

Sermon: "Acts of the Holy Spirit"  
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Acts 8:26-40

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.) 27 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 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

32 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.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip,

"About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"

35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

36 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?”

38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

39 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.

40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

## ACTS OF THE SPIRIT

The full title of the book of Acts is the Acts of the Apostles.

But, I think that's a misnomer.  
I think the full title should be the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Take our lesson for today as an example.  
An angel of the Lord gets Philip up and tells him,  
“It's time to move.”

And where is Philip to go?

He's ordered to go south on the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.

That's a “wilderness road” by the way.  
That's the middle of nowhere.

Philip would have never gone there on his own.  
But, when the angel of the Lord tells you to go,  
.....you go.

I suspect that by now those first disciples had become accustomed to hearing and responding to the surprising call of the Spirit.

In the first chapter of Acts the risen Christ had given them their marching orders.

They were to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Apparently Philip had drawn the end of the earth assignment! Lucky Philip.

## THE ETHIOPIAN

And who did Philip see in this unlikely setting for ministry?

He saw an Ethiopian eunuch.

He was the treasurer for the queen of the Ethiopians, also known as the Candace. (That's a title, not a name.)

But, this Ethiopian was more than just the treasurer for the Queen.

He was also a man of faith.

We know that because he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

And now he was on his way home.

Apparently the Ethiopian had someone to drive that chariot, because the Scripture tells us that the man was seated, reading a scroll from the prophet Isaiah.

Once again the Spirit prompts the action.

The Bible tells us that the Spirit whispered in Philip's ear,

"Go over to the chariot and join it."

So Philip ran over to the chariot.

(If the chariot was moving Philip would have had to run.)

And as Philip jogged alongside the chariot he heard this man reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah.

Breathlessly, Philip shouted out,

“Do you understand what you’re reading?”

And the Ethiopian shouted back,

“How can I understand unless someone guides me?”

With that, the Ethiopian stopped the chariot, and invited Philip to join him.

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT AND JESUS

No doubt Philip was happy that there would be no more theology on the run, and he looked at the passage the man had been reading. It was from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, one of the suffering servant passages.

It described someone who would be helpless, like a sheep before the shearer.

He would be humiliated.  
He would be the victim of injustice.  
His life would be taken away.

The Ethiopian asked,  
“Who is this prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”

Can you think of a better opportunity to preach the gospel? Philip began with this passage and used it to tell the story about Jesus.

He told the Ethiopian that Jesus was this suffering servant. He told him that Jesus was humiliated, denied justice and crucified by the very people he came to save.

And I suspect Philip also said something like,

“But, this was not the end of the story.  
God raised Jesus from the dead to give the whole world hope, not only for this life but for all eternity.”

## BAPTIZED IN THE DESERT

And so this man learned about Jesus in the middle of the wilderness. And in the desert the seed of the gospel fell on good soil, and grew into faith.

As they traveled down this desert road, lo and behold there appeared an oasis in the desert. The Ethiopian said,

“Why can’t I be baptized here and now?  
I want to follow Jesus.”

So, he commanded the chariot to stop.  
Philip and the man went down into the water.  
And this Ethiopian was baptized.

And as they were coming up out of the water the Bible tells us that the Spirit “snatched Philip away.”  
The Ethiopian never saw Philip again.

But I suspect that didn’t matter.

He had seen Jesus, and he went home rejoicing.

And what happened to Philip?

He ended up in Azotus ... wherever that was.  
And from there he made his way to Caesarea, stopping at every little town along the way.

The Spirit continued to take Philip to the “ends of the earth” so that he could preach the good news about Jesus.

And that’s how Philip became known as Philip the evangelist.

## THE SPIRIT THAT LEADS US

Now this is a fascinating story.  
But, it’s not just a story about what happened way back when. It’s also a story about what happens here and now.

Remember I said that we shouldn't entitle the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles.

We should call it the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

And we believe the Spirit is still acting.

The story is not over!

We're a part of this story!

I believe the Spirit still wakes us up and takes us down roads we would rather not travel.

I believe the Spirit still leads us into the wilderness.

I believe the Spirit still interrupts our plans and replaces them with God's plans.

Philip had no idea that there would be an Ethiopian official in the desert who longed to hear and understand the gospel.

But, God knew.

And God made a way in the desert so that this man might come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Christian discipleship is not trying to do everything.

Christian discipleship is being open to going where the Spirit leads next.

And that's it.

Faith is just taking the next step.

There is no long range planning when you are subject to the call of the Spirit.

Just keep your bags packed.

Believe me.

When you follow the call of the Spirit, you will travel down some wilderness roads that seem pretty deserted.

But, when you look back on your life, you will often see how God used those side trips into the desert to accomplish great things.

The Scripture tells us that the Ethiopian went home rejoicing. Do you think that man kept the good news about Jesus to himself?

I don't.

I think that many lives were changed because he found a stream of salvation in the desert.

This is an example of what Paul wrote about in his letter to the Romans.

