

**Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd      Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: May 2, 2021 Year B 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 8:26-40 The Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip

Title: The Gospel is Good News for . . . ?

Focus: The Good News of the Gospel is extended “to the ends of the earth” through this encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Both he and Philip are nudged by God’s Spirit and the eunuch, an “outsider” in multiple ways, is welcomed in baptism by the grace of God.

**Scripture Reading: Acts 8:26-40**

<sup>26</sup>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.) <sup>27</sup>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 <sup>28</sup>and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup>Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” <sup>30</sup>So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup>He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup>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.

<sup>33</sup>In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup>The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup>Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup>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?” <sup>38</sup>He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>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.

**Have you Wondered how people would Live Up to a Challenge?**

Have you ever been in a circumstance in which you wondered how a person or a group or team was going to respond to a particular challenge?

**Search Committee:** To give you a particular scenario: Maybe you were a part of search team looking to hire a person for a particular role in your company or agency. You read over resumes and applications and engage in interviews. You meet with these candidates and then with people on your team, you ponder how a particular person could contribute to your setting.

**Graduation:** Maybe it's a different milestone and turning point that would prompt you to wonder how a person would respond to a challenge. As we move into the month of May and then into June, high school and college graduations will soon be upon us. How will a young graduate transition to the next challenge or setting?

**There could be all kinds of settings in which you wonder how a person or people will respond to a particular challenge:**

- It could be a kid spending the night at a friend's house for the first time.
- Going off to camp for a week in the summer.
- It could be a dancer or a musician preparing for a performance or an athlete or team for a competition—how well are they prepared and how will they do?

## **We have Seen the Disciples Disappoint**

It's hard to walk through the season of Lent and then Holy Week and Easter and then the resurrection without being aware of the shortcomings of the disciples. We have read about and talked about how they were disappointing in a number of ways over time.

- Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, **one of you will betray me**, one who is eating with me.'
  - <sup>19</sup>They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?' (Mark 14:18-19).
- And Jesus said to [the disciples], '**You will all become deserters. . .**' (Mark 14:27).
- That led to **Peter's bold declaration**: "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." (Mark 14:31).
  - We know how that claim was lived out.
- "All of them deserted [Jesus] and fled" (Mark 14:50).
- We have read of the disciples gathered in fear on the day of resurrection, with the doors locked (John 20:19)

Time and time again in the gospels, the disciples are befuddled, they display their pride by jockeying for position, and remain as stuck as the sheep we say stuck in the ditch in the video clip we saw last week—who was then freed, only to get stuck again. Are these the right ones to lead the Church? How would the disciples respond to this challenge?

## **How would the Disciples Respond?**

Like a graduation speech that challenges a student to make the transition from academia to a new world, the risen Jesus, as recorded in the first chapter of Acts, summons the disciples and challenges them to leadership in a new time and setting. In

the Church, we would say that Jesus *commissions* them, as in charging them with a particular task and authorizing them to do it.

### **The Ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:6-11)**

The post-resurrection Jesus gathered the disciples together and then said, <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

And then after he had said this, "he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (v. 9).

That "charge" (captured in v. 8) is set up as the theme verse of the book of Acts.

- What are they "charged" to do?
  - When the Holy Spirit has come upon them, they will be witnesses to Jesus, beginning from the most nearby and most familiar places, like Jerusalem, to the most different and distinct, "the ends of the earth."
- How will they respond? What will happen next?

This opening episode in chapter 1 in which the risen Jesus is speaking to the disciples just before his ascension to heaven poses these sorts of questions. Luke as writer sets this up to signal this is what the book is going to be about: If the gospels tell the story of Jesus on earth, his teaching and ministry and interaction with the disciples and others, then the Book of Acts tells what happens next.

The first verse of chapter 1 of Acts describes the transition between the gospel story(-ies) and Acts in this way:

- In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning. . . (Acts 1:1)
- <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

The book of Acts is the story of the early Church in the first century. It's the story of "What happened?" after the gospels.

This encounter between the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip is an example of how the disciples responded or how they lived out this commissioning or charge expressed in chapter 1, verse 8 of "you will be my witnesses, to the ends of the earth."

### **Role of the Spirit in nudging Philip**

Did you notice what happens at the very beginning of the story? "**An angel of the Lord said to Philip. . .**" You might say this is a story about Philip and the eunuch, but it actually starts and is initiated by the Spirit of God nudging Philip: "An angel of the Lord said to Philip. Get up and go toward the south to this particular road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. . ."

**Get up and go.** Two short imperatives or commands: "Get up and go. . ." And what did Philip do? He got up and went (v. 27).

**Then there is this description of the eunuch:** his role as a court official in charge of the whole treasury for Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. He'd been in Jerusalem to worship and was now returning home.

**The Spirit nudges Philip again:** “Go over to this chariot and join it” (v. 29). The Spirit seems active throughout the passage, perhaps leading also to the receptivity of the eunuch by inviting Philip to join him in the chariot and welcoming his instruction or explanations.

