

Year B  
5 Easter  
Acts 8:22-40  
Psalm 22:24-30  
1 John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8

We are still in the Great 50 days of Easter, my friends! Easter is not just on a Sunday, but is celebrated until Pentecost. And during Easter the first reading of the day is not from the Old Testament, but from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. So during Easter we get to focus on the activities of the early church, and hear stories of the apostles spreading the gospel of the Risen Christ.

Today's story is one that has always gotten my attention, for several reasons. One reason is the way Phillip just vanishes at the end, and reappears in Azotus—did you notice? Amazingly, Phillip seems unfazed by this, and simply continues spreading his message. Being an apostle in the post-resurrection period seems to have required a high comfort-level with the miraculous. Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh but clearly the Holy Spirit was powerfully present, and very active. In fact, Holy Spirit is one of the three main characters in this story.

Of course, the main focus of the story is the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Holy Spirit's influence on Phillip's interaction with *him*. We see that this eunuch is very important and powerful: he is in charge of the entire treasury of the queen of Ethiopia. Now brace yourselves—I'm going to talk for a minute about eunuchs, because it's important for the story. You might know that a eunuch is a castrated man or boy, but you might not know that becoming a eunuch was something that boys and young men could do for career advancement in the ancient Near East. The thinking was that being a eunuch meant you were trustworthy around women and girls. Eunuchs guarded harems, for instance, and female members of the royal or noble household. If one wanted to rise in the ranks of the queen's household, or really to make a career in a royal or noble household at all, it could make sense to become a eunuch. Why? Because eunuchs, couldn't father children to create a competing dynasty, and they were unlikely to mount a coup to overthrow anyone.

Another "career path" for eunuchs was for boys who wanted to preserve a particularly beautiful singing voice. So eunuchs were not uncommon in the ancient world, and even up until the early 19th century there were still a few castrati tenors.

So this very powerful Ethiopian royal official had been to Jerusalem to worship, and was on his way back home, reading from the prophet Isaiah, in his chariot. There are a few things to note here. One is that there *were* Ethiopian Jews, so this man could actually have been Jewish, himself. He could also have been what's called a proselyte, which was a convert to Judaism, or he could have been a "God-fearer" which was a gentile who worshipped God, but was not a full convert. No matter which he was, he was faithful enough to be making a pilgrimage to the temple, and rich enough to own a scroll of Isaiah during a time when the written word was very expensive to reproduce, because it was all copied by hand.

Notice also that he is reading aloud. This was the way reading was done then: aloud. Even into the Renaissance, silent reading was not the norm; people read the written word aloud, and if they were with other people, they would either share the text with them, *or* they would whisper the words, so as not to disturb people nearby.

At this point “the Spirit said to Phillip, ‘Go over to the chariot and join it.’” So Phillip, in obedience to the Spirit, runs alongside the chariot, hears the man reading from Isaiah, and asks if he understands what he’s reading.

This is rather a rude question, really. Asking someone whether they understand what they’re reading is bad enough, but let’s put the situation in a modern context for a second. Let’s say we have a very wealthy Ethiopian diplomat riding in his limousine through Washington DC. Let’s say he has his window down, he’s reading Isaiah aloud, and the car stops at a stoplight. Suddenly, Phillip the grubby street preacher runs up beside the car and asks if the diplomat understands what he’s reading. One might expect the diplomat to have his security get rid of this guy, right? But no—the diplomat asks Phillip to sit beside him and help him understand the text. The attitude of both men in this case is radically open and inclusive, as they are brought together and inspired by the Holy Spirit. The rich, powerful Ethiopian immediately believes that this poor, impertinent stranger can enlighten him; and Phillip is willing to sit with and evangelize a foreigner and a eunuch. He helps the Ethiopian understand how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah’s prophetic poetry, and tells him of the Lord’s resurrection. This illustrates the inclusive nature of the early Church. Jesus said to spread the word to “the ends of the earth,” and even though eunuchs were ritually unclean according to Jewish law, Phillip, prompted by the Spirit, disregards that. When the Ethiopian sees a body of water, and asks “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Phillip clearly sees no reason whatsoever. They stop the chariot, get out, and Phillip baptizes the man immediately.

This remarkable baptism is made miraculous by the fact that “the Spirit of the Lord snatched Phillip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.” His choice to accept Jesus and be baptized is powerfully confirmed by the Holy Spirit.

How many times have you been prompted by the Holy Spirit to do something, or to be with someone? Have you ever run into someone in the store, or at work, or on the street, who turned out to need to talk to you for some reason? Or just happened to meet someone whom *you* needed to see? Have you ever been told something that stayed with you, and grew and blossomed into something unexpected, or lovely? This is the Holy Spirit at work.

All my life I’ve had this kind of thing happen, but when I first started working as a chaplain, it surprised me how *often* it happened. I would think, “let me check on Mr. So-and-So for a second,” and *he* would not be in his room, but I would meet a totally unrelated person in the hall whose spouse was dying, and they would ask me to come pray with them. Or I would find a person who was lost in the maze of hallways we have at the hospital, and then discover that they

had a grandchild in the NICU, and were so worried for them. This kind of serendipity happened so often that I realized it would be good for me to be intentionally open to it, and give thanks for it. I began to pray, “Holy Spirit lead me—make me a blessing in someone’s life today.”

The Holy Spirit can be something many people are uncomfortable with. It’s not scientific, you know. It’s not reproducible or touchable, or provable in a laboratory. It’s also unpredictable, and certainly uncontrollable. But if you look back over your time last week, can you, in hindsight, see the action of the Holy Spirit in your life? What if it wasn’t just coincidence? What if the Spirit is trying to get your attention? Just like with Phillip and the Ethiopian, following the promptings of the Holy Spirit can change your life. Be open to it.

Amen

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