This is God working all things together for the good of the kingdom.

This is God calling His children according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

And God has children all over this world.

## THE SPIRIT THAT HELPS US UNDERSTAND

So, the Spirit leads us into some unlikely places.  
Sometimes the Spirit even takes us into the desert.

And the Spirit invites us to come alongside those who are seeking a deeper faith.

This is important.

Seekers are given hope when Spirit inspired disciples come alongside.

In the New Testament we learn that faith is not a do it yourself project.  
Faith is developed in community, the church, the Body of Christ.

We cannot learn what it means to follow Jesus unless someone shows the way.

The Ethiopian wanted to be a part of God's people, but there was a problem.

He was a eunuch.

He was mutilated, and as a person of faith, he knew the Scriptures.

He knew that Deuteronomy 23:1 says that no one mutilated in the way he was would be admitted into the house of the Lord.

Isn't that amazing?

He traveled all the way from Ethiopia to worship.

But, when he got there he couldn't go in the Temple.

And yet he went anyway.

His desire to seek the Lord was greater than those isolated verses that seemed to exclude him.

The Spirit prompted Philip to make his way into the desert, but the Spirit also prompted the Ethiopian Eunuch to read Isaiah.

I am not surprised he was reading Isaiah.

Isaiah offered much more hope for a man in his condition.

The prophet Isaiah announces that God will "recover the remnant that is left of his people ... from Ethiopia." (11:11)

And the prophet also promises that "eunuchs who keep my sabbaths" will be welcome in the house of the God and will receive "a name better than sons and daughters." (56:4-5)

Philip helps the Ethiopian understand that, in this case, Isaiah is to take precedence over Deuteronomy.

The kingdom of God is not about keeping people out.

The kingdom of God is about taking people in, all kinds of people.

You see, Philip knows more than Scripture.

Philip knows the warm embrace of the gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Ethiopian needed someone like Philip to help him understand.

We all need someone like Philip to help us understand.

The Spirit provides the person we need.

## THE SPIRIT THAT SAVES US

The Ethiopian wanted to know who Isaiah was talking about in the Scripture that he was reading. Who was this man who was humiliated and finally killed?

The Ethiopian was in some ways a man of power and privilege.

But he was also a eunuch, a man who knew humiliation, rejection, and justice denied.

He wondered if this Scripture passage was just about the prophet Isaiah or did this passage have something to do with the humiliation and rejection he had faced. Was this Scripture in some way about *him, today?*

We believe that the Bible is the *living Word of God*, and in that sense it is always about us, today.

It is about more than what happened to an ancient people. It is also about God's promise to us in our day and time.

Jesus said in his hometown synagogue,  
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21)

And today that Scripture is still being fulfilled.

But, when Philip explains to the eunuch how that scripture was fulfilled in Jesus, it turns out to be even better news than he could have ever imagined.

Not only does God know and understand the eunuch's experience of being humiliated and ostracized; God in Christ took on that lowly and outcast state.

Jesus was humiliated and denied justice.  
But, for Jesus and all who dare to follow him the pain and sorrow is transformed into salvation.

The scroll of Isaiah from which he was reading put it this way,

“Out of his anguish he shall see light ... The righteous one, my servant shall make many righteous.” (Isaiah 53:11)

Now the eunuch’s story of shame is now viewed through the lens of the cross and resurrection.

And in that frame it becomes a story of salvation.

## THE SPIRIT THAT BAPTIZES US

In our story for today the Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip a question.  
“What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

From one perspective there were quite few things that would prevent the eunuch from being baptized.

First, he was from Ethiopia.  
He wasn’t a part of God’s chosen people.

Second, he was a eunuch, and the purity code specifically said that he was to be excluded.  
It was in the Bible.  
No eunuchs allowed.

Sorry about that Mr. Ethiopian.  
You might be a good guy, but we’ve got to follow the Bible ... blindly if necessary.

And to top it off, he was a member of the cabinet of the queen of Ethiopia.

How can we baptize someone who works for a foreign government?  
After 911 we can’t be too careful.

So, to summarize:  
He belonged to the wrong nation.  
He held the wrong job.  
He had the wrong sexuality.

Funny, that sounds a lot like issues we are dealing with today doesn’t it?

But, note this.

When the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip,  
“What is to prevent me from being baptized?”  
the Holy Spirit whispered in Peter’s ear,

“Absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

The walls of prejudice that had stood for generations came tumbling down.  
They were blown down by the wind of God’s Spirit.

And a man who felt humiliated and lost was restored in the wideness of  
God’s mercy.

WHAT PREVENTS US?

This morning you may feel like there are walls separating you from God.

It may be a wall called guilt.  
It may be wall called prejudice.  
It may be a wall called shame.  
It may be a wall called pride.

But, when we pass by the water you ask, “What is to prevent me from taking a dip in the waters of God’s grace?”

The Holy Spirit still whispers the same answer in our ear,  
“Nothing, absolutely nothing. Come on in. The water’s fine.”

Amen.