

Acts 8:26-40  
Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch  
WRCoB 4.25.21

The angel of the Lord sends Philip  
To the middle of nowhere  
To evangelize one potential convert.

He wasn't sent to a town square  
Where he might preach before a crowd of hundreds  
Where he might get more bang for his buck

But to a lonely spot on a desert road  
Where one chariot is passing by.

One.

But in terms of Christian evangelism, a very strategic move.

~~

Philip walks up to this man's carriage  
Obviously, a person of high esteem.  
An official within Queen Candace's administration.

He is a worshiper of God  
And is returning to Africa  
Following celebrations in Jerusalem.

He is wealthy enough to own a set of Holy Scriptures  
Something not everyone can afford.

And he was reading a passage from the scroll of Isaiah.

A passage that is familiar to Christian readers  
As pointing to Jesus as the “suffering servant”.

Philip saw his cue and asked the Ethiopian  
If he understood what he was reading.

And then, upon invitation, Philip climbs into the chariot  
And shares the good news of Jesus Christ.

Apparently so moved by their discussion  
Seeing a body of water deep enough

The Ethiopian asks Philip  
What might keep him from being baptized?

And with that, they go down into the water  
Where Philip baptizes him.

Still wringing wet  
The Holy Spirit snatches Philip  
And sends him off to Azotus.

While the Ethiopian continues on his journey rejoicing.

Interesting story, isn't it?

What makes this story all the more interesting  
Is the peculiarities surrounding this man  
The angel of the Lord was sent to.

He was a black African.

He was wealthy and held a prominent position  
In a foreign government.

He was, then, a foreigner.

He was “God-fearer”  
Someone who wasn’t a Jew  
But someone who practiced Judaism.

He was not a proselyte, a full-fledged member of Judaism  
Due to his physically-altered state.

He was a eunuch, a castrated male.

According to Luke, the fact that he was a eunuch  
Holds a very prominent place in the story.

Luke mentions it five times.

Jesus identifies eunuchs this way.

**Matthew 19:12 NRSV**

**12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”**

Jesus describes three categories of eunuchs.

- Those who were born that way
- Those who were made that way
- Those who choose to live that way

The ones who were born that way  
Are most likely males with birth defects

Perhaps some sort of genital deformity  
That prevented them  
From marrying and having children.

Some argue this category includes  
Males with a different sexual orientation.

That might be stretching Jesus' definition here a bit much.

~

The ones who were made that way  
Would have been those who were physically altered.

Certain cultures castrated men  
So they wouldn't be distracted  
In carrying out their duties.

Eunuchs were placed in charge of harems  
And as is the case in this passage, treasuries.

A eunuch was considered less aggressive  
And more docile.

One can find them in Chinese and Ottoman societies  
And even as late as the 18 C

Choir boys in Europe were emasculated  
To preserve their high voices.

~

And then we have those who choose to live as eunuchs.

These men would be those who chose celibacy  
To focus their devotion solely on God.

John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and the Apostle Paul  
Are three examples of this category.

~~

The Old Testament law as stated in Dt. 23:1  
Did not allow eunuchs into the assembly of the Lord.

Though they believed and worshiped God  
And could live in Jewish society.  
They could not join in their religious activities.

They were considered outcasts.

And so, all the more poignant  
Is Philip baptizing the eunuch  
Making him a full-fledged member

Of this new movement call the “followers of the way.”

~~

It causes me to wonder, then  
When the eunuch asks Philip

If the writer of the passage is referring to himself  
Or to someone else?

It causes me to wonder  
If the Ethiopian is wistfully hoping  
The passage addresses people like himself.

Let's look at it again.

**Acts 8:32 Like a sheep he was led to slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearers, so he does not open his mouth. <sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.**

We assume Philip explained this passage  
As being fulfilled in Jesus.

But when asked the question  
We don't really know what Philip said except

**Acts 8:35 . . . he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.**

But could we not also understand this passage  
To reflect the eunuch's own experience

Of a silenced victim  
Whose own generation was cut off  
By his forced emasculation?

Could it also be that his own feelings of brokenness  
And his experience as an outcast  
Has drawn him to this passage

Hoping that a person like himself  
Might be accepted into God's gracious kingdom?

We know the good news of Jesus Christ includes  
Liberating the poor, freedom for the captive  
And release of the oppressed.

We also see in a few chapters later  
Isaiah say so himself.

**Isaiah 56:3-7 NRSV**

**<sup>3</sup> Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
“The Lord will surely separate me from his people”;  
and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.”**

**<sup>4</sup> For thus says the Lord:  
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,**

**<sup>5</sup> I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.**

~~

Is this not good news?

Are not these passages specifically addressing  
People like the Ethiopian eunuch?

Is not Isaiah stating that whatever was said in the past  
Namely, the law concerning eunuchs  
No longer applies?

That those who are joined to God by their love of God  
And obedient to God's ways are welcomed  
No matter who they are?

That's the way I read this.

~~

In these passages

It is tough to overlook

The outcasts within society today.

What do these passages tell us about those who love God  
And yet are refused entry into today's assemblies?

If that is not enough, Isaiah continues.

### **Isaiah 56:6-8 NRSV**

**<sup>6</sup> And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,  
and hold fast my covenant—**

**<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.**

**<sup>8</sup> Thus says the Lord God,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already gathered.**



For the Ethiopian eunuch

To be fully accepted into this new community of faith

Must have been a very healing and joy-filled occasion.

No wonder he went his way rejoicing.

~~

The late, great Craddock preached a sermon on this text

I'm not too ashamed to use his words in closing.

*And Philip said, "Do you understand what you're reading?"*

*He said, "No, I don't have anybody to help me, but I found some good stuff here. Now is the prophet talking about himself or is the prophet talking about someone else?" Philip said, "Let me tell you who that is. That's Jesus."*

*"You mean he was cut off without any children? He didn't have any other generations and grandchildren and people to keep his name?"*

*"No, he was cut off from the land of the living."*

*"Do you mean to say that maybe this other verse up here, maybe, I know, I know, I'm just an Ethiopian and I don't know how you feel about Ethiopians, but it says here, no longer, no longer let the foreigners say surely the Lord will say, 'get out.'*

*"I know I'm a eunuch and I know what it says in Deuteronomy but it says in Isaiah, 'No longer let the eunuch say I'm just a dried tree. Listen I will bless you and you will*

*be remembered and it will be better than children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren forever.”*

*“Uh, Philip, do you suppose it’s possible, I know I’m just an Ethiopian. I know I’m a eunuch, but do you think it is possible, could I be a member of the church?”*

*And Philip said, “I can think of a hundred people who are going to be upset but, yes. I don’t know how this is going to go over back home, but yes. In fact, I feel a little awkward myself because I’ve never been in this situation and I’m not handling it well, but yes. Because the fact of the matter is, who am I to say no when it is clear that God has already said yes.”*

~~

No wonder the Ethiopian eunuch went his way rejoicing.

Is it possible we can rejoice with him?

Because that’s good news!