

## “Calling All Outcasts”

### Acts 8: 26-40

May 6, 2012—5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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\*Read before Scripture reading!!!

#### **I. Character 1: Phillip**

Our lectionary reading this week takes place in Chapter 8. Last week, in chapter four, we read Peter’s sermon of defense to the Sadducees and religious leaders, calling them to believe in the name and the power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Between chapters 4 and 8 the number of believers in Christ increase and the movement grows. Stephen gives an incredible sermon, and then becomes the first Christian martyr—stoned by the authorities. Saul, a Greek Jew, persecuted the new Christian community and dragged women and men to prison.

Then, beginning in chapter eight we hear of a new disciple named Phillip. Phillip (not one of the original disciples) is appointed to run a food pantry, clinic, and hospice program. As he flees the persecution of Saul in Jerusalem, Phillip takes Christianity for the first time to the non-Jewish region of Samaria. He’s a smashing success there. Crowds convert to Christ. Even more, a magician named Simon believed, renouncing his black arts in favor of receiving a baptism by Phillip. Phillip’s a gifted preacher. Phillip is looking forward to great new mission work. Then, an angel of the Lord comes and speaks to him, saying, “go to the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. Go to the desert.” ‘Great,’ Phillip must have thought. ‘I do all this amazing work in Samaria. . . and now I’m being sent to the wasteland. But where God’s angel tells me to go, I’ll go (sigh). Wilderness road (sigh).’<sup>1</sup> Hear now the reading of scripture

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Carter Florence, “Do You Really Understand What You are Reading?” aired October 10, 2004. Accessed April 30, 2012.

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### II. Character 2: Ethiopian eunuch

#### A. Why a eunuch?

First of all, let's deal right away with the 'why is he a eunuch?' question. Eunuchs were common in the ancient near east. They were often high officials of important rank; in our story the eunuch is the chief royal treasurer for the Queen of Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> They would have been financially well-to-do; our eunuch was able to buy a scroll of Isaiah in Jerusalem—an expensive purchase that only someone of means could have done.<sup>3</sup> Though they had high economic status, eunuchs were still shunned socially—even by their own families who had sold them into the position of a eunuch in the first place.

The second part of the eunuch's job explains why they were castrated. Castrated men served in the ancient near east as keepers of a royal harem. In the book of Esther a eunuch kept watch over Queen Esther and the rest of the king's beautiful young women. As the medieval theologian Peter Abelard puts it, "men were made eunuchs in order to remove any suspicion of iniquity or tainting of the royal lineage."<sup>4</sup> Enough said on why they were eunuchs.

#### B. Soul of the Eunuch

This keeper of the royal harem, this chief treasurer from Ethiopia has just come back from a long and arduous trip to Jerusalem. This trip wasn't an official visit on behalf of the queen; the eunuch undertook this difficult travel for the hungers in his soul. In his homeland of Ethiopia, also known as Cush, he practiced Judaism. Unsatisfied with the

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<sup>2</sup> *Wesley's Notes- Acts 8.*

<sup>3</sup> Peter Paris, "African Heritage Sunday: Lectionary Commentary," [www.africanamericanlectionary.com](http://www.africanamericanlectionary.com)

<sup>4</sup> Peter Abelard, *Chapter XIV- Historia Calamitatum.*

practices at home, he made all the plans and preparations to pilgrim to Jerusalem—to seek out this God whom he felt calling him.

Once in Jerusalem, he went straight to the Temple to worship. With his body still weary from the journey while his soul hungered to know God, he tried to follow the throng going into the synagogue. He was stopped. He couldn't have looked more foreign—dark African skin, strange clothes with the official insignias of a foreign ruler on them. The temple officials spotted him right away as a eunuch, one not allowed to worship because temple law forbade someone who was not “in tact<sup>5</sup>” to be a part of the household of God. The eunuch must have pleaded with them, must have shared his ardent desire to worship the living God. No go. He was cast outside, made in every way to feel the outsider. Despite his soul's hunger, he doesn't belong. Dejected, he leaves Jerusalem—just stopping to buy a scroll of scripture on his way out. (did he hear the stories of Jesus somewhere)

As the wheels of his chariot roll through the desolation of the wilderness to Gaza, his soul feels as barren as the landscape. Rejected from his family of faith, unable to have a family of his own, the eunuch, even surrounded by his retinue of servants, feels terribly alone. He opens his scroll of Isaiah for comfort. He turns toward the end, where's he's heard that it speaks of eunuchs, where it says that he will be given a name better than having sons and daughters. He reads about one who suffers like him, who was abused, who was scorned—the suffering servant, he was called.

