

***“About Whom Does the Prophet Say This?” – Acts 8:26-40***

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

**April 28, 2024**

This is one of the more uniquely fascinating stories in all of scripture. And it centers around two characters.

The first is the evangelist Philip, not to be confused with the apostle Philip. In this early Christ-believing community, Philip emerges as the first “evangelist” to preach the gospel outside Jerusalem and Judea, beginning in bordering Samaria, which is occupied by people with a history of ethnic-religious conflict with Jerusalem-oriented Jews (8:4–13; see also 21:8). Philip enjoyed great success as a large number of urban Samaritans believed his message and were baptized in Christ’s name.

But, in our text today, Philip’s evangelistic career takes a strange turn, as “an angel of the Lord” suddenly dispatches him to the isolated “wilderness/desert road” running from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip thus heads “toward the south” from Samaria (8:26). But the term “south” (*mesēmbria*) used here can also mean “noon” (see 22:6), doubling as a marker indicating time of day. Thus, Philip the evangelist heads to a desert road in the noontime heat—a place and time he was least likely to encounter anyone to preach to!

It only gets stranger as a strange character rolls by. Actually, “races” by would be more accurate as the traveler cruises along in a chariot, requiring Philip to “[run] up to it” and “join it” (8:29–30). This passenger is the chief treasury officer to “the Candace (Cahn-duh-cie), the queen of the Ethiopians” (8:27), which explains his fancy ride. But what is he doing on this Jerusalem-Gaza roadway? He’s heading home to Ethiopia but not from a diplomatic mission. Rather, he had visited Jerusalem on a religious pilgrimage to worship Israel’s God. He had also procured a scroll of Isaiah, a valuable document not widely available, which he happens to be reading when Philip approaches (8:27–30).

So midday in the middle of the Gaza desert, Philip encounters a wealthy, chariot-riding, God-fearing, Bible-reading African official. Just another day in the life of a Christ evangelist—with another wrinkle that’s

really the main feature. This fascinating, multifaceted figure is also a **eunuch**, and it is this sexual characteristic that most defines him in Acts' story. Technically, a eunuch is a man; by social definition, however, a eunuch is **no-man**, no real man, no whole man. Though enjoying advantages befitting his high economic and political status, his eunuch condition marks him as deviant in "normal" society.

If his main identity is "the eunuch," his main activity is "reading the prophet Isaiah" (8:28). This is what first catches Philip's ear when he catches up to the chariot. Philip **hears** the eunuch reading Isaiah aloud (a servant would be driving while he reads) and asks him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (8:30). That is the central question, and Philip's core mission is to help this religious seeker—whatever his other identities (Philip never mentions them)—understand the scripture he's reading.

The eunuch is not just reading any random Isaiah text when Philip arrives. It's an evocative passage about a shorn, scorned, shamed sheep-like figure to whom "justice") was denied (Isaiah 53:7–8 // Acts 8:32–33). The eunuch specifically wants to know, "About whom ... does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (8:34).

This is intensely personal for the man **as a eunuch**. Again, whatever benefits he has in the Cahn-duh-cee's court, he suffers widespread stigmatization in Gentile and Jewish society as a permanently emasculated, mutilated figure unable to procreate—in short, a threatening sexual anomaly. More particular to his religious interests, he remains "cut off" by law from full participation in the covenant community, according to Deuteronomy 23:1—**unless** Isaiah offers a glimmer of good news; **unless** there's some way to "describe" a more positive outcome for the shorn and slain sufferer's "generation" and "life" (Isaiah 53:8 // Acts 8:33).

Philip the evangelist comes at the right time and place (orchestrated by the Spirit), and "starting with this [Isaiah] scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (8:35). Acts provides no transcript of Philip's sermon, but we readily imagine his identification of the unjustly crucified Jesus with Isaiah's innocent slain figure.

