

Baptized

Acts 8:26-40

Our scripture is in a section of Acts where the early church was reaching out. In the opening chapter of the book of Acts, Jesus presented his apostles a geographic program for the spread of the gospel: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The apostles, led by Peter and John, began their ministry by preaching and performing miracles in Jerusalem. After growing opposition to the gospel, Stephen's martyrdom, and the first great persecution against the church, the disciples fled Jerusalem to carry their message to Judea and Samaria (8:1). The Samaritan mission under the leadership of Philip marked the first step of the early church in spreading the word beyond the bounds of traditional Judaism. The Samaritans had received the Good News from Philip with joy.

Now in our scripture, Philip, the obedient Christian of our scripture, left the Samaritan mission in the good hands of Peter and John, and was directed by an angel of the Lord to reverse course and travel southwest on a deserted road toward Gaza on the Mediterranean coast. It was on this deserted road. Along the way, Philip encountered an Ethiopian riding in a chariot.

Luke tells us a great deal about these two men. 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 (6:1-6). He was known as Philip the evangelist, who eventually settled in Caesarea, the seat of Roman government in first-century

Palestine, and had four daughters who were considered prophets in their Christian community (Acts 21:8-9).

The Ethiopian was in charge of the treasury of the Candace, the official title of the queen mother, head of the government in Ethiopia. That he traveled by chariot attested to his status. That he actually possessed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah attested to his wealth. We are also told that he was a eunuch, not an unusual situation for one whose life was devoted to serving in the queen's court. Each of the five times Luke referred to the Ethiopian he was identified as "the eunuch." He had been to Jerusalem to worship and was on his way home. Clearly he had a strong desire to worship with the Jews in the temple at Jerusalem. He may have been a Jew attempting to worship at the temple, or he may have been a Gentile God-fearer attracted to Judaism. In either case, his relationship with Judaism was problematic. As a castrated male, he would not have been granted access to the temple, as Deut. 23:1 excluded eunuchs from entering the "assembly of the LORD." Or, if he was a Gentile, he would not have gotten beyond the court of the Gentiles. This important man, although an "insider" in his own country and position, appears to be an outsider to the faith he sought to embrace.

Again, Philip received a divine directive: "Go over to this chariot and join it." Jogging alongside the chariot, Philip heard the Ethiopian reading aloud, as was customary in antiquity. Philip overheard the Ethiopian reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah and asked if he understood the meaning of the text. For a follower of Jesus like Philip, there would be a strong connection between the event of the Ethiopian eunuch reading about the messianic figure led "like a lamb silent before its shearer" and Jesus' rabbinic custom of teaching from the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah promised freedom from marginalization in the assembly, including release from certain older,

Deuteronomic and Levitical laws. During the Mosaic period, Deuteronomic and Levitical law gave lower socioreligious status to eunuchs, because they were seen as scarred, defective men, unable to be fruitful and multiply. Israelites who held strictly to Deuteronomic and Levitical law permitted eunuchs only marginal participation in the assembly of Israel. The passage is one familiar to us as Christians—then and now. He was reading the fourth and saddest Servant Song (Isa. 52:13-53:12). The identity of this suffering servant of God perplexed the Ethiopian, even as it has intrigued Bible readers over the ages.

Hearing the particular text from Isaiah, Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The African politely invited Philip aboard his chariot for conversation about the text. For Philip this became what church educators would call "a teachable moment."

Philip's answer offers us a window into the life of the earliest Christian community. In their reading of Scripture, early Christians identified the Suffering Servant with Jesus Christ. Jesus was the obvious fulfillment of this prophecy. Therefore Philip enlightened the Ethiopian. We are not given all of what Philip said, however it does not appear that Philip questioned or condemned the eunuch's social status, national affiliation, ethnicity, gender, or sexual condition. Philip simply taught that the prophecies in Isaiah have been revealed and fulfilled in Jesus.

Having heard the good news about Jesus, the servant of God, the Ethiopian asked to be baptized. It is easy for us to miss the emotional tinge to his request. There was probably a hint of anxiety as he asked, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" If he was a God-worshipping Gentile, then he might have thought he needed to become a convert to Judaism; however, his sexual status may have stood in his way. He may have been asking: is there anything

about me that might keep me from being a full participant in the people of God—of becoming a member of the Christian sect of Judaism? The good news of the story is that the two men went down into the water and Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch.

Again the Holy Spirit sent Philip on his way to preach the good news until he arrived home in Caesarea, and the eunuch continued on his journey home, "rejoicing." **Paul W. Walaskay and Karen Baker-Fletcher**

The account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is the very personal story of the recovery of one of these outcast people, those who have been lost, pushed away, and forgotten. As Christians, we need to be able to help people who are seeking a relationship with God, find their way to the answers that the eunuch asked: 1. *"How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?"* 2. *"About whom ... does the prophet say this?"* 3. *"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"* **Thomas G. Long**

Many of our family, friends and neighbors have the same questions. We all know people who are seeking to make their lives meaningful. We know good people with good jobs and good money, but they lack a real relationship with God. They know about God, they have read scripture, they may even attend church, but they want to know God. Some want to come to worship and meet God, but have only experienced religion as a list of "Thy will nots," rather than a place to find the goodness and mercy of God.

Maybe you are one who has been reading the Bible, but without understanding. You have thought it was ancient, classical literature that tells about how God related in ancient time. No one explained how the Word of God is alive and like a two-edged sword – it can cut things out of our lives that don't need to be there, or perform delicate surgery to fix things in our lives that need fixing. Coming to worship doesn't have to be a social event or

a duty – it can be a life-changing, life empowering experience. Religion is not designed to draw a circle to leave you out, but to include you in the family of God.

A few years ago I preached at Carriage Town Ministries. After the worship a young man named Philip came to me and asked to be baptized. I asked about his study and understanding of what he was requesting. He explained that he was doing Bible study with three different church groups but none would baptize him. I instructed him to ask each pastor again and gave him my telephone number if they continued to deny him baptism. A month or so later he called and said none of the churches would baptize them. So on a weekday evening Philip, the young man, and a few of the elders and a deacon of Unity gathered and baptized Philip. He explained living in his car and he was moving South before winter and he wanted to be baptized before going. Philip went on his way rejoicing! We, like Philip in today's scripture, were not able to do follow-up, however we were obedient to the Holy Spirit, and baptized this young man. Often we want the candidate for baptism to attend a 6 to 8 week class, sign a pledge card, be assigned to a Bible study or mission group – but all we need to do is tell others the good news of Jesus, accept their confession of faith, administer baptism and let them and us go on our way rejoicing in the Lord.

To paraphrase the Ethiopian eunuch: Is there anything that might prevent *any* man or woman who responds to the good news from being baptized and becoming a full participant in the people of God? This was a serious question for Luke's church, and it is a serious question for ours.