The Spirit is active toward the close of the passage, abruptly leading Philip to a new place.

### **The Book of Acts:**

Most often, we refer to this book by its simple, short title: “Acts.” The full name you’d see as you flip to the opening page of the book in your Bible, is “The Acts of the Apostles.” Apostles means those who are “sent out.”

It’s kind of funny (ironic funny) to formally call this “The Acts of the Apostles” when in this particular story and again and again throughout the book, the larger story is about the power of the Spirit of God at work and secondarily about the disciples (or apostles). In that commissioning verse of 1:8, the action begins with the promise, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” and then in this story, the first actor or action is the angel of the Lord who says, “Get up and go” and Philip got up and went. **The Spirit is the first actor, the initiator or the first to take action.**

Back to that commissioning verse or theme verse of 1:8. Jesus commissions them to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” They are to share this message of the Good News of Jesus from where they are and what’s most familiar and continue to be witnesses to him “to the end of the earth,” to people and places which were different and distinct from them.

This story is the first time in the book of Acts that the apostles are moving and responding across those boundaries.

#### **The eunuch was an outsider in multiple ways.**

- **Geography:** From the Greco-Roman perspective, the south of Egypt location from which he likely came represents “the ends of the earth.” As an Ethiopian he represents those who are geographically and ethnically, far away.
- There is his **distinctive role and physical and/or social status:** From a Greco-Roman point of view, he might be viewed as lacking status because of his identity as a eunuch—even more so if he is enslaved. Yet Acts describes him as powerful. He’s an official and trusted to be in charge of the queen’s treasury. He’s literate and wealthy enough to have an Isaiah scroll and use of a chariot.
- There is **ambiguity about his religious status:** He is described as returning from worshiping in Jerusalem (vv. 27-28), but there are also things about scripture—this excerpt from the book of Isaiah and questions about the one to whom it refers—that show how dependent he is upon others to help him understand. Philip “proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (v. 35).
- His story is told with an odd, but kind of refreshing mix of detail and ambiguity or mystery: This joyful convert does not conform to the rules set by standard boundaries. He is powerless yet powerful, strange yet impressive, ignorant yet knowledgeable.

The **climax of the story** is again a product of the serendipity of God's Spirit: Here in the desert, they come across water. I love the joyful recognition and the expectant tone in the way the court official poses the question: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

His beautiful, hopeful rhetorical question is a recognition of the grace of God. He simply sees the water and, on his own, does the reasoning: "Baptism is for me." Whatever Philip tells him about Jesus, the court official discerns on his own the fitting outcome for him. I am included. This is for me. I belong.

Who is this good news for? This good news acknowledges the worth and dignity of all. This good news evades attempts restrict and hem in God's grace.

To respond to the rhetorical question: Nothing. Nothing at all. You are welcome by the grace of God.

## Good News in the Time of COVID

During this time of COVID separation, the Church (Capital "C" Church), like every other entity, is adapting, redefining who it is and how it shall function or carry out its essential mission.

In very direct, practical ways, the Church has had to ask questions like

- Who is the congregation?
- What is our mission and purpose?
- How do we carry that out in sustainable ways when faced with such restrictions?

Layer on top of that the essential questions of a text like this:

- What is the Good News?
- What is the commission that Jesus has given us—to be witnesses of this good news "to the ends of the earth."

Back to the practical: How shall the Church do that when its buildings have been (unfortunately, but necessarily) shut and its ability to gather is restricted?

I described the realization and question of the Ethiopian as hopeful, joyful, beautiful. I had an email exchange this past week with a newcomer who has been an online worshiper with us that had the same tone.

- Like the Ethiopian, this person doesn't neatly fit the descriptions or categories of an insider—of someone you might expect.
- I think this person has had painful experiences with the Church in the past (Capital "C" Church, not with Good Shepherd as a congregation.)
- We have been so aware of COVID *restrictions*, but here is one thing that has been an enhancement—something better—being able to worship online.
- This person was introduced to Good Shepherd by a friend and said in the note to me: "I started internet stalking the church and watching a bunch of your services online" and then inserted one of those laughing emoji faces: 😄
- ["Your way of reading the Bible] feels familiar to me. And I have never heard you say anything condemning or cruel, which helps make me feel safer."
- This worshiper approaches us cautiously and yet there are glimpses that remind me of Philip and the Ethiopian court official:

- Where is the Spirit nudging me and us, saying, “Get up and go.”
- I want this cautious worshiper to ask, “Who is this Good News for?”
- And to come to the joyful conclusion: “It is for me” or to metaphorically say, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The grace of God is for me, too.

May we at Good Shepherd be receptive to being a part of the Holy Spirit nudging us in that way and to have that kind of encounter with someone as they experience the wildly inclusive grace of God.