

Sermon "Unexpected Moments"  
Kirk of St James  
Sunday April 28, 2024  
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I was looking back through past sermons, and the account of the Ethiopian eunuch is not one I have often preached on. Part of the reason is that I have such a hard time picturing this account in my mind. The idea of Philip jogging along the side of the chariot while the eunuch was travelling and reading out loud sounds bizarre. One writer offered a modern day parallel and said, "imagine a diplomat in Washington D.C., inviting an unknown street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study." That sounds like an impossible scenario, yet on this particular day, on a road that travels from Jerusalem to Gaza such a thing happened. What are the implications of this passage, and why was this moment recorded by Luke in the book of Acts?

The heart of this particular narrative is a part of the larger vision in Acts regarding the universal embrace of the gospel. In Acts 1:8 Jesus tells the disciples that "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This vision has begun, already the Holy Spirit has come upon them, and the disciples were heard to speak the Good News in many languages. In Jerusalem thousands of new believers were being added to their numbers, sometimes three and five thousand at a time. There were healings, moments of repentance, and their bold proclamations to any who would listen. Along with these positive experiences came persecution, as these things were not going unnoticed by the authorities. This rises to the fore in Acts seven when Stephen is stoned to death by an angry crowd. That is also where we catch our first glimpse of Saul, who was head of the persecution, but would later come to be known as one of the most prominent apostles Paul.

Due to the rising persecution the disciples were scattered, and Philip travelled to a town in Samaria, where there was a huge response to his preaching. It is here under the leadership of

Philip that we see the first spread of the word outside the bounds of traditional Judaism. Jesus had certainly set the example for this mission when he sat and talked to a Samaritan at Jacob's well but, this is when the ministry there truly begins.

It is helpful to understand the context of the two main people in this account. Biblical Scholar Paul Walaskay explains in his writing that Philip is one of seven Greek-speaking Jewish Christians appointed by the Twelve to tend to the needs of others, especially widows, in the Greek-speaking portion of the Christian community. He is known as Philip the evangelist, who eventually settled in Caesarea (the seat of the Roman government in first-century Palestine) and has four daughters who were considered prophets in this Christian community (Acts 21:8-9). The Ethiopian is described as being in charge of the treasury of the Candace, the official title of the Queen mother, head of the government in Ethiopia. That he travels by chariot attests to his status. That he actually possesses a scroll of the prophet Isaiah attests to his wealth.

In the ancient world it was not uncommon for a castrated male servant known as a eunuch to be trusted to perform duties for royalty. They were considered safe to serve among the women of the royal household. However, there were complications for these eunuchs when it came to religion, for example, eunuchs were sometimes stereotyped as sexually immoral. Far more difficult was the Deuteronomic and Levitical laws that prevented people considered sexually mutilated from God's court. It is also important to remember that the establishment of the world religion known as Christianity was hundreds of years away. As Barbara Brown Taylor explains Judaism was still their mother faith and many of the Gentiles who responded to the early gospel were already proselytes (full converts to Judaism) or God-fearers (who stopped short of circumcision) drawn to the worship of Israel's God.

Despite the laws there is something about Judaism that is so compelling the Ethiopian makes the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship and is now returning home. Whether he was a Jew, or a Gentile did not matter as either way he would have been excluded from worship. Even if he was Jewish as a castrated male he would not be allowed in the temple, and if he was a Gentile he would not be allowed past the court of the Gentiles—either way he would never be welcomed in. On his journey home he is reading from the book of Isaiah, and Luke records it is from the fourth servant song. This sad excerpt is about the identity of the suffering servant.

The fact that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading out loud is not as strange as we might initially think. It was actually customary for people to read out loud until things began to change under the rule of Augustine when reading became silent. All of this history, background information, old prejudices, and questions collide on a road back to Gaza. It is a miracle Philip is even there to see and hear what is going on but with God the unexpected should always be expected. Philip hears a voice telling him to get up and go, and without question he answers. Due to his faith and conviction, he meets the eunuch, offers to explain what he is reading, and share the good news. Within this story of the suffering servant, the eunuch who is doubly excluded comes to understand that not only does God understand his pain, but that Jesus entered into that pain on his behalf. That moment must have felt like the sun breaking out from behind a sky of storm clouds. We hear his vulnerability and hope echoed in his next question to Philip.

As preaching legend Tom Long said “But Philip heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man’s question. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the eunuch. “Absolutely nothing,” whispered the spirit. “Absolutely nothing.” So, the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized right on the spot. Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling, blown down by the breath of God’s

Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God's grace in Jesus Christ." No wonder the eunuch went home rejoicing. This was not just Good news, it was the BEST news. So many of the stories in Luke follow this pattern of hope and rejoicing, of the lost being found, sheep, coins, wayward sons, all had value.

This Good news is the same Good news that we proclaim today. We are a part of this continuing story and call. This word is for us today, and in the lives we live. One of the things that always resonates with me in this passage is Philip's conviction that he must get up and go. How many times in our lives do people cross our minds, or we have a strong sense of something we must do even if we can't explain it? Only to find out later they were God details in a bigger story that we are still learning.

One of the things my former boss at camp used to do with us at the end of a week when we might be feeling tired, or a bit low, was to unpack the week with us. And one of the ways she would do that was to ask, "Where did you see God at work this week." And even if it had been a tough week, or there had problems, often if you looked back you would find these moments of grace that she called God details. And one of the things about actively searching our lives for these moments is that it reminds us that God is still at work in the world, and we still have a role to play. So much like the Ethiopian eunuch asked questions of Philip, I am going to leave you with two—where in the last week have you seen God at work in the world? And how might we continue to answer God's call in our life? There are countless reasons for us to rejoice, and when things get tough as they sometimes do, I pray that God meets us along the road and reminds us of what is important and good.