***THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH***

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Texts: Acts 8:26-40 and Isaiah 56:1-8

In my office here at the church one whole wall is lined with bookshelves which are lined with books – thick books, thin books, Greek and Hebrew books, Bibles and commentaries, prayer books, one of those books from the ancient past called a dictionary, a Koran that was a gift from a young Muslim woman, and a Dr. Seuss book or two. I have books about theology and church history, Presbyterian polity and church growth, preaching and poetry. I have books with uninspired titles like *Introduction to the New Testament* and books with creative titles like Brian McLaren’s *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* In thinking about this passage in Acts one particular book caught my eye because its title seems to capture something of this encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The book is entitled *The Pilgrim Road: Sermons on Christian Life*.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is a collection of sermons by a retired theology professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. The sermons are organized around the image of a road, that path along which we travel on our journeys of faith as pilgrims through the Christian life.

In Scripture matters of great consequence happen along the roads of the Middle East. Along a road Jesus found Zacchaeus, a wee little man hiding in a tree whose life was transformed by his encounter with Jesus. On the road into Jerusalem Jesus rode a young colt to shouts of “Hosanna!” that first Palm Sunday, setting in motion events that would lead to his death and resurrection. On the Emmaus Road the risen Jesus walked with two disciples that first Easter evening. On the Damascus Road Saul encountered the risen Christ in a blinding light that changed him from persecutor of Christians to apostle for Christ. And among Jesus’ most loved parables is that story of the Good Samaritan who finds the injured man on the side of the Jericho Road. God is at work along the roads of life, along the highways and byways of the Earth – and sometimes even at the stoplights! The road from Jerusalem to Gaza winds through the wilderness in an area now contested by Palestinians and Israelis. It was somewhere on that road that Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch and that wilderness path became a pilgrim road.

Luke makes it pretty clear that this was not a chance encounter. Philip was there because God told him to go there without offering any explanation. I am not sure I would have gone so willingly. I would want to know why I was going and what was supposed to happen there. I would ask for a game plan or at least a reason to be wandering down a deserted desert highway, before I wandered down a deserted desert highway. I would want something more than, “Go south, young man!” It is not that I don’t trust God, but is it really asking too much of God to provide a little clarity in the call before I answer? Some of us pilgrims would like to know where we are going before we go, heeding the warning of that great philosopher Yogi Berra who said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you might not get there!” Yet the nature of a pilgrim road is that we don’t always know where the road will lead or what God has in mind along the way. Sometimes we only understand after the fact, in the rearview mirror if you will. It is only then that we can say, “Ah! That is why God sent me there!” So it was for Philip in his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch.

Being Ethiopian meant that this stranger was a foreigner, a pilgrim of a different race, an outsider to Judaism. Being a eunuch meant he was sexually dysfunctional, not by choice, but likely by the decision of his parents who had him castrated to prepare him for service to the queen. The Law barred eunuchs from the Jewish community and Temple. We do not know this man’s name, but we do know that he was a learned man, a powerful man with authority over the queen’s treasury, a wealthy man who could afford not only the chariot in which he rode but also the scroll of Isaiah he was reading. There was no Amazon or Scrolls-a-Million from whom to purchase a scroll back then, yet the Ethiopian eunuch had in his hands a copy of the Word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Isaiah, a non-Jew studying the words of a Jewish prophet. Perhaps he had heard the words of the prophet that we read this morning, words of hope for a day when eunuchs would be welcomed into the family of faith, blessed, and given reason to rejoice.

In his book *Confessions*, St. Augustine, another man of African descent, describes his conversion to Christianity. He writes that while he wanted to believe, he was tormented by objections and doubts that left him weeping. In the midst of his tears, he heard a child’s voice from a nearby house saying in a singsong voice, “*Take and read, take and read*.” He interpreted this as a divine command to open the Scriptures and read the first passage that his eyes fell upon. Doing so, he read these words of Paul:

*Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries, but rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites.*

Augustine writes:

*I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

In those words of Paul, Augustine’s life was transformed – from despairing sinner to hope-filled saint.

When did you last take time to read your Bible? When did you last search for God’s word for you in those ancient words? Several families have shared with me the well-worn Bibles of parents or grandparents. These are not just family heirlooms but holy words passed down from one generation to the next in pages dog-eared by loving fingers, with bindings well-worn and covers in tatters from daily use. In some of them familiar passages are marked or have notes scribbled in the margins – questions, names, or references sparked by the reading of God’s Word. Such Bibles offer a map for the pilgrim road those saints have traveled.

