

"Where Might the Spirit Send You"

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is the story of two worlds colliding and what happens when the Holy Spirit is directing such an event. I say this because these two men were so different from each other, yet their interaction is an important part of how the story of our salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is shared. So let's take a look at them separately, beginning with Philip.

Philip had been chosen as a deacon in the new church of the followers of Jesus after his resurrection. They were not called Christians yet – that would come much later. But those who were intent on fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth were taking their charge to heart. Now, this particular Philip was not the same as the disciple Philip and, being new on the job, he was eager to do everything just the way God wanted him to. And he had been charged to preach throughout Samaria.

What we don't know until later in the book of Acts is that Philip is also a family man. He lived in Caesarea with his wife and four daughters, all of whom had been given the gift of prophecy. Our story finds him making his way through Samaria to share his faith with others.

But along the way, Philip had a clear interruption from God. The Holy Spirit came to Philip in the form of an angel who told him in no uncertain terms to go Gaza and to use a certain wilderness road to get there. So being new on the job and wanting to get good comments at his 90 day review, Philip did just that. And it was on this road the he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch.

This Ethiopian was influential and wealthy. The Scriptures tell us that he had been appointed to oversee the treasury of his whole country on behalf of the queen. But curiously enough, the queen is not with him. Therefore we know that he is not on a business trip but rather a personal trip. Since Luke tells us that he had been to worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, we can assume he is Jewish and had been on a pilgrimage. This in and of itself is not remarkable, as the Jews had been dispersed to many nations at this point in history and often came to the Temple to pay tithes or make sacrifices. But what is remarkable is that he had been to the Temple and that he is a eunuch. Let me explain.

Eunuchs were castrated males. Since they weren't considered a threat or a distraction to females, they were often employed in the palaces to attend to queens and the wives of other dignitaries. Yet according to Deuteronomy, they were considered blemished and imperfect and were excluded from Temple worship.

So this servant had traveled over 2000 miles, through wilderness and desert. His journey had lasted at least four months. He had finally arrived in Jerusalem, sun burned and dry and dusty, only to be told that he could not enter the Temple because of his physical imperfections.

But we know that this exclusion does not discourage him in his relationship with God. Because evidently he came away with a souvenir of sorts. Even though he was excluded from worshiping in the Temple, he had purchased a pearl of great price. A scroll with the words from the prophet Isaiah. So he is bouncing along the dry, bumpy road reading from his lavish prize. And because it was not customary to read silently in that day, we know that the eunuch was reading aloud these words: "And like a sheep he was led to slaughter; in his humiliation justice was denied him."

It is at this point that their worlds collide and the Holy Spirit speaks to Philip a second time, instructing him to join the Eunuch. And when Philip, the itinerant preacher hears the words from the chariot being read aloud, he knows a lot about the man on the wilderness road. He knows he is wealthy enough to ride in a chariot. He knows that he is educated enough to read Greek. He knows that, despite his exclusion from the Temple, he was devout enough to be studying the prophet Isaiah. And that he is hospitable enough to offer a weary traveler a ride.

So by the power of the Spirit, the Holy hitchhiker is invited to step aboard the chariot from the Queen's Palace and the two very different worlds collide. And without even so much as a "Hello" Philip asks, "Sir, do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian answers with a question, "How can I understand unless someone guides me?"

Philip does just that. He guides him, shepherds him, lives out his call to make disciples of all nations. He explains that the words from the prophet Isaiah are about the coming of the suffering Messiah. The Messiah who would be scorned and afflicted and slaughtered on behalf of God's people so that all oppression, all exclusion, all misery for God's people would come to an end.

The eunuch is a good student and asks a second question. "About whom does this prophet say this?" Surely he is wondering if the words were just meant for the people of Isaiah's day or could they possibly be for him. Though being turned away from the Temple, we know that his devotion stands strong since he is still immersed in the word of God. So we can only hope that Philip went a little further in that scroll to read the promise from God that said, "to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath . . .and hold fast to my covenant, I will give within my house a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off!"

