



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR B, MAY 2, 2021
ACTS 8:26-40; PSALM 22:24-30; 1 JOHN 4:7-21; JOHN 15:1-8

THE HOLY SPIRIT DOES IT AGAIN

Acts 8:26-40 *[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.) 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it 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. 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.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.*

Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 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. 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.

The diocesan confirmation service held here yesterday was a high-energy, joyful event. Twenty people received sacramental rites, including five from Saint Mark's. Those five join the twelve others who since November have been baptized, confirmed or received.

Here's the remarkable thing – more than half of these people are new to Saint Mark's since the pandemic began. In listening to their stories, you sense the Holy Spirit at work in their lives and blessing this community through them. You hear "I was just drawn in; I

longed for God again; I felt at home; I fell in love.” COVID restrictions or not, the Holy Spirit moves as she pleases, opening hearts, easing hurts, and knitting a community together. Thanks be to God!

As we talked a couple weeks ago, during the Easter season, our first reading on Sundays comes from the Acts of the Apostles. Acts was written by a gentile at a time when gentile Christians were beginning to outnumber Jewish Christians and both groups were scattering beyond Jerusalem, making homes away from the synagogue and within diverse communities. As they spread out, they carried the gospel with them, reinterpreting their covenant with God in light of Jesus Christ, and extending the Christian community through Judea and Samaria, “to the ends of the earth.”

Acts contains stories about the apostles, for sure, but also about newer leaders in The Way of Jesus, including seven men appointed by the apostles to take care of the gentile community’s needs. They were called “*diakonon*,” in Greek, “those who serve others.” It’s where we get our word for deacons.

One such man was Philip, the evangelist in our story today. And what a story! It’s the only time a person from Ethiopia, a eunuch, or a chariot appears in the entire New Testament. And

those details must be important, because the author of Acts points them out repeatedly.

The Ethiopian man is completely “other” to Philip – tremendously wealthy, powerfully connected, and traveling from a far-away land. He is an observant Jew, perhaps a convert, willing to go a long distance to worship. But he is also a eunuch, a man castrated in order to make him a trustworthy servant among royal women. That is almost certainly not his choice, and in addition to the loss of his physical wholeness, he has lower religious status under Mosaic law and is prohibited from joining the full temple assembly.

So the power dynamics of the Ethiopian man’s encounter with Philip are complicated. He is traveling in his limousine on a deserted, country road, when a stranger runs up, interrupting his reading. In the first gesture of hospitality in this story, he stops and gives Philip his full attention. And then, he asks for help from a person beneath him in society.

There is deep vulnerability here, too. Listen to what the eunuch is reading. “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.” (Isaiah 53:7-8). This passage originally referred to Israel and its experience of suffering in exile, longing for justice and union with

God. But can you see how it might resonate with a man who is shorn himself? In his humiliation, justice was denied him. When he asks Philip, “who is this about?” we can hear the underlying question, “could this be about me, too?”

In the second act of hospitality, Philip explains these verses in the context of Jesus. For early Christians, this passage authentically described Jesus’ undeserved suffering and union with God at the same time. This is not supersessionism, claiming that Isaiah was talking about Christ all along. No, Philip is telling the Ethiopian man that God works through both situations in the same transformative way, and therefore God’s presence can bring transformation for him, too.

And then the hospitality is so mutual, each man is host and guest at the same time. The eunuch desires and receives baptism, is marked as Christ’s own forever, and goes on his way rejoicing. Philip continues proclaiming the gospel, gathering many to the growing community, and settles in Caesarea. We learn later in Acts that his four unmarried daughters are acknowledged prophets. What a legacy!

In Bible commentaries, this story is called “Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch,” but I wonder if it would be more accurately named,

“The Holy Spirit Does It Again.” It is the Spirit, after all, who is the consistent, powerful presence, sending Philip down the wilderness road, prodding him to approach the chariot, and eventually whisking him away to his next destination.

And you can see the Spirit at work in the eunuch’s life, too, in his commitment to worship despite social constraints, in his openness to the poor stranger on the road, in his willingness to give voice to his desire, “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” Not a thing. Nothing can prevent it -- not his foreignness, his sexuality, or his limited knowledge of scripture. Nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit Does It Again.

When we read this story as one primarily about the nature of God, we see three themes that are woven throughout scripture. First, God is all about radical inclusion. Just as Jesus gathered all people to himself, especially the rejected and undervalued, the early church took the message of a loving God to anyone who would listen. No matter their faith, education, wealth, or virtue. God took a motley crew and knit them into one body.

So, we must be about radical inclusion, too. Inclusion and welcome for all people, even if it means changing ourselves or making space in

a new way. And we must be about inclusion of every part of ourselves, too. It is easy to imagine our generous and compassionate selves as “marked as Christ’s own forever,” but so are the selfish, hurtful parts of ourselves. The parts we hide or try to cut off. They can be transformed, too, through God’s love.

Next, the Holy Spirit works in the wilderness. The times when we feel most alone, cut off from others or even ourselves, the times we are brought low by disappointment, failure, or grief, we need to remember that none of this was foreign to Jesus. He walked the journey of faith just as you and I do, enduring his own trials, conflicts, fears and doubts. Jesus knew the wilderness well. It was where he communed with God and gathered wisdom and strength for the journey. It is where the Holy Spirit works in us, too.

Finally, the Holy Spirit moves when we give up control. You know, that need to manage others and lock down the future. Think about the most moving experiences you’ve had in relationship with others. Did you plan every detail in advance, or did you give in to intimacy that unfolded in front of you? What if our “accidental” encounters with other people are

really divine appointments?”¹ If we orient ourselves to appreciating what is, not comparing it to some idealized “could be,” we will find our calendar filled with divine appointments.

Through radical inclusion, in the wilderness, when we give up control, the Holy Spirit moves as she pleases, opening hearts, easing hurts, and knitting a community together. Thanks be to God!

Whatever wilderness the Spirit has brought you to:

Walk in boldness, as a beloved child of God,

Walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High,

Walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with you.

The blessing of the Creator, Redeemer, and Holy Spirit is among you today and always. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, p. 459.