

5th Sunday of Easter
Sermon 4.28.24

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)

Philip was on this wilderness road because there'd been a crackdown in Jerusalem.

Funny that the story doesn't mention that. It was pretty big news.

The established powers weren't going to tolerate this energetic new movement anymore.

This strange outgrowth of the way of the Jews, these new followers in the Jesus way, they were disrupting the delicate balance between the imperial powers of faraway Rome and the local people, the Jews. These two had long since decided that Rome would look away while the Jews just did what they did, what they'd been doing for a thousand years. It wasn't in accordance with imperial law, but no one really cared. They were in a distant corner of the empire, and there weren't that many of them.

But now this new movement, this energetic new way: it made it so Rome might notice, which is really the last thing you want to have happen, tyranny to take notice.

So, there'd been a crackdown. A stoning. Stephen. The first one after Jesus to be killed, the first one killed because of the Resurrection and then fifty days later the coming down of the Holy Spirit and all of the apostles refusing to stop talking about it. Some Pharisees had taken up against

Stephen. Paul, then still Saul, a Pharisee, stood by, watched, held their cloaks. You don't want your cloak on when you're stoning someone. It's binding. You can't get the force you need.

A crackdown: it had emptied the city of those following in the Jesus way. It scattered them all, far, wide.

That's what had Philip on this wilderness road.

Funny, then, that the story says it was an angel who'd beckoned him here, an angel of the Lord saying to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza—" fraught land even then. A place for potentially disastrous encounters.

As for what Philip would find here, it was a eunuch, though I imagine you gathered as much already. Five times the story calls him that, a eunuch. Five times it casts him in this less-than-exalting light.

A eunuch was, and is, an emasculated man. Either by birth or by choice or by force, a eunuch is one whose testes don't function or have removed, and so isn't able to reproduce, isn't able to participate in generation, not naturally so anyway, isn't able in many cases even to develop fully into an adult male. Depending on when in the life of the person the neutering happened, he might now always retain a certain boyishness, beautiful in many cases, the pre-adolescent boy.

In the case of this one eunuch, we know nothing of how he came to be so—whether he was merely celibate, or was infertile, or had been castrated for courtly purposes, like to sing as a castrati for the queen or to manage the harem for the king or to guard such royals while they slept, the word "eunuch" apparently literally meaning "guarding the bed." This one was set to the purpose of guarding the queen's treasury, no small duty!

But most prominent in the story is the fact that he was a eunuch. Five times, a eunuch.

Not something you'd brag about if you were one.

And, let's be clear, the story had other options. He was, after all, a lot of things in life. He was an Ethiopian, which is probably less what it means today, that he was from Ethiopia, the east African country, and more to indicate his likely dark skin. The Greek word, *ethiōp*, means "burnt face" indicating that he was probably physically a darker-skinned person that was typical of people in this region. As for where he *was* from, it was probably Meroe, south of Egypt, given the title of his queen, the Candace.

Which is another thing the story could have insisted about him, that he was a court official, the Candace's treasurer or guard. This means he was trusted, and likely trustworthy, trusted with a chariot for a trip out of town, trusted even with a sacred scroll and the power of

literacy. Really, he could have been emphasized as someone with access to considerable wealth, considerable power, even if, strictly speaking, it wasn't *his*.

Finally, and most basically, he could have been referred to by his own name. We would learn it, after all. This story ends in his baptism, and central to that sacrament is the naming of the one to be baptized. I imagine this was true even way back then, when the sacrament hadn't yet been institutionalized or made regular. Even then, I imagine, the naming of the one to be baptized would have been central as it is now. "By what name are you called to baptism?" comes the question just prior to when your name is joined with names for the Triune God, baptized now in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Whether or not Philip had it all liturgically correct, the moment of baptism would have been the perfect time for the story to introduce this person by name.

But, no, he was eunuch. Five times, a eunuch. Every chance to exalt him, emphasizing his access to wealth, to power, and how very trusted he was, the story brings him low again. Every chance to humanize him with his own name, the story dodges the moment.

Did you notice that?

He seems to have, if only as a dawning awareness in this very moment, this very encounter with scripture, and then with Philip. "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." Reading this, he seems slowly awakened to something, something likely of him, which comes first as a question. "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this," he asks Philip, "about himself or about someone else?"

For what it's worth, the eunuch was reading the scroll of Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah, the portion of it that gives voice to what's come to be called the Suffering Servant. This is a mysterious figure, someone never fully established as to who *exactly* it was, or is, or is to be, spoken of in this middle portion of the book of Isaiah, this middle portion that's also called Second Isaiah.

This long book of prophecy is actually thought to be three books of prophecy, each coming from a different of three moments in the people Israel. First Isaiah speaks from prior to the exile, prior to when Babylon attacked this Southern Kingdom, Judea, and destroyed the city at its heart, Jerusalem, and desecrated and burned down the Temple, and took the worthy people into exile to serve as slaves while leaving behind the very young or the very sick or the old and lame to die amidst the rubble. Second Isaiah speaks from the time after all that, the time of exile when this

fresh hell had settled in as reality, but new hope hadn't yet dawned. Third Isaiah speaks from that dawn, when return and rebuilding felt possible, felt increasingly likely. Maybe. Maybe.

