

5th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 5.2.21

Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “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 asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (345)

John 15:1-8

Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. (520)

This eunuch—five times this story calls him a eunuch.

It could have been otherwise. I mean, he wasn't *only* a eunuch.

He was also an Ethiopian—which, by the way, doesn't mean he was from the country we now know as Ethiopia. The word “Ethiopian” is Greek for “burnt face.” It's more likely that he was from Meroe, south of Egypt, given the title of his queen, the Candace. So, his being called an Ethiopian is because of his likely relatively dark skin. The point is, though, he could have been five times called the Ethiopian.

He was also a court official, the Candace's treasurer or guard. So, he could have been called that: the court official, the queen's guard.

Or he could have been called his own name.

These sorts of stories are split in that regard—some people are referred to by name in these stories, and some aren't, and it isn't always clear why those who are, are and those who aren't, aren't. In the story of Jesus' resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus, the two travelers to whom he appeared exemplify this split. One gets a name, Cleopas; the other one doesn't. I've always wondered why the difference. It's not that Cleopas is more important, someone we've never met before and never will see again. Maybe he was known to the writer and to the congregation for whom the gospel was written...?

In the case of this encounter between Philip and the eunuch, though, it'd make sense if he were named. He was baptized, after all, by the end of it, and baptism is an event that features your own name more than most other events. "By what name shall I baptize you?" the officiant will ask, your given name being the name by which God calls you, this God who's known to call us each by name. So, your name: it's central. It's as if it brings you into the ultimate center, baptism done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It's as if a conjoining of names, a grafting of a branch onto a trunk or vine.

But, no, this person is called a eunuch five times. Like the Centurion who ultimately confessed Jesus as the son of God, like the woman with the hemorrhage who touched Jesus' cloak, like the woman at the well who shared the longest conversation with Jesus in all of scripture, this person doesn't get a name, instead gets a feature that comes to be the central feature at least for the purposes of the story.

For the purpose of this story, this person is first and foremost a eunuch.

Why?

It's likely he came to be such by castration. This was a practice to create a caste of people who could serve in a specific social role. Since the word seems literally to mean "guarding the bed," these people were often selected during early adolescence and created for the purpose of guarding royalty while they slept or guarding a king's harem. They were useful for being non-threatening, non-predatory. Deprived of the parts of the body that largely generate desire and aggression and the empowerment that comes from these sources, they are neutered as if to become neutral, useful to some purpose other than their own.

I imagine it would have been an honor to be so chosen, to have one of your sons to be so chosen. As to why they'd be chosen, maybe they were beautiful in that way some in early adolescence are, or maybe they were fully grown physically, just not yet physiologically—strong but not independent or mature. Whatever was the case, I'd bet it was one of those honors that plays out painfully. When a life is determined to have one very specific purpose, it forecloses on so much, not least the purpose for which we all are made: to love and to be loved, and then freely to go where that love will take you, and freely to do what that love will generate in you to do.

I remember catching a bit of the action of the 2018 Olympics, Lindsey Vaughn's last.

A downhill skier, she'd dominated since 2002, her first Olympics. At this, which turned out to be her last, she was often interviewed and featured in those little clips between events. I figured this was because she was an adult, could comport herself for television, could reflect on herself and therefore had some interesting things to say, while many of her competitors were still teenagers—tough subjects for interviewing.

The one thing Vaughn couldn't articulate, though, was what might come next for her in life. Now thirty-three years old, she wasn't going to be skiing competitively any longer. This was clear even to her, at least rationally. But she couldn't seem to *imagine* the truth of it. Every time the question came around to what was next, she'd coil back to maybe giving it another go, or to recollecting what went wrong on this race and how she could improve on it for next time. But there wouldn't be a next time.

I felt for her. She'd cut such a groove for herself in life, or life had cut her into such a groove, that she couldn't jump it, couldn't seem to find another groove.

You're useful in exactly one way.

Not all eunuchs would have had it this good. Most indeed would have lived precariously, cut off from so much, family, community, even worship (if they were Jews, as this one likely was). The Law prohibited eunuchs from Temple worship, so it's not for certain this one even got what he came for in Jerusalem. It's not clear that, having come to Jerusalem to worship and now returning home, he'd even managed to do that. He might have been relegated to the outer courts for worship, disallowed from entering the center of things.

But he was wealthy: he was in a chariot; he had a scroll. These weren't commonplace for anyone. Clearly, he had the trust of his queen.

Taken out of that role, though, that context; taken away from that one specific purpose, he'd have been an unsettling figure, disturbing or even frightening, therefore terribly at risk.

Essayist Tressie McMillan Cottom writes as a black woman about leaving the context where she's known to have expertise. As soon as stepping outside that, she has to start from scratch again. This articulate, astute, empathetic woman: she's nobody once again, and a Black nobody at that.

