

Acts 8:26-39

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 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.

Luke 24:44-47

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

This is an unusual story in the New Testament. It reads more like one of the Old Testament stories of Elijah, maybe, or Isaiah. An angel of the Lord tells a holy person to go somewhere, but does not tell him what he will find or what he should do. He just responds to events, and God blesses what the holy person does.

In this case, the holy person is Philip, who was one of the deacons who were ordained with Stephen. Starting with Stephen's martyrdom, the Church is being scattered as the first persecution of Christians is starting up.

Philip is just back from a successful trip to Samaria, where he taught many people about Christ. He was so successful that the Apostles came in and took over, making the Church in Samaria just as much part of the Church as the home folks in Jerusalem.¹

"So, Philip, where are you going to go next?" Disneyworld is not one of his choices. He is told to go directly away from where he understands the action to be. He is told go south to the middle of nowhere on the road that leads through the desert from Jerusalem to Gaza.

So, Philip goes.

An African eunuch is traveling home in his chauffeured chariot, reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah aloud. This man is the chief treasurer of the kingdom of Ethiopia, the famed wealthy kingdom of gold. Candace, which today we know as a name, was at the time the title of the Queen of Nubia, the real power in the kingdom.²

The Spirit tells Philip to go over and join this man, so he goes over, close enough to hear the man reading. He asks him, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Can you imagine? Wealthy and powerful people are not accustomed to being asked if they understand something. They are used to everyone assuming that they understand. The audacity of the question is breathtaking. But Philip asks it.

The eunuch responds, "How can I, unless someone helps me?" And he invites Philip to get into the chariot and sit with him.

¹ Acts 8:4-25

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 175. The word in the original Scripture is Αἰθίοπων, or "Ethiopian."

This is not business as usual. I don't imagine that Ms. Jovita Carranza, the Treasurer of the United States, is in the habit of stopping her limo somewhere on the highway between Washington D.C. and her home town of Chicago and inviting a street preacher into the car for some Bible study. I'm sure that Philip was surprised; the eunuch may himself have been surprised by what he found himself doing.

So Philip gets into the chariot and starts explaining to the eunuch this prophecy of Isaiah. This prophecy of Isaiah is called the "Song of the Suffering Servant," and we Christians generally understand it to be describing Jesus Christ and what will happen to him.

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The eunuch has apparently not heard the news about Jesus. He asks Philip who this Hebrew prophet is talking about. So, I imagine Philip takes a deep breath, and starts telling the story of Jesus Christ.

You can't truly tell the story of Jesus Christ without explaining that he came for the whole world, or as they would say, the *cosmos*, all of Creation. You can't tell the story of Jesus Christ without explaining what he taught, and how it applies not just to the Jews, who had always been God's chosen people, but to everyone.

This eunuch has spent his life being the outsider, the one to whom blessings did not apply. In Ethiopia, he is a devotee of some odd foreign religion. In Jerusalem, he is an African,

no literal descendant of Abraham. In Jerusalem, his welcome is further limited because he is a eunuch. Deuteronomy says that, “the eunuch shall have no place in the congregation,”³ so he is not allowed to so much as set foot in the court of the Israelite men in the Temple.

He lives in a world where life was often, to quote Hobbes, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”⁴ This world was, therefore, very concerned with fertility and children. In that world, he would never have a wife to love and support, or to love and support him, no children to tell of his lineage or to pass on his legacy. He is cut off from having what Abraham and the people of Israel understood to be the most important thing that God had promised -- posterity. He is an outsider everywhere he goes, and an insider nowhere.

No wonder the eunuch is interested in Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant! He, too, is a man who had been cut off. He has lost being really a part of his Ethiopian community without really becoming really a part of the Israelite community.

The eunuch hears God’s word. We don’t know whether Philip tells him explicitly that the appropriate response to hearing God’s word is repentance, baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. That’s what Peter preached at Pentecost. We don’t know whether Philip explained it, or whether the eunuch understood it solely through God’s leading. In any case, he came to understand it.

So, they come to some water,⁵ and he asks Philip, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

There are many answers to this question:

³ Deut. 23:1.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Ch. 12.

⁵ Likely the Wadi el-Hesi northwest of Gaza

- He is a foreigner. Even though the Church has spread to the Samaritans, the Samaritans were at least related to the Jews, fellow descendants of Abraham.
- He is a eunuch. He is unable to be married or to have a traditional family.
- He does not have a church community to be a part of.
- There is no agreement from a Church council or at least an Apostle.
- Philip is “just a deacon.” He was ordained, you remember, to wait on tables and to make sure that widows had enough food. He’s acting way beyond his original mandate.⁶
- They are out in the desert in the middle of nowhere.
- The eunuch has not confessed his sins, that we know of.
- The eunuch has not confessed his faith, except implicitly in asking for baptism.

There are many reasons not to do this baptism, but Philip chooses to err on the side of grace. He baptizes the eunuch in the water.

Philip baptizes the eunuch, who goes on his way rejoicing. Philip finds himself whisked away to the city of Azotus, twenty miles north of Gaza. He shrugs, and starts working his way north to Caesarea, preaching the good news in every town he goes through.⁷

We don’t hear any more about the eunuch in the Scriptures themselves, but there is a Christian church of forty million people in Ethiopia today that traces its history back to this day.⁸ For reference, that’s between one and a half and two times the size of the better-known Greek

⁶ And not for the first time. See Acts 8:4-13, where, too, he acted without an Apostle to bring people to Christ.

⁷ He settles down in Caesarea, apparently, and twenty years later has four daughters who are all prophetesses (preachers) – Acts 21:8-9.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Ethiopia estimates 40-46 million people.

Orthodox Churches worldwide, and about twenty-five times the size of the Presbyterian Church (USA).⁹

Philip believed, I'm sure, that he was being sent to the middle of nowhere to do something insignificant. Even once the eunuch arrived, I'm sure that Philip thought that this was an unimportant task related to a person who might be important in the world, but not to God. But he sat with this person, and he talked with him, and he shared the Gospel with him.

The task was not unimportant. The eunuch was important in the world, but he was also one of God's children. The result of what Philip did was far beyond anything that Philip could have imagined.

There is a saying in the theater that "there are no small parts, only small actors." This is true in the Church and in the world, as well. We are electing new ruling elders and deacons today, which are important roles in the church.

But that does not make you or what you do any less important, whatever that is.

Every time you get yourself out of bed on Sunday morning and come to worship, that matters. Human beings were created to be in relationship with God and with each other.

Every time you are gracious and kind to someone at work or in the grocery store or in traffic, that matters. You demonstrate for that person that God's grace and love are present in this world. That can be like water in the desert – life-giving in the midst of desolation.

You never know when or how God will use God's grace through you to make a difference in the world through making a difference in the life of someone else. You may never know. And that's OK.

Do it anyway.

⁹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian_Church_\(USA\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian_Church_(USA)),
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_Orthodox_Church

AMEN.