in the court of the queen of Ethiopia -- Candace means 'queen' in that language. And oh yes, one more thing: he's a eunuch. In fact, that's how he's referred to through this story, not by name, but as "the eunuch."

Eunuch is not a word we use a lot; this is the part which might be a little tricky to explain to young children. A eunuch is a castrated human. Usually a boy who was castrated against his will (apparently not many boys volunteered for this) before puberty. Eunuchs were often court officials close to the king or queen. They were considered politically more safe because they weren't going to have romantic or family entanglements. They were officials and house slaves and especially handy for guarding the king's wives, if he had a harem. This eunuch, as we said, was the minister of finance. If castration was a pre-requisite for government office today, that would put a speedy end to a lot of political ambition.

Eunuchs were looked down on and snickered about as lesser men -- which they kind of were. But importantly for our story, Jewish law specifically forbade a man who had permanent injury to his sexual organs from entering the assembly of the Lord. This is in Deuteronomy 23:1 you may read it yourself: I am not going to quote it

exactly. This eunuch is wealthy and powerful and smart, but he's an outcast in his own society, and he's excluded from gathering to worship with Jews. And this is what he's chosen for a little light reading from Isaiah 53:7-8, the Song of the Suffering Servant:

**As a sheep led to slaughter, and quiet as a lamb being sheared,
He was silent, saying nothing. He was mocked and put down,
never got a fair trial.**

**But who now can he count his kin since he's been taken from
the earth.**

The question the eunuch asks Philip is “Is the prophet talking about himself, or some other?” but I believe the question the eunuch is *really* asking is the question that most of us have asked ourselves or someone else, “How can I be accepted by God?” Fortunately, the answer to both of those questions is the same: Jesus. Christians reading the prophet Isaiah realized that chapter 53 is a description of Jesus Christ. It also includes a description of us, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid upon him [the servant] the sin of us all.”

The book of Acts doesn’t tell us specifically what Philip said to the eunuch: it says Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus. Sisters and brothers, that is the same good news that we are still proclaiming today: The good news that Jesus Christ died for us; the good news that Jesus Christ took away our sin; the good news that Jesus Christ defeated death and the grave; the good news that Jesus Christ makes us whole; the good news that through Jesus Christ we are acceptable to God.

Very few of us come to that truth on our own. In fact, we don’t come to that truth at all without this book. My copy includes the very same book of Isaiah that the eunuch was reading aloud to himself while driving down a road in the middle of nowhere. But it also includes a lot more: not just the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, but its New Testament fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Whether someone preaches it to us, or we read it ourselves, or some combination of both, we know the glory of God, the story of Jesus, and the promise of the Spirit because of this book.

Last week I was at a conference on Biblical Authority sponsored by the Church of the Brethren. It was a fine event, and gave me plenty to reflect on. The Bible is one of the great treasures of our faith, and this story of Philip and the eunuch illustrates part of how the Brethren value the Bible. Their exchange is a conversation which could happen today: “Do you understand what you’re reading?” “How can I without some help?” Here is a truth of the Bible: none of us holds the entire truth of the Bible. We understand what we’re reading with help from other people; our understanding is challenged when we discuss it with other people; we come to a deeper understanding when we listen to other people. The Bible was never intended to be anyone’s

private property. It is a treasure for God's people to share. We are meant to experience the Bible in community, and to help each other understand what we read there.

Do you remember the question I asked at the beginning of this sermon? *What is the Holy Spirit up to?* We're going to be asking that question A LOT in the coming months. Here's why: whatever we're doing as God's people, whether it's reading the Bible or a congregational meeting or a garden or a children's event or community ministry, we're going to need some help. Sure, we need help from one another, but to be sure we're going the right way, we need help from the Holy Spirit. Whatever we're doing as God's people, we need the will and the courage to go where the Spirit is calling us to go. Whatever we're doing as God's people, we need to remember that whatever we're doing, we're God's people.

The story of Philip and the eunuch has a happy ending: literally, the end of verse 40 says "he went down the road as happy as he could be." But here's what happens just before that: Philip proclaims the good news of Jesus to the eunuch in the chariot, and they come upon a stream of water. He stops the chariot and says, "Here's water. Why can't I be baptized?" Notice how the eunuch frames that. I think he's still hedging his bets; Philip has proclaimed the good news of Jesus and how Jesus is for everyone. But what about the Jewish law? Can he be acceptable to God? What if it's all too good to be true? What if he said, "Philip, I want you to baptize me" and Philip said No. The eunuch is giving himself a way out in case Philip doesn't agree. So the eunuch frames the question as a negative. The NRSV says, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" and Philip doesn't have to say anything for us to know the answer is "Nothing. Nothing at all. There is to keep you from being acceptable to God." Surely Philip knows the law from Deuteronomy, but the Spirit called Philip to this road to meet this man -- the same Spirit that appeared in Jerusalem proclaiming the good news of Jesus to Jews and non-Jews, a message of welcome to all people. The eunuch goes down to the stream and Philip baptizes him.

Do you remember what happened to Jesus when he came up out of the baptismal waters of the river Jordan? The heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. Something similar happens

here, but it is Philip who is taken away by the Spirit. The eunuch goes on his way rejoicing. How can we get some of that acceptance and joy for ourselves? What is the Holy Spirit up to? We're going to find out. Amen