

Some context: Philip was one of seven “respected men” chosen after Pentecost- in other words he wasn’t one of the original twelve disciples. He was a deacon who was appointed to be a leader in the early days of the new church when membership was growing, and the original twelve needed emergency back-up. Philip and the other six men were chosen to wait on tables so that the original twelve disciples could “devote themselves to prayer and to serving the word” (6:4). The twelve were complaining that they had no time to proclaim God’s word because they were busy serving tables, which meant distributing daily food to those in need, especially widows. So these seven chosen men, including Philip, stood before the disciples, who prayed and laid hands on them (Acts 6:6) as they were commissioned to wait on tables. In fulfillment of Jesus’ command and promise, most of those commissioned ended up scattering to “all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Philip, unlike many others, was not afraid of Samaritans, so he went down to Samaria and preached. He was very successful there, as he was a gifted preacher and evangelist. Without a doubt, God was working through him! Philip’s next mission on the heels of being in Samaria is where we find ourselves in today’s scripture. It’s also where we meet today’s face of faith: the Ethiopian Eunuch. **PRAY. READ.**

This is another strange story. The angel of the Lord, a messenger of God, told Philip to get up and go at noon to a desert or wilderness road. You can imagine perhaps Philip’s disappointment at his new assignment. After all, he had just been very successful in Samaria as a rookie preacher and had converted an entire city of Samaritans and now he

was assigned to go down a desert road! Perhaps he saw this as a demotion?! Caesarea, yes! A desert road to Gaza? Really? How was Philip sure that God was leading him there? I don't know about you all, but even being in communication with God, I don't always know how to discern a clear word from God. It seems strange- foreign- to many of us to receive and recognize such a clear communication from the Holy Spirit. Sometimes God's call is subtle and sometimes it is crystal clear, and discerning God's call can be often be challenging. Yet, Philip listens, trusts and obeys God, even when it involves a boring, non-touristy desert road. And notice that he's supposed to begin his next assignment at noon, which is not the greatest time of day to travel. In addition, desert roads can be unknown, remote (with no cell service) and very scary. Yet, down this desert road is exactly where God sends Philip. Why? Maybe because the object of God's interest is an Ethiopian Eunuch who is traveling on that same desert road from Jerusalem where he has been worshiping. This journey is obviously not something Philip came up with on his own nor was it about Philip. His mission and route was divinely initiated and guided all the way because if it were up to Philip and his ego, he probably would've passed.

Soon enters said Ethiopian eunuch- sitting in a carriage, reading the prophet Isaiah out loud, which was often the custom. If anyone represents the "other" in Acts, in terms of the perception of cultural stereotypes, it is the Ethiopian eunuch. He looks different, is from "the ends of the earth," as far as those in and around Jerusalem are concerned, and his identity as a eunuch brings with it stereotypes of

being a despised outsider. This eunuch represents the unknown, but he's also a trusted and important person to the Queen of Ethiopia. He's educated and wealthy and seems to be on a spiritual journey, having just come from worshiping in Jerusalem. According to scholars, "the Ethiopian official would not have been permitted to become a full proselyte to Judaism, not because of the eunuch's race, nationality, or status, but because of the eunuch's sexual identity" (Coleman Baker, workingpreacher.org (WP)). "Eunuchs were easily spotted, being shorter and softer than their peers, and usually beardless. Enslaved boys and men working in positions of power were often castrated to render them infertile and ensure the purity of the royal line" (Margaret Aymer, WP). This eunuch was one who lingered on the edge of Judaism because according to Deuteronomy 23:1, he was half a man, unable to enter "the assembly of the Lord." And Jews weren't the only ones who thought this way about eunuchs.

