

“About Whom is the Prophet Isaiah Speaking?”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Hearts Abound Sermon Series

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, May 22, 2016

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Holy Scriptures: Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV)

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south^[a] 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?”^[b] ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip^[c] 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.

Footnotes:

a [Acts 8:26](#) Or go at noon

b [Acts 8:36](#) Other ancient authorities add all or most of verse 37, *And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*

c [Acts 8:38](#) Gk he

Sermon

A Lesson in Church History

Our common history began with the rush of a mighty wind. Like wind, the Spirit of God moved over the waters and mountains, across desolate lands and through city streets, and then into the hearts and minds of God's people, and through them the Holy Spirit inspired the Church Universal.

Church history, also known as the ongoing story of the Christian Faith,

began about 30 A.D. in Palestine following the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

According to Acts 1:15,

the first church began with Jews and Jewish Proselytes, numbering around 120 people.

They preached Jesus in the local synagogues as well as started house churches,

becoming known far and wide

for their acts of hospitality, healing, and hope-filled spirituality.

Acts 2: 42-47 (The Message)

"They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles!

And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony,

holding everything in common.

They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources

*so that each person's need was met.
They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple
followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration,
exuberant and joyful, as they praised God.
People in general liked what they saw.
Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved."*

Within two hundred years, by the third century A.D.,
Christianity had grown to become the dominant religion
of the northern Mediterranean world.
Christianity spread to the east and south of the
Mediterranean, as well.

Credit for its widespread growth as a faith movement
goes to the efforts of the initial apostles,
men and women of grace and courage who lived in the
first century A.D.

This first part of the first Great Awakening is called
the Apostolic Age.

The apostolic period extends from the Day of
Pentecost to the death of the Apostle John,
and covers about seventy years, from A.D. 30 to about
100.

The main arena of action was the land in and around
Palestine.

However as spiritual fervor increased so too did the
spreading of the gospel,
which gradually extended over Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and
Italy.

The most prominent centers were Jerusalem, Antioch, and
Rome,

which represent respectively the mother churches
of Jewish, Gentile, and United Catholic Christianity.

Next to them in core importance were the churches in
Ephesus and Corinth.

Ephesus acquired a special importance by the
residence and labors of John,
which were felt during the second century through Polycarp
and Irenaeus.

The Christian faith was planted as well in Samaria, Damascus,

Joppa, and Caesarea;
in Tyre, Cyprus, and the provinces of Asia Minor;
in Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Beraea, and Athens;
the faith was planted deep in Crete, Patmos,
Malta, and Puteoli.

At this point I have either completely captured your
imagination
or completely lost some if not most of us
(we do have a 13 year old in our church named Will
who eats this up).

Know this truth:
we are overhearing far more
than the names of towns and villages, of hamlets and
cities.

Each name of a place that is spoken aloud in honor of
a church that was planted there
represents a loving, giving, heartfelt faith community
that lived out their calling to be and share the Gospel,
to welcome home widows and orphans,
children and seniors,
and the broke and the broken,
transforming the hopeless into hope-filled
followers of Jesus.

From the west unto the east, the Gospel had
been released.[\[i\]](#)

Let's pause to observe that as early as 58 A.D.
the Apostle Paul would say:
*"From Jerusalem and round about even unto Illyricum,
I have fully preached the gospel of Christ."* (Romans 15: 19)
Not only was the Gospel sown, the seeds of grace took root.
Afterwards Paul carried the Good News of Jesus Christ to Rome,
where it had already been known before,
and possibly as far as Spain,
the western boundary of the Roman Empire.

Through the eunuch converted by Philip,
Christianity reached the land and culture of the queen of the

Ethiopians,

known as the Candace.

There in Ethiopia the congregation called itself the
Coptic Church.

The Coptic Church in Ethiopia lives and thrives to this
day,
a vibrant, breathing testament
as the oldest continuously worshipping church in the
world,

proud to trace its origins to the founding actions of the man
who was converted by Philip along a road almost
2,000 years ago.

And to think that the story began with the power of
the Holy Spirit.

Are you surprised?

We've heard this story before, for this story is our
story as well.

A good story is worthy to be told again, and again, and
again,
for the narrative speaks to Who and Whose we are.

Acts 8: 26

*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."*

The fact that we already know what is going to happen next
gives us an insight into the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza was a
traveler,

a traveler whose chariot was pointed in the direction of home,
whose home was far away and whose service was to
his queen,

the Candace of Ethiopia.

So we find in Acts 8 that the Angel of the Lord
directed Philip to get up and move,
to go to the road where he would have an encounter with the
Ethiopian.

You see, clearly the Spirit of God had a will, a desire, a prayer,

a hope, a determination
that the Church of Jesus Christ must be spread into northern
Africa,
far beyond the boundaries and cultures of Jerusalem
and Mt. Sinai,
outside the well-travelled homelands
of David, King of Israel, and Jesus of
Nazareth.

Acts 8: 27- 31

*So Philip 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 [Holy] Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join
it."*

Let's pause to observe that the same Spirit which gave life to the earth
and then begat the Church
and then encouraged Philip to get up off of his couch
to go to a certain place on the road from
Jerusalem to Gaza,
now inspires him to introduce himself
to a stranger.
And what is a stranger, but a neighbor
you have yet to meet.

*So Philip ran up to [the chariot] 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.*

As you know, there are four extended passages in Isaiah
called the Songs of the Suffering Servant.
They are four poems that sing aloud of the love of God
by one who has suffered extensively,
possibly both physically and mentally,
for the sake of the Lord.
The Suffering Servant testified that:

*“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.”*

Acts 8: 34

The eunuch asked Philip, *“About whom, may I ask you, does the
prophet say this,
about himself or about someone else?”*

Undoubtedly the Ethiopian eunuch can relate,
for like the Suffering Servant,

he has rubbed shoulders with the powerful,
yet like the Suffering Servant

in the world’s eyes he is powerless.

