

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south^[a] 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, 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?”^[b] ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip^[c] 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.

It’s a fantastical story this telling of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, it starts with directions from an angel, ends with a mighty gust of the Holy Spirit has some preaching and teaching and an impromptu baptism in between. Almost unbelievable to be sure, but we are people of the Resurrection, we understand angels and empty tombs, we make a habit of believing the

unbelievable, walking on water, the blind seeing, the lame made whole, the hungry fed, death overcome by life. It is a fantastical story, but one that helps us to find the the answer to the question that we have been asking since Easter. Now What?

Will you pray with me please? May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

In the ten years that I have been preaching I have never preached this story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch before. It has come up several times in the preaching cycle, but I have always made another choices. In all of the years that I have been going to church, I honestly don't remember any of my pastors preaching it, they might have, but I don't remember it. I would guess that it is not a familiar passage for you either. So keeping that in mind, I am going to start out with some teaching this morning so we can all start from the same point.

This account of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is part of the larger story. At the end of Luke's gospel and at the start of Acts before his Ascension Jesus commissions his disciples to go out into the world and spread the gospel. The Book of Acts records how the good news of Jesus Christ began its journey into the

world as the disciples literally began moving out to the ends of the earth to be instruments of the restorative love of God.

Philip, along with Peter and John set out to carry the message to Judea and Samaria. During their journey, Philip is intercepted by an angel and directed to reverse his course and walk southwest on a road from Jerusalem that goes along the Mediterranean coast towards Gaza. It is here that Philip encounters the eunuch as he leaves Jerusalem and returns to his home in Ethiopia.

Luke, the writer of today's story is very specific in making sure that we understand that the man that Philip meets is a eunuch, he mentions this fact 5 times in 13 verses. A eunuch is a neutered male servant, castrated before he reached puberty so that he would be safe to serve among women in a royal household. It was a common practice of that age and despite sexual mutilation many eunuchs held powerful positions like the man we meet today. He is in charge of the entire treasury of Candace, (Kandake) which means queen of Ethiopia. This man is a relatively important palace official and yet this man is a societal outcast due to the intentional mutilation of his genitalia by others.

We don't know if the eunuch was a gentile or a Jew, he could have been either. At this point in time thanks to the dysporia of the Babylonian exile, Jews lived all over the world.

Jew or Gentile, biblical scholars have long suspected that he was a God-fearer and that he had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the temple...the sad thing is, that because of the ancient laws found in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, he was considered a scarred and defective man and therefore would have been denied entrance into the temple to worship, would have been denied the ability to sit and learn the ancient texts with a rabbi. Deuteronomy 23:1 makes it plain that no one who is sexually mutilated "Shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord."

But that didn't stop him, he still went to Jerusalem to worship as he was able, and he still took time to study the scrolls of the prophets on his own. Hard reading I can imagine, for a man who could get the impression from his reading that he was not welcome in God's house.

Thankfully, the eunuch is not reading Deuteronomy, he is reading Isaiah. Not only does Isaiah announce that God will "recover the remnant that is left of his people, he also promises

that “eunuchs who keep my Sabbath will be welcome in the house of God.”

No wonder he asks Philip “who is this prophet talking about himself or someone else”? He wants to know...is this word of God for me or is it for someone else. This is a man who understood being denied social justice, who understood humiliation and he was wondering if God was speaking to him as an outcast, was God speaking to him at all.

Philip could have jumped into that chariot and given the eunuch a history lesson on religion that was all tied up in the long ago laws. But Philip was a man who had listened to the good news that Jesus brought of an extravagant, welcoming God. Philip was a man who understood that religion was not about what happened way back when, but about what was happening right now in front of him. He was able to take a text that was ancient even 2000 years ago and shared with the eunuch better news than he had probably hoped for or imagined. Not only does God know and understand the eunuchs experience of being humiliated and ostracized religiously; that Jesus himself fulfilled that same role in this world, allowing himself to be humiliated in an outcast’s death.

Here is what I love about this story. Philip does not tell the eunuch that if he only confesses Jesus Christ is baptized and prays hard that God will restore his mutilated body. Philip just shares the good news that God is for him and really, that is at the heart of any witness that we are called to do. Share the news that God is for us. And that, my dear family in Christ, is the answer to the question of Now What?

We come here every week expecting to hear the good news, and we do and we worship God and we give thanks for the way that news affects our lives. But what we might have a hard time understanding is that our lives changed five weeks ago when we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus on Easter. Like it or not, Jesus, in his life after death did not resume the reins of his ministry, he handed them over to the disciples, to us, with the words, “Go out into all of the world and share the good news of the gospel.”

The problem is that we barely want to share that good news with each other, with our own family, let alone tell a complete stranger riding by in a chariot...

That is the challenge that is in front of us...we may not have an angel turning us around in our tracks, we may not encounter a man in a chariot, but I guarantee you that every day, every day

you are in arms length of someone who is hurt and humiliated and denied, someone who is trying to understand what the word of God has to do with them, what the word of God has for them, understand that the word of God IS for them. This is not about knocking on doors and asking people if they have been saved, this is not about scaring people into believing in order to avoid eternal damnation, this is not about knowing the Bible inside and out This is about living the truth of our words we when say, no matter who you are or where you are on your journey in life you are welcome here. This is about knowing that God is love and knowing that we have been entrusted with that good news by no less than Jesus himself.

It's a fantastical story that starts with an angel and ends with the Holy Spirit, but we are people of the Resurrection, we understand angels and empty tombs, we make a habit of believing the unbelievable, walking on water, the blind seeing, the lame made whole, the hungry fed, death overcome by life. It is a fantastical story, but one that answers the question that we have been asking since Easter. Now What?