This Jesus, God's Son and Messiah, suffered in sympathetic solidarity with all victims of violence and stigmatization, like Isaiah's slaughtered lamb—and the Ethiopian eunuch. And the best news is that "Jesus' life [was] taken away from the earth" (Isaiah 53:8 // Acts 8:33) in **resurrection and exaltation** by God, thus opening the household of God for faithful sufferers—including eunuchs, foreigners, and other "outcasts"—just as Isaiah announced a little later in his scroll (56:3–8)!

The prophet Isaiah and Jesus Messiah revise Deuteronomic law to better reflect the inclusive thrust of God's covenant to bless all peoples, families, and persons on the earth (see Genesis 12:1–3; 22:17–18).

The Ethiopian eunuch readily grasps the point and moves to act: "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (8:36). How about that—water in the desert at the optimal evangelistic moment! With barriers blocking fellowships broken down, nothing "prevents" Philip and the eunuch entering the baptismal waters together and emerging as full brothers in Christ in God's family. (F. Scott Spencer, *Working Preacher*, April 28, 2024)

This Ethiopian, in many respects, was a man of privilege. He was the chief treasury officer for the Ethiopian queen. He's riding in a chariot! He has a driver. He has influence. He has advantages in the culture that few had. And yet, there's something about him that stigmatizes him—his sexual identity as a eunuch. That would supposedly keep him from the blessings of God.

That is, until Phillip comes along and teaches him to understand that the subject of this reading from Isaiah that he's trying to comprehend is Christ the Messiah, who was also denied justice, whose life was taken away. Christ dying was for him as much as it is for anybody else.

We continue to live in a stigmatizing world. The debates on sexual identity have been torrid for as long as we can remember, and they will continue to be. It's not possible for us as a society to agree on the origins, or the morality, or the ethics of sexual or gender identity that continue to rage throughout the culture.

We all have our informed opinions of what's true and what's right. And like all other issues that divide, the answer is probably somewhere in

the middle. But what this story today teaches us is that no matter how we arrived at where we are, anybody who is stigmatized because of their identity is as much a beloved child of God as you or me.

The writer of 1<sup>st</sup> John states it simply: God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. We love because he first loved us. And those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

It doesn't matter how we got to a place where we identify however we do: Republican, Democrat, black, white, brown, gay, straight, transgendered, Green Bay Packers fan, Minnesota Vikings fan (yuck!).

Everybody no matter their label (either inherited or chosen) is loved by Jesus. The eunuch discovered that Jesus' love was for him!

Richard Rohr, in his book *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, said "Life itself — and Scripture too — is always three steps forward and two steps backward. It gets the point and then loses it or doubts it. Our job is to see where the three steps forward are heading (invariably toward mercy, forgiveness, inclusion, nonviolence, and trust) which then gives us the ability to both recognize and forgive the two steps backward (which are usually about vengeance, pettiness, law over grace, forms over substance, and requirements over relationship).

Isn't it a consolation to know that life is not a straight line? Many of us wish and have been told that it should be, but I haven't met a life yet that's a clear and straight line to truth, to self, or to God. And I even met Mother Teresa! It's always about getting the point and missing the point. It's God entering our lives and then our fighting, avoiding, running from that very possibility. It is always too good to be true — for someone as little and seemingly unimportant as me! There is hopefully the moment of divine communion or intimacy, and then the pullback that invariably says, "I am probably making this up. This is mere wishful thinking."

Fortunately, God works with all of it, both the forward and the backward, and that's what bases the whole journey precisely in divine mercy or what the Bible calls "steadfast love."

Steadfast love. For the stigmatized. For the stigmatized is just like the one whom the eunuch sought clarity on. The one about whom he

asked, "About whom does the prophet Isaiah say this, about himself or someone else?" It was Jesus, the one whose life was taken away on earth only to be resurrected and exalted. That's of whom the prophet was speaking. And that's the one of whom he could find solidarity with.

It led him to baptism. And to a life of faith in Christ.

Christ came for all. He loves all. No stipulations, no caveats, no conditions. No matter what *we* think, everyone is included.