Do you think he can relate to the
denial of justice?

Might he grasp what it feels like to be
alive yet to imagine that his life is taken
away?

He has within himself a strong faith,
dignity, and discipline,

yet in the judgment of those around him he is flawed and less
than,

less than the best, less than everyone else.

He wonders if the prophet is speaking about himself,
Isaiah’s own personal suffering for God,

or if somehow Isaiah has looked into the future

and is portraying the story and pain of the

Ethiopian eunuch,

or even a future prophet or messiah or
entire people.

Let’s pause to reflect that we follow a
loving and gracious God

who knows much about suffering, who knows everything
about our own.

*“Through [Jesus] we have obtained access to this grace in which we
stand,*

*and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character, and character
produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit which has been given to
us." (Romans 5: 2-5)*

The Holy Spirit knows our sufferings, our story, our
song.

This is what the prophet Isaiah knew,
and what the Ethiopian eunuch gleaned, as well.
Ever read or hear something and say, that is my story, too?
The Spirit of God has a way of knowing your story,
your joys and concerns, your challenges and victories,
and bringing them to light in the Word.

The Spirit of God trusted that Philip could bring light
to bear on this subject,
and so made it possible for him to intercept the chariot,
and to receive the question uppermost on the reader's
mind,
and to dare to unpack the Word so this humble soul from

Ethiopia

might know some joy inside his pain,
some laughter in his tears,
some hope inside a chariot headed for
home.

Let's pause to observe what Philip did
and did not care about.

I am reminded of the scene in "The
Fugitive" when Tommy Lee Jones
is all set to capture Harrison Ford, so Ford raises his hands
and says, "I didn't kill my wife!" to which Jones
responds, "I don't care!"

To Jones, whether Ford did or did not harm his wife is
a non-issue.

The only issue to Jones is the arrest of a fugitive.

Back to the chariot, parked by the roadside between
Jerusalem and Gaza,
two men are bent over the Holy Scriptures,
concentrating on Isaiah, talking and listening intently,
and we're hyperaware that there are issues
and non-issues at play.

The Spirit knew that Philip would not make a
scene
about his ethnicity or sexuality, gender concerns or leader
status.

Philip was chosen because it would not cross his mind
to attempt to deny someone else's humanity
or make an issue of a non-issue, one where God in
Christ does not.

Philip cared that the chariot rider was reading the
Word of God.

He could not care less that his new friend hailed from
a land foreign to him.

Philip cared that they both wanted to grow in the
Spirit.

He could not have cared less that before him
was a high up mucky muck in the Ethiopian government.

Philip cared that he was welcomed aboard and not tossed out
at Ben Hur speed.

He could not care less that this gentleman was a eunuch,
even though eunuchs were considered less than, as
permanent outsiders,

and were not allowed to worship God inside the
temple in Jerusalem.

Philip cared that his new friend and host
was asking questions that were a most apt, learned, insightful,
questions that told him far more about the reader
than about the reading.

He could not care less about his new friend and host's
gender or sexuality

or what restroom he preferred to use.

There are issues of import, like justice and equality, mercy and healthy spiritualities.

There are non-issues that far too many people make a big to-do about in order to disregard or downplay or distract us from vital communal concerns.

I'll paraphrase what one of our church members shared last Sunday at our fellowship meal: *"I care more about whether someone walking into the public restroom with me has a gun than is transgender."*

Here is an inspired idea:

Let folks use the restroom they feel most comfortable with, and then let's get busy with building together a cleaner, safer, more loving society.

The Spirit of God had sent Philip to the Ethiopian because God knew he cared about his neighbor.

Philip didn't ask, *"Who is my neighbor?"*

That is not the question and it never, really is; we all know who our neighbors are.

Philip wondered, *"What does my neighbor need?"*

That is what the eunuch wanted to know, that is why he asked if Isaiah was talking about himself or someone else,

like his own suffering servant self,

his own song of ostracization,

his lament of permanent outsider

status,

and that, my friends,

is exactly what the Holy Spirit calls us to address

in such a time as this.

What does your neighbor need?

Dignity? Respect? Recognition?

Room to be whomever they need to be?

What does your neighbor need?

A welcome home?
A pat on the back and an encouraging word?
A prayer or a psalm or a passage of scripture?

What does your neighbor need?

A meal or a visit or a place to stay or, dare we say it, yes, we dare,
world peace?

Philip cared about him because he was a child of God.

Period.

Together, side by side in the seats on the chariot as they read the
Torah

and examined the love of God in Jesus Christ,

Philip was transformed into God's messenger
of love and compassion, healing and

acceptance,

while the Ethiopian was transformed into God's

provider

of hospitality and receptivity and historicity.

We say historicity because this moment, the

exchange of grace,

was a historic turning point, a spiritual fulcrum, if you will.

Immediately afterward the eunuch asked to be baptized by

Philip,

who was absolutely delighted to oblige.

Yet when the man arose from the water dripping wet and

blessed,

Philip was gone, without a trace.

So he went on his way rejoicing,

returning home to Ethiopia to serve God and Queen.

There he started the Coptic Church,

which worships & serves God to this very day.

Let's pause to give thanks this new day in Church History,

a new Great Awakening,

a new day in which we are anointed and inspired,

empowered and sent forth by...

...the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.

[1] A nod to the song writing of Bob Dylan: “From the west unto the east, any day now, any day now, I shall be released.”