

April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40

Sermon Title: The Wilderness Road

²⁶ 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.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² 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.*

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ 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?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

I admire Philip. When the spirit says, "Get up and go." Philip gets up and goes. It is an unusual prompting. Philip is told to go south to a location somewhere between Jerusalem and Gaza. This is a wilderness road. And though it is not entirely clear what this means it is probably safe to say that Philip is told to go to the middle of nowhere, where there are few travelers, few comforts, and little safety. It can also mean that liminal space where one place has been left, and the other is not yet on the horizon.

Without hesitation he does as he is told. Sure enough he encounters a man approaching him in a chariot. Only very wealthy people could afford a chariot and a driver. At the spirit's prompting, Philip runs up to the chariot and overhears the individual reading aloud. So now we know that the individual was not only wealthy but well educated. He was literate. He was reading from a scroll containing the Book of Isaiah. He could read the words, but he didn't understand what he was reading. We know this because Philip asks him point blank, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And the individual replies, "How can I unless someone guides me?"

So, who is this individual? Who is this person who can afford a chariot, driver, and a sacred scroll. Who is this well-educated person traveling in the middle of nowhere on a wilderness road? Luke, the author of the Book of Acts tells us he is an Ethiopian eunuch. He is a court official for the Queen of Ethiopia, in charge of her treasury. His skin is dark and his appearance likely reflects the hormonal impact of castration at a young age, though we can't say for sure. He is on his way back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where he has gone to worship. He is an Ethiopian eunuch, and so much more.

While the history is unclear, there is evidence of communities of Jewish Ethiopians after the destruction of the first temple some 600 years before this encounter. So it is quite plausible that this Eunuch was Jewish. Like the prophet Daniel, he was elevated to a position of power in the royal court, but at a price. The fact that he is a eunuch means that he is enslaved. It was not uncommon to mutilate young boys in this way so as to remove any threat they might pose. They were trusted with women in private spaces and because they were unable to sire an heir that might be a threat to the royal household, they were trusted with men in political spaces. So, while this Ethiopian Eunuch appears to have it made, with wealth, power, education, and the ability to travel, we cannot forget that he is a slave. And because he is disfigured in this way, he likely suffered from those in his own community who quoted to him from the book of Deuteronomy where it says, and I apologize to all the men in the room, " "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall come into the assembly of the Lord." (Deut 23:1) How well we know the power of a single verse to crush spirits and shut people out, exiling them to the margins.

Yet Isaiah offers a different word from the Lord. Perhaps the Ethiopian eunuch was yet to read these words. They are a just beyond what he is reading in his chariot. Isaiah 56 says,

⁴ For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me

and hold fast my covenant,
⁵I 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. (Is 56:4-5)

We don't know what kind of experience this Ethiopian eunuch had in Jerusalem, but we do know he is confused about what he is reading. He is reading a passage from Isaiah known as one of the Suffering Servant passages. "To whom does this refer?" That is the question he is pondering as he invites Philip into his chariot.

Philip discusses scripture with the eunuch and tells him about the way of Jesus. Whatever Philip said must have been compelling because when the chariot came upon some water the eunuch asked, "What is to keep me from being baptized?"

I'm guessing this was uncharted territory for Philip. Did he have to think about it? Had he put this question out on Facebook he probably would have been given a host of reasons he shouldn't baptize this rich, powerful, educated, Ethiopian, eunuch. No doubt some would quote that verse from Deuteronomy. But Philip doesn't consult anyone, including doctrine, tradition, the Bible, or the court of public opinion.

"What is to keep me from being baptized?" What is to keep me from being a full member of the body of Christ? What is to keep me from the table of the Lord?

Philip's silence says it all. The answer is a resounding nothing.

Philip baptizes the eunuch and as he rose up out of the water, Philip disappeared, and the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

We could look at this story and consider how it functions in the Book of Acts. The Book opens with Jesus commissioning the disciples to take the good news to the ends of the earth and as we move through the book we recognize ever-widening circles of inclusion. The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch marks the inclusion of all those Jewish communities in faraway lands. Ethiopia was the ends of the earth for those in Israel. The story that follows in Acts widens the circle even further to include Gentiles. After that encounter Peter declares what he has learned, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34-35) In the Book of Acts it is the church that has to wake up to God's expansive love! And so it is today, as the inclusion of people pressed to the

margins and bullied by the Bible, continues to be debated. God may not show partiality – but we clearly struggle with it. Today the message for us could be an invitation to consider how we might be called to take the good news of God's expansive love to those who don't know that they are beloved and belong.

We could look at this story and recognize the importance of reading scripture in community. The truth is that we all need guidance when it comes to scripture. It was meant to be read to the community and discussed as community. The eunuch's wealth has afforded him a scroll to read alone – but alone he doesn't understand what he is reading. AND he is wise enough to admit it. He is open and humble and capable of having a conversation. He is open.

We could take this story and make it a case study for evangelism. Philip is open to the eunuch in all his differentness. Philip greets the eunuch with curiosity rather than judgment. He sits beside him. And when invited to do so, he shares his experience of Jesus. Philip isn't shouting threats through a megaphone. Instead, he joins the eunuch in a conversation. He is equally open to being changed by this encounter. Evangelism isn't about knocking on doors or coercing someone to come around to your way of thinking – it's about sharing your experience with Jesus and the good news he taught and lived. I think we sometimes forget how desperate some people are for love, and grace, and belonging. What we know in Christ has the power to transform lives.

If we really wanted to dive into this story, we could turn to the prophet Isaiah and read the passages that speak of one who is to come, who will suffer, die, and be vindicated. These passages are known as the suffering servant passages. The eunuch wants to know, "Who is this suffering servant?" Jewish Rabbis believe the suffering servant is God's people, Israel, who have suffered, who will one day be vindicated. Given the way our story reads it is possible that Philip believed Jesus was the suffering servant and that is what he shared with the eunuch. Whether you think it is Israel or Jesus, these suffering servant passages found in Isaiah lead us to a God that understands our suffering; to a God who suffers with us; to a God who says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matt 11:28)

The eunuch knew what it was to suffer. He knew what it was to be humiliated and rejected. He knew what it was to be in that liminal space where you are neither this nor that. As a young boy he was destined for a life of servitude. And even though he grew to be a person with power and wealth, he was regarded as a freak by some and condemned by his own sacred text. Who even bothered to understand his suffering?

Who meets us in the wilderness of our suffering? Who meets us in the wilderness of our loneliness? Who meets us in the wilderness of our grief? The answer? The one who knows what it is to suffer. The one who knows what it is to be rejected. The one who knows what it is to grieve. In the likes of Philip, God meets the eunuch in his wilderness.

There are so many potential sermons in this story, I have just scratched the surface. For now, I'll jump to the conclusion of this encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. He goes on his way rejoicing.

That is what good news does – it sends us on our way rejoicing. And the good news is that God meets us in our wilderness, welcoming us as a beloved. And this belovedness, when we embrace it, transforms us. And then, God sends us out rejoicing. God sends us out to be the good news and to love without partiality...so that all the world might rejoice.

May it be so.