### **III. Encounter: Phillip and the Eunuch**

As his eyes are pouring over the text for signs of life, Phillip, our first character, hears the crunch of wheels over the desert soil from the far distance. ‘Really, God?’ he thinks. ‘You send me out in this wasteland to talk to that foreigner?’ As the chariot nears and he

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<sup>5</sup> William Brosend, “Unless Someone Guides Me” *Christian Century* May 10, 2000, 535.

sees its that entourage for a eunuch, he thinks, ‘God, I offered the gospel to the Samaritans. Wasn’t that enough? Do you really mean to include *him*? At this point, the Holy Spirit does some mighty nudging to Phillip, “GET OVER to this chariot and join it!” Phillip does as he’s told. He runs up to the passing chariot.

Phillip sees the eunuch’s pained expression as he reads Isaiah, as he tries to understand if he could ever really be included in the family of faith, if he’s ever really included in God’s household. Phillip sees the lines of hurt in his forehead, sees the eyes hungry for a word of life. Phillip’s prejudice melts. He asks the eunuch if he can help him find a word of life. The eunuch says, “Yes! How can I know what I am reading without a guide? I’ve never been allowed in the temple to learn.” His unsaid words are “how can I know what this scripture in Isaiah means if I’ve always been an outsider?”

Phillip speaks to him as a guide on the desert way. He doesn’t have a sermon prepared. He doesn’t have a Sunday School lesson worked out. He shares with the eunuch his life story.<sup>6</sup> Phillip tells him of the new life he’s received in Jesus. He tells him of the love he’s experienced—a welcome greater than he has ever known. Between the two of them, there in that chariot on a dusty, hot desert road, the Spirit of the Lord shone forth. The eunuch sees a possibility of new life for himself. His heart warms to learn that Jesus does include him—a disfigured foreigner. With Christ he is finally accepted. He is no longer outcast. He belongs.

He asks Phillip for the sign of that belonging—baptism. He wants right away to be incorporated into his new family of faith. So Phillip breaks all kinds of social and ritual barriers. Emboldened by the Holy Spirit, given water in the midst of the desert, he dribbles

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Bantum, “Living By the Word,” *Christian Century* May 6, 2012.

that precious water on the eunuch's head, and welcomes him as a new brother. The eunuch, for the first time in his life, belongs to a family. No wonder he goes on his way rejoicing.

#### **IV. Calling all outcasts**

The eunuch went home and spread the good news through the Ethiopian court—spreading the message of Christ to what was considered the ends of the earth in ancient times. That message eventually spread around the world and across centuries to reach us, to bring us the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian—two characters in God's drama of love. Some of you hear today might identify with the character of the Ethiopian (aside from the eunuch aspect). Perhaps you've felt left out, like an outsider, like you don't belong—either in the church or in life in general. Perhaps you feel like you don't quite fit in at work, or maybe in your own family. This story of Phillip welcoming the Ethiopian, then, is a story of welcome for you. You are no longer an outcast. You belong to God. You belong in this church. You belong to this Christian family. Let go of feelings of exclusion you've carried with you a long time, and step inside this circle of love where you belong.

Some of you might identify more with the character of Philip. You've been in the church a good while, you've served as a leader, you've done good work for God. This story of Phillip welcoming the Ethiopian, then, is a story for you of practicing welcome. Perhaps it's hard sometimes to welcome someone who is different than you, who is from a different land, or has a different color of skin, or a different socio-economic level. Phillip's example of hospitality instructs you, so that you can practice hospitality to people nothing like you—people whom God loves and calls you to welcome into God's family, the church.

All of us, whether like Philip or like the Ethiopian, have a chance today to welcome new members into our family. We celebrate their choice to become a part of our circle of love, and we heartedly invite them. They need us, as the Ethiopian did Phillip, to come

alongside them for the journey. They need us to tell them our stories of the good news of Jesus. They might like us to be a guide as they embark on life in our community. They belong; they are no outcasts or foreigners. They are part of our family. May we all go on our way rejoicing—rejoicing that we are welcome, rejoicing that we can welcome others, rejoicing that we invite new members into our circle. Amen

Please turn to page 38 in your hymnals.