

2021 NL3 WK35 Acts 8 Ethiopian Eunuch
21-04-25 4th Sunday of Easter

God's beloved people, grace and peace to you in the name of our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ.....Amen.....

The story in Acts moves fast and expands the church! After Stephen's martyrdom last week, most of the Christians were chased out of Jerusalem and into the surrounding country. Philip, who had been commissioned as a deacon along with Stephen, fled into Samaria where he preached to the people, like Jesus had done with the woman at the well.

Then the spirit told Philip to head south, toward the Mediterranean Sea on the road to Gaza which was the way to Egypt and northeastern Africa.

It was a wilderness road, not much to see there, but the Holy Spirit seems to put people in each others' paths. There was a traveler from Ethiopia in a chariot returning from Jerusalem. This particular Ethiopian person was a Eunuch, a man who had been castrated so as not to be a threat to the royal family.

He could work closely with the queen, and the government could be assured that the royal bloodline wouldn't be infiltrated by this Eunuch.

This man, a black skinned Ethiopian of Africa, sexually sterilized, worshiper of God is a person who in society is at least “privilege adjacent” since he is in the royal court, working around money, riding in a chariot, and reading from an Isaiah scroll, which isn’t like today when pretty much anyone can get ahold of a bible.

He had been to Jerusalem to worship which means he may have been part of the Ethiopian Jews descended from those who had been chased out of Jerusalem by the Babylonians 600 years earlier. But even that heritage wouldn’t allow him to go very far into the temple, because he was a eunuch, and eunuchs were not allowed to be full participants in their religion.

So, the Eunuch was a complicated person for Luke’s audience to grasp: so privileged in many ways..., but also.... SO excluded in faith and life – a resource to be exploited – not seen as a person.

But complicated makes the Holy Spirit joyful!.... Leave it to the Holy Spirit to shake things up and to clarify what had been controversial. The spirit sends Philip, “*Hey, Philip, run over to that chariot and talk to that guy!*”

As Philip was running alongside the chariot, he can hear the Eunuch reading Isaiah out loud, and he hollers to him, “*Do you know what that means?*”

And the Eunuch, one who had been excluded from the full participation in his own family and his own faith, says, “*Nope, why don't you get up here so we can talk about it?*”

It was the suffering servant hymn of Isaiah 53 that the Eunuch had been reading... and he asked Philip if Isaiah was talking about himself being humiliated... and denied justice... and killed..., or was he talking about someone else?

The Eunuch heartbreakingly asks the question of everyone who has ever been denied justice and who is trying to find some hope –

can I relate to this person?

Am I included in his story, and is there good news at the end?

The humiliation of enduring state-sanctioned violence with no recourse and no voice in the matter.... where is my place?

It has been George Floyd's question.... Am I included in this?.... Is my life worth anything to the God of this scroll?.... Is this body of mine full of too many obstacles for love?....///

And Philip, began to preach.... beginning in Isaiah, Philip told the Eunuch the *good news about Jesus*..... We don't have that speech recorded..... But we know that by the time he was finished, the Eunuch had found the place where he belonged.

As they sat in the chariot and pondered *the good news about Jesus*, they passed by some water..... And, the question of the hour....., the question of ALL scripture is the one on the lips of the Ethiopian Eunuch, "*what is to prevent me from being baptized?*" *What is to prevent...?*

It's the heartfelt cry of one who is **longing for belonging**. The early Christian church struggled with how far the reach of God's love would stretch, not unlike the fights and conversations that the church has had forever – who is included in God's love?

Gentiles?

Women?

LGBTQ people?

People of Color?

Sick people?

But the Holy Spirit moves. Remember that the spirit instigated this! This was God's doing, and so like God!... *For God so loved the world...!!!*

So, what in Deuteronomy had excluded people like the eunuch..., the Holy Spirit has set the record right now in Acts: in Jesus, ALL are welcomed and affirmed.

Those whom the church had formerly pushed aside, God calls to the altar.

When the sexually altered Eunuch, the black skinned officer of the Queen of Ethiopia, who had been marginalized by the church... came up out of the waters of baptism, the people of God were forever changed.

Generations of **Ethiopian Orthodox Christians**, since the 300s, credit the Eunuch as the founder of their church! And generations of LGBTQ people have drawn comfort knowing from the Eunuch, that all sexual and gender related discrimination is gone..., because the Holy Spirit said so.

What is to prevent me from being baptized? The question hangs in the air... because the answer for generations was simply “the church”... it’ll change everything if Philip baptizes him..... And he does.....///

The spirit whisks Philip away when they are finished..., while the Eunuch went on his way rejoicing. Outcast turned into member..... Moved from the margins to the center..... From confusion to joy!.....///

My hope... for myself, our congregations, all Christians, and all people... is that we live and move and have our being... with love first... as Jesus instructed.

That we would help people find the joy of God’s forgiving love.

Telling people that God loves them.

Showing people that God loves them, so that the answer to the question, “*what is to prevent ME from being baptized?*” Is never “me” or Philip or the church...

We are all made in the image of God..., saved by God..., loved by God..., affirmed by God – you are God’s picture of who you are to be. And the answer to *what is to prevent me?.....* Is “nothing.”

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us [prevent us] from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Amen.....

Acts 8:26-39

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.) ²⁷So 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 ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now 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. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” ³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As 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?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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.