

Philip and Ethiopian Eunuch
Sermon for April 28, 2024
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“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about Philip, who was one of the Seven Deacons who had been chosen to take care of the poor people in Jerusalem. Philip is approached by an angel of the Lord and told to go out on the road leading away from Jerusalem to Gaza, which was considered a desert or wilderness. Sadly, that same area is now beset by war, destruction, and starvation, but 2000 years ago it was just considered a wilderness.

Philip obeyed the angel and went out on the road, where he met a dark-skinned man riding in a fancy chariot and reading out loud from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. The man had gone to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage to worship, and was on his way home to Africa. In the Bible what was called Ethiopia was not the same as the modern country of Ethiopia. It was actually a large kingdom south of Egypt which was also called Kush or Nubia. Any dark-skinned person might be referred to as Ethiopian.

The dark-skinned man in the chariot was also described as a eunuch, a castrated man, and as such was excluded by Jewish law from participating in Temple worship or from becoming a convert to Judaism. We also learn that the man was VIP, a court official in charge of the entire treasury of Ethiopia, a position comparable to a CFO or Treasury Secretary.

The angel then told Philip to go over to the chariot and talk to the man, and again Philip obeyed. He didn't walk but ran up to the chariot and asked the man if he understood what he was reading. The man answered that could not understand the Scripture without guidance. Maybe that was why he went to Jerusalem in the first place, to try to understand the Scripture, but was turned away from the Temple because of his eunuch status and possibly also because of his race.

The passage from Isaiah that he was reading was Chapter 53, verses 7 and 8, and it is called one of the Songs of the Suffering Servant or “servant songs.” These Old Testament verses were written hundreds of years earlier, and originally referred to the exiled nation of Israel. But the early Christian church was quick to reframe their meaning to describe Jesus as the suffering servant. This passage from Isaiah highlights Luke's overall claim that Jesus' crucifixion was a fulfillment of this prophetic passage. This is what Philip meant when he explained it to the eunuch and “proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.”

In verse 36, the eunuch asked if he could be baptized, and Philip baptized him, which was a joyful and life-changing experience for the man. And then it would have been natural for him to proclaim: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” But, if you look at the Book of Acts in our Bibles, you will not see that statement. You will see that right after verse 36 comes verse 38. So where is verse 37? Only a very few versions of the Bible—including the King James Version and the Catholic Douay Bible—include verse 37, which states: “Philip said, ‘If you whole-heartedly believe, it is permitted’. Then he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” Why would they take out an important proclamation of faith like that? Apparently the church fathers and scholars believed this proclamation was not actually part of the early text but was oral tradition that got included later.

The scroll of Isaiah refers to eunuch in Chapter 56.

“For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.”

It seems odd to me that eunuchs were forbidden to become Jewish converts or to enter the Temple when the prophet Isaiah cites God as accepting them. But the explanation is that both the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus have strict prohibitions against eunuchs participating in God’s assembly, and the Torah was the Law. The law of the Torah is what the Temple authorities would have known and followed, and it is actually very likely that they had not studied Isaiah or the other prophets.

Maybe the Ethiopian eunuch was already a Jew and had already read this passage from Isaiah, and went to Jerusalem with the hope of worshipping at the Temple. If that happened and he was turned away, he would have been going home in great disappointment. And being approached by Philip, who explained the “new” meaning of the Scripture and baptized him into the new faith would indeed have been a joyful experience. The Ethiopian eunuch recognizes that the good news Philip shares with him acknowledges his own worth and dignity.

Immediately after Philip came out of the water after baptizing the Ethiopian, poof! he was snatched away by the Spirit of the Lord. And suddenly he found himself in several miles north in Azotus, and then continued his journey up the coast to Caesarea, all the while proclaiming the good news. Philip became known as Philip the Evangelist because he spent the rest of his life reaching out to people throughout the Holy Land, preaching, baptizing them, and teaching them about Jesus.

Luke does not tell us the name of the man in this encounter, nor what happened afterward, but several later traditions honor him. In a later chapter in Acts he is named as “Simon who was called Niger” or Simon the Black among the prophets and teachers at Antioch. Irenaeus of Lyon wrote of him as Simeon Bachus and states that he became the first Christian missionary to Africa. The Ethiopian Christian Church honors him as Bachus, and the Episcopal Church marks his feast day on August 27th. In some recent traditions, he has become the patron saint of LGBTQ people.

It has been speculated that the eunuch’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem was in anticipation of the future inclusion of eunuchs among God’s people, as Matthew’s Gospel records Jesus as saying:

“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

The Book of Acts is all about the expansion of the Church. In the beginning of Acts, Jesus promised the apostles, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and

Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.” This begins in Jerusalem with the original followers of Jesus, preaching the good news and converting their family and friends. Then the apostles and deacons began to flee Jerusalem when they were persecuted, and they extended their travels to Judea and Samaria. After Paul became a believer, he made it his life’s work to bring the word of Jesus to Gentiles and to gradually extend his scope farther and farther away from Jerusalem. But those stories are for the next few weeks.

This expansion of the early church caused a lot of disagreements and rifts with the Church leaders. The followers of the “new” way directly repudiated many of the old Jewish laws and traditions. Acts has numerous descriptions of these disagreements over such things as whether Gentiles would be allowed become part of the church, whether a convert had to be circumcised and follow the dietary laws. As we see in this story, the old laws as defined in the Torah— including as the prohibition of eunuchs from worshiping in the Temple and converting to Judaism —comes smack up against the new way, which welcomed people of all nations and races to become part of its membership.

The new order has a binary code. The only requirement is that one must affirm one’s belief and faith in Jesus Christ. Those who reject Jesus are excluded from God’s community and do not share the blessings of salvation. In John’s Gospel reading this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” In the first letter of John, we hear that God is love, and the love of God means also loving our brothers and sisters.

Philip was open to hearing the Holy Spirit and he decided that someone outside the national, racial, religious, and sexual norms was someone worthy of being baptized. What about us? Are we worthy of our own baptismal covenant? Can we

achieve this? Can we fulfill our own baptismal covenant and seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves? Can we respect the dignity of every human being?

I believe that we can. We can be open to unexpected opportunities to interact with other people and to minister to them. When we are presented with an opportunity to share our beliefs, especially with a nonbeliever, we can do so with a sense of cooperation, not of superiority. If we encounter someone who has recently found faith, or renewed a lost faith, we can rejoice with them and support them. If we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, we can become evangelists like Philip.

We need to welcome all people into our fellowship, and share the good news about Jesus with our brothers and sisters, and possibly even an Ethiopian eunuch.

Amen.