They serve as a guide for the Christian journey. Have you taken time to look at that map for your own journey? Has your Bible been well-loved, well-read, and well-worn by ***your*** hands? Or is it gathering dust on a shelf with its binding uncracked and its pages unblemished only to be taken out when Sarah or I come to visit? Take and read, said the voice, for the Bible has transformed the faith of pilgrims for generations. It just may do for you what it did for Augustine or for the Ethiopian eunuch – spark faith – if you will just take and read it!

The Ethiopian eunuch understood little about what he read from the prophet Isaiah. Scripture is like that sometimes. It isn’t always crystal clear; it is sometimes shrouded in mystery. It demands more than a cursory glance, more than a first reading. It sometimes demands more than we alone can give. A minister was once told by one of his members, “*Preacher, today’s sermon was like the peace of God. It passed all understanding*.” Sermons aren’t supposed to be like that. They are supposed to connect the text with your life. Preaching is not about the preacher; it is about the work of the Holy Spirit through the preacher and if necessary, despite the preacher. Anything helpful you take away from here is the work of the Spirit, not of this preacher.

So it is with our study of Scripture. God grants us the words AND insights to their meaning. While we would all like the meaning to leap from the page, it does not always work that way; sometimes it comes a little slower and sometimes we need a little help. The Ethiopian eunuch needed the insights of Philip to open his eyes to the meaning of the passage from Isaiah. So, the Spirit sent Philip to him, asking, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

“How can I understand unless someone guides me?” was the eunuch’s reply. Isaiah’s words spoke of justice denied and innocent slaughter, and the eunuch wondered aloud, “of whom does he speak?” Philip told him – Jesus – and shared with him the good news; he told him about Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection in fulfillment of the Scriptures. He opened his eyes, not only to the words of Isaiah, but to the suffering servant who came to take away the sins of the world. On the side of a deserted wilderness road Philip shared with him the promises of life and hope in Jesus Christ. So moved was the eunuch, that when they came to a pool of water, he asked Philip, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

That statement is loaded with faith – for baptism is the sign and seal of faith in Christ. But perhaps it was also tinged with doubt. The eunuch had traveled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Jews and was regarded as unworthy to enter the Temple, for he was uncircumcised, a foreigner, a eunuch. In Jerusalem he discovered there were barriers barring him from the Jewish circle of faith – barriers not of his own making, barriers of nationality and sexual dysfunction. Perhaps in his question about baptism arose that doubt once more – is there a barrier that will exclude me from this community of faith? Will I be accepted as I am? Was the Christian circle wide enough to welcome a eunuch who believed?

There are those who would have said, “No!”, for there were those in the early church who believed that to be a good Christian one must be a good Jew, be circumcised and follow the Law. Had they prevailed, we probably would not be here today. But the story told by Luke in Acts is the story of an ever-widening circle that welcomes those who were excluded. It began with Jews in Jerusalem and then grew with Philip’s mission to Samaria; on that wilderness road the circle expanded to include the outcast eunuchs and foreigners who came to believe; shortly thereafter it expanded further to include Gentile believers through the encounter between Peter and Cornelius. This was not some grand plan for church growth concocted by the disciples; it was by Luke’s account, the work of the Holy Spirit. God was pushing the limits and welcoming into the family of faith those who had been outside it. That is how God works, seeking not to exclude, but to include more in the circle of believers.

There were no barriers to the baptism of this Ethiopian eunuch who professed faith in Jesus Christ, for Jesus came for all people, and baptism is for ***all*** who profess faith in him. Instead of excluding him, Philip entered the water with him and baptized him in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, marking him as one belonging in life and in death to Jesus Christ crucified and risen. His race, nationality and sexual status would not stand in the way of his inclusion in the body of Christ, for in Christ there is no Jew or gentile, slave or free, male or female, gay or straight, Republican or Democrat, outsider or insider. All are one in Christ. That is the good news of the gospel that we bear to a badly fractured world.

*The eunuch went on his way rejoicing* – that is how this chapter of the Christian story ends. It ends with resumption of the journey, it ends with new-found faith, it ends with joy! And there it begins anew – with faith, with joy, with the journey. And so it begins for us this day – continuing our journeys on this pilgrim road, bearing the good news of Jesus to a fractured world longing for news that is good in the midst of a pandemic, and living with joy, always with joy, for in the words of St. John of the Cross: “*The soul of one who loves God always swims in joy…*” Brothers and sisters, love God, be joyful, journey well, and swim on! Amen

1. *The Pilgrim Road: Sermons On Christian Life*, B.A. Gerrish, ed. by Mary T. Stimming, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book VIII, Ch.12, translated by Rex Warner, Penguin Books, 1963 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)