It's interesting to note the anonymity of the eunuch especially given that Philip's name occurs nine times in the Greek text. It's as if Philip gets all the air time, but again, this story isn't about Philip. There's another face of faith here, even though we aren't told his name. You can sense the hesitation of recognition as Philip appears to drag his feet by not approaching the chariot until prodded again by the Holy Spirit (8:28). He then picks up the pace literally by running. This story revolves around four questions and a quotation. Philip only asks one of these. In the chariot the eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53, and Philip asks him, while running beside him, if he understands what he is reading. What

kind of question is that? Maybe it's the sarcastic nature of my ear but that sounds so condescending! "Either way, the words reveal a certain reluctance to engage, as if pieces of this scene are starting to blow Philip's mind. And maybe that's understandable. How do we talk about matters of faith with complete strangers whose life experience is so different from our own? How do we even start? For when we speak of our faith to someone, there's no place to hide. It's just a wilderness built for two, and there we are" (Anna Carter Florence, *A is for Alabaster*). The eunuch then throws out a question of his own: "How can I, without someone to guide me?" Notice the eunuch didn't say explain or correct or enlighten. No. He said to guide him, which means that he isn't looking for a lecture. He is looking for companionship on this journey called faith. He is looking for someone to walk with him as a friend and to share the journey into Scripture. He is looking for someone to sit beside him on this faith journey. Next thing you know Philip climbs into the carriage with the eunuch, and they begin to discuss the scriptures. Like many OT scholars have debated for centuries, the eunuch asks who exactly Isaiah is referring to in this passage? Again, we aren't told what Philip says to the eunuch, but we can surmise that he may have connected the Suffering Servant in Isaiah to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This interaction reminds us that interpretation happens best through the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of risking conversation with others, especially those who are different. This is why Bible studies that are open to the Holy Spirit and allowing people to share what they see in Scripture can be so rich. This is why there are some young adults here in our congregation who want to learn alongside some older

members because they hunger for this companionship on their journeys of faith.

“The eunuch asks Philip questions and Philip answers them, but the point of clarity comes when the landscape shifts. Instantly, the eunuch moves from questioning to a sense of awe, excitement, wonder, and maybe even a bit certainty” (Lauren Wright Pittman, *A Sanctified Art*).

He said, “Look, here is water!” And then the eunuch asked Philip, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” “Here the restriction in

Deuteronomy 23:1 hangs in the air. Philip is silent” (Aymer). **What**

prevents the eunuch? Well, just about everything! But through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, absolutely nothing!

“The answer is nothing—not his status, not his questioning, not even his position in society as a sexual minority. Absolutely nothing keeps the eunuch from the water, and it seems as though he knows this truth deep into the very cells of his existence. Nothing holds him back from baptism. Courageously diving headfirst into a wonderfully mysterious and certainly uncertain life of following Christ, the eunuch emerges from the water drenched in the truth that nothing will keep him from the love of God” (Pittman). That’s right- absolutely nothing! The eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized by Philip right there on the side of this desert road, making him the first African convert. The impossibility of this event is made possible by the unbelievable reach of God's grace. As the grace-filled water poured over the eunuch’s head, “walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling, blown down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and

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restored in the wideness of God's grace in Jesus Christ" (Thomas Long, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 458).

In several translations of the Bible, verse 37 is missing. Other ancient church authorities added in verse 37 that reads, "And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And the eunuch replied, 'I believe that Jesus is the Son of God' (Harper Collins Study Bible, p. 2073). This was a later addition, according to scholars, because people in the church were anxious. They needed to have rules- things done a certain way. It was hard enough that he was a eunuch so they needed a confession of faith before he was baptized. Maybe there isn't a verse 37 in here because Luke intended to leave this question hanging in the air for each generation to answer or perhaps what took place and who was there were enough? There was a man who heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed, saw water and asked to be baptized into the household...into the family of God. Who was Philip to stop the Holy Spirit at work?! Who are we to get in the way of God's Spirit and to say who is in and who is out?

At the end of today's story, Philip is snatched up by the Holy Spirit to his next good news sharing gig just as he and the eunuch came out of the water. And the eunuch, who never sees Philip again, went on his way rejoicing. Maybe he was rejoicing because he knows that baptism *marks the beginning of new life in Christ and a new family*. Can't you just hear him? *Come on in, the water feels great!* Like the eunuch, we are not alone on our faith journey. God is with us and so are others, like Philip, who

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God sends down a desert road to meet us where we are to tell us about the good news of Jesus Christ, to befriend us and travel with us down the road of faith and life. May we have the courage to dive right on in to our faith for God's Spirit is on the move! Thanks be to God! Amen.