And so it was that the voice of the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah had poignancy, a cry from the dark when dawn wasn't even yet dreamed of. This, though it's not a settled matter, the question of who is speaking, who indeed is singing these also called Servant Songs. It could be anyone who would sing them, any one of the Judean people. They'd each and all have cause to feel put to suffering. More likely, it was all of them together, a whole people singing of their sorrowing state, made to suffer that something of redemption might also reign.

"Here is my servant," begins the first of the four, God introducing this servant. "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights... He will not cry or lift up his voice; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice..."

A few chapters later, he would speak for himself through the prophet, speaking also of God: "He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'" This seems to make it clear that the Servant is all Israel, all the Judean people.

But it won't just be Israel glorified, it will be peoples far beyond that. "It is too light a thing," the Lord will say to his servant of his servant, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

And again, in the servant's own voice, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word... The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting..."

And finally, of the servant from the perspective of other people: "...he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him... a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, he was one from whom others hide their faces, despised, and we held him of no account.

"Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; ...he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future, his way of generation? For he was cut off from the land of the living...”

Of course, Christians have understood this Suffering Servant to be Jesus, and first among those to do so were the gospel writers who used this imagery to tell their stories of Jesus. Relying on this very rhetoric to give intelligibility to this singular figure, the gospel writers wrote these very phrases into their Jesus accounts.

Which is very likely what Philip said to this eunuch when he began to speak and, starting with this scripture, to proclaim to him the good news about Jesus. That Jesus, as one who was cut off, cast out, dismembered from his people to be crucified outside the city wall; that Jesus would now serve in such a way that all who are cut off or cast out or dismembered from the gathered community might be grafted onto, gathered in, remembered among: it was Jesus whose suffering would reveal redemption, make real redemption.

But I imagine, the eunuch also saw in this himself. I imagine he recognized himself in this suffering servant, singled out as he'd been, cut off, unable to participate in generation, this which indicates not just a cohort of people (Generation X, Millennials, Gen Z) but also which names how people come about, their generation, how they are generated, which this eunuch could not be a part of in any natural sense. I imagine he saw himself as someone put to other people's purpose, used, even exploited, pressed onto his body the painful insistence of others.

Which would give content to his sudden desire, and this surprising possibility, an unnamed, unexpected body of water on a desert road, dry and otherwise sunbaked, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Well, of course, the story gives us every reason why he might be so prevented—or rather it gives one very good reason and gives it five times: he was a eunuch. (It's what I keep telling you!) He was unacceptable. He likely hadn't even been able to accomplish his goal on this trip, which was to worship in Temple. Eunuchs weren't allowed to worship in the Temple. They weren't allowed in the Temple at all, except maybe in its most outer courts. So, it's likely he'd been turned away not moments ago. Really, he had one purpose in the world, and it didn't involve him being a beloved member of loving community.

It rather, quite the opposite, insisted that he be isolated in the world, not given any chance to operate outside the service for which he'd been altered.

It was a position for which he'd perhaps been chosen. Maybe especially beautiful as a boy, or maybe particularly noticed and groomed by the palace, there was perhaps an early honor in it. Maybe his parents were even proud. But that honor would in time come with heaps of shame, which shame would make it so he could indeed be trusted in his service, trusted even with the queen's treasury—for what could he do with it? Where could he go if he were to steal from it? What life could he have other than the one into which he'd been conscripted and even corrupted? I'll tell you: none at all.

Really, the story gives all the reason in the world why he would be unfit for baptism.

“Hey, eunuch, you can't be a part of this.”

And yet, he (Philip? The eunuch? The story doesn't say. Like they're interchangeable at this point.) he commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. And from there, the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

This is one of several stories in the Book of Acts that involve an apostle of the earliest days of the church encountering someone from an utterly different social location, and the two meeting each other in mutual openness and curiosity. These stories serve as foundation to the early growth of the church. These are of how that growth happened.

And notice, please, they didn't happen because one person held the truth and the other person changed in order to have access to it. Notice, please, that both were changed because of it, that the truth emerged from the encounter.

Truly, these stories are about everyone being converted, everyone being enlightened and enlarged about what it means to follow Jesus, what it means to gather as the mystical body of the risen Christ made active in the world by the Holy Spirit. There's a largesse to it all, a mutual metanoia, that transformation of mind that would have us approach the mind of God. Being sent out as an apostle, being sent out on a mission, isn't about having the truth and coercing the world to come to it. It's about opening yourself up to be as changed as you bring change to others.

But that obfuscates the fact that Philip hadn't quite been sent, that he was rather a person in flight. He was fleeing violence, the threat of violence. His world with the other apostles in Jerusalem had been closed off to him. His friend Stephen had been killed and they would come for the others as well.

So, I wonder, when your world becomes closed off to you, when you're forced into a new realm, what story do you tell yourself about it? Is it that you're forced by outrageous cause or called by new purpose?

I'm not asking a sentimental question. I'm not asking you to turn that frown upside down. I'm asking you because I need to ask myself. There are a lot of things pressed upon me that I would desperately have be otherwise. There are, truly. More than a few things that I do resentfully regard and only slightly graciously engage. There are a lot of things that I don't want to be so. And yet they are so.

Is it somewhat similar for you?

Watch for the pool of water on the desert road. Be ready to baptize the new life.

Thanks be to God.