You know, it's quite amazing, then, that the eunuch was so open to receiving Philip—Philip who was a stranger to the eunuch, and so was someone whom the eunuch might have assumed would attack him, attack him for being himself a stranger, yet not just a stranger but one who was *strange*, a liminal figure, someone positioned on both sides of a boundary felt as crucial. We who live more *inside* the cozy, comfy norm tend not to like such things—liminal figures. They scramble our perception of things. They confuse us, as they themselves are a con-fusion of things that should be distinct.

I wonder how Philip managed not to seem threatening. I really wonder that. I want to *know*.

I have a friend named Rosa. She has brown skin and browner freckles and curly hair. Her father is Black, her mother is white, and they don't live close by. None of her current social world would know her parentage, unless she's told them, as with me for reasons that have to do with our once-working relationship. She finds it amusing how people will try to figure out whether she's Hispanic or bi-racial or something else...? They'll ask her whether she's heard the new Shakira single, or J.Lo...? Or does she like hip-hop...? I don't know her well enough to know whether or when this goes from amusing to tiresome.

Tobias has a friend, a trans-girl. These two went out one evening with a third friend, who then picked up a fourth, which is when things got sketchy in the car. Tobias and his friend asked to be let out. Evening was falling, and it would be dark soon. It was already cold, especially for those in miniskirts. Tobias phoned me at the house to ask if I could come get them. They were off North Street. I said I would when I could; I hate being treated as "on-call," which he knows. He asked me to make it sooner rather than later. They'd found a doorway to wait in, the Methodist Church. They didn't exactly blend in. I got my bag, my keys. And I felt glad that they sensed the threshold of a church as a suitable place to wait.

Why do we do this? Why do we have this reaction to the liminal, the things positioned on both sides of a threshold? The liminal: we are fascinated by it, we fetishize it, then we punish it. Because those thresholds, those boundaries: we need them, we're kept safe by them (or so we think). So, the crossing of them, the violating of them: this is dangerous (or so it seems).

Like, take Jesus, for example. He was a liminal figure, man-god, god-man. But, which is it—man or god? Because you can't have it both ways. That's dangerous—a playing with the boundaries that God himself is remembered to have set into place at the beginning. Light and dark. Ocean and dry land. It's all boundaries. So, messing with that: that's dangerous. We might have to crucify this so-called man-god in order to clear things up.

This wasn't the story the eunuch was reading, of course—the story of Jesus, because this wasn't a story yet written down. The scrolls containing Jesus' story were yet decades away at the time this eunuch was reading, and Philip happened along. The story the eunuch was reading, though, was something similar, another liminal figure, the suffering servant of the prophecy of Isaiah.

This was, and is, one whose identity remains a mystery, one of whom it's known only what's said in the so-called servant songs of the book of Isaiah. There are four, maybe five, such servant songs. And they're all a piece with this one: "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...He was cut off from the land of the living."

Cut off. Utterly alone.

The eunuch, reading this, asked the question everyone asks about this passage: Who is being spoken of here? Is Isaiah talking about himself, or is this about someone else?

The answer is elusive. It might be that Isaiah was talking of himself. Prophets did indeed suffer for their being prophets. After all, saying what's true about reality can win you some enemies, can win you isolation and loneliness and even the role of the scapegoat. It might also then be that Isaiah was talking about a phenomenon, which the whole people Israel in their own way embodied, and which five centuries later Jesus would end up embodying, and which this eunuch five years or so after that would likewise realize himself to embody. "Where are you in this story," we ask in *Godly Play*, "or what part of this story is about you?"

The eunuch might well have answered, "This part. This is where I am in the story. This is the part of the story that's about me. Cut off, unable to participate in the sort of generation easily described, my life will be taken away from the earth, and I'll leave barely a trace. I'll have served my use, guarding the queen's treasures, and then gone, gone."

Unless there were some other way to generate connection, community...? Unless there was some new center around which people might gather, any people, any person, any sort of person...?

—which might be what Philip had to say to the eunuch about this. In interpreting this scripture for the novice reader, Philip might well have said this: in Jesus there had come a new center by which is generated a new body politic, a new way of gathering, whose generative power isn't a matter of bloodline or offspring or status or old norms or prior usefulness but is a matter of love. It has nothing to do with anything except the very human desire to connect, to be connected, to be grafted onto a life-giving vine or tapped into a wellspring as source.

You don't have to change to join. You don't have to become something you're not. But you can expect to be changed; you should expect to be transformed. Love will do that. Attachment will do that. It will change you, just as you will change the living body that you join—for, by your joining, it will become a truer version of itself.

So, "What's to keep *me* from being baptized right now?" he asked.

Nothing, my friend. Not one single thing.

By what name shall you be brought into the center of love? By what name shall you be grafted onto this true vine?

I'm Liz. What's your name?

Thanks be to God.