It must have been at this moment that Philip understands why the Holy Spirit has averted his travels with this unplanned side trip. It is so that he can tell the eunuch that this Messiah, this hope, has already come. That Isaiah's words have been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of God made Flesh, Jesus the Christ. What joy! What relief! What Good News for this man who has been excluded from the Temple that there is room for him at the table. Philip reassures this devout follower of Yahweh that his faith has not been in vain. He explains that, despite his imperfections, even he is considered among those who are saved. He too is included. The Good News is a promise that the waters of baptism are a healing agent and that those who stand at the foot of the cross are on level ground. And upon learning this, the Ethiopian asks his third and final question.

"What is to prevent *me* from being baptized?" And we all know by the word that was just proclaimed that the answer is nothing. "The eunuch's story of shame is refracted through the story of the cross and resurrection of Jesus and becomes a narrative of redemption, restoration and hope." (1) And friends, so has your shame and mine. Everyone who has heard and will hear the Good News of the empty tomb and accepts the grace of God is included in the kingdom of Eternity with God and Christ.

You may think it is odd that I chose this story to preach from today. But we just witnessed the baptism of little Ean and in doing so, we affirmed the answers to the questions that the Ethiopian asked. "How can I understand unless someone guides me?" Friends, we all just made a pledge to Ean, to Susan and Brian, to each other as members of the body of Christ here at Nazareth, and most of all to God. We have promised to be that guide.

Ean cannot understand unless we teach him. Unless we set the examples by our words and deeds, with love and prayer, by encouraging him and his whole family. Ean will understand

when we preach the gospel with our lives what it means to live within the covenant promises of the family of faith.

"About whom does this prophet say this?" Ean's baptism and our own affirms that the words were written to the people of God, in all times and places. While the Good News gave hope to the Exiles in Babylon and gave the promise of new life to the eunuch, today that same Good News gives us hope and promise. The Good News is always to us – today! No one is excluded.

Yet, when the worlds of these two unlikely brothers in Christ collide by the power of the Holy Spirit, the message is clarified even further. All of God's children are invited into the kingdom. We cannot be deemed unworthy by our race, our gender, our age, our status, our education or our sexual preferences. God has poured out the baptismal waters for us all - the impure, the scarred, the shameful, the rejected, the confused. Each of us is simply a broken vessel, seeking, hoping, praying for God's wholeness and healing. And by God's grace, it is available to everyone here.

And it is in our promise to nurture Ean with our love and by our deeds that he and all of the children of Nazareth will know that in God's house there are many rooms and that we are to invite all to enter into the fellowship of Christ Jesus. There is no wrong nation, no wrong job, no past too shady, no sin that cannot be redeemed. No one is to be left out.

And finally, the eunuch asked, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The Holy Spirit made it clear that the waters of baptism will join all of us to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Whether we are brought as infants, crying in our mothers' arms or are led by the Spirit to choose for ourselves, no one is worthy enough. We are all blemished, imperfect, in one way

or another. Yet, God calls and claims us any way, making us worthy in the way that only God can.

And as Philip took the eunuch down to the waters, so we are called to do the same. To share this visible sign of invisible grace and allow all heirs of God to claim our heritage.

But truth be told, the story might never have taken place if Philip had not been open to the leading of the Spirit. Because it is God who orchestrated this event that was anything but a chance encounter. God who brought the two worlds together. God who supplied the waters just when they were needed. God. The Maker and Perfecter of all things.

And we are to share with Ean and each other and all of God's children that God is the author of this story in which two vastly different worlds collide to teach us what lies at the heart of Christianity. Hospitality, inclusion, welcome, kindness, equality and unity are the words that illustrate this story of baptism. The Ethiopian eunuch's baptism and Ean's and yours and mine are a picture of the kingdom of God as God intends it.

And in order for the story of redemption to be told, each of us here must be open to the Spirit. In her words about this text, minister Barbara Brown Taylor asks, "If we were to surrender control of our own travel plans for even an hour, where might the Spirit lead us?"

May we follow the example of willingness to teach and to be taught so that we, like Philip, can send God's children away rejoicing. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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(1) Tom Long; Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2; Westminster/John Knox Press/2008; p. 458.