

***“The Wilderness Road:  
Where We Discover the WHO and HOW of Faith”***

*Acts 8:26-39*

New Revised Standard Version

This is a delightfully odd story. It's odd because of the unlikely pairing of people and the mysterious, remote location of their encounter. And it's delightful because everything about it is good news.

It expands our horizons of WHO is included, showing us that not only is the gospel FOR Everyone, beyond all of our earthly borders and binaries, but the gospel can also spread THROUGH Anyone, no matter our education level, economic class, or life experience. And it shows us HOW to go about being faith-full in the giving and receiving of the gospel. It's a story of relational, inquisitive, conversational, empowering evangelism.

This delightfully odd story is a breath of fresh air and allows us to reset, which is needed, because tensions are at an all-time high right now in the book of Acts. Stephen had just been rushed by a mob and stoned to death. And underscoring that

his murder was no mistake, Luke begins chapter 8 by writing: *“And Saul approved of their killing Stephen. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria...Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, committing them to prison,”* (Acts 8:1-3).

It's in the midst of this “no knock warrant” culture of threat and terror that Philip, a friend of Stephen's, is scattered to Samaria to start spreading the gospel when an angel tells him to “get up and go” to the wilderness road – where the commission to “take the gospel to the ends of the earth” begins when Philip meets the eunuch from Ethiopia and baptizes him.

But before we dive into today's story it's worth noting what

happens right after it in Acts 9:1: *“Meanwhile Saul, [was] still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord... If he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he bound them and brought them to Jerusalem.”*

You see, while today’s story is a breath of fresh air in the midst of trauma, tension, and terror, it does not automatically change everything in Philip’s context or the eunuch’s context and magically make life better. This story IS good news; it IS a society-shattering moment by the Spirit – but it is not naïve or simple. It happens in the midst of complexity, sandwiched between stories of violence and persecution showing us that the gospel finds breath and life even when the air is full of threat and death.

It’s not unlike what many of us might have felt this week as the verdict was read in the trial concerning the murder of George Floyd. A guilty verdict for former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin is accountability, finally, but it is

not justice. George Floyd’s breath, his life, is gone forever. No verdict can bring him back. Unlike the Floyd family, too many black and brown families never receive such accountability, so while it is relieving to know that life cannot be taken without consequence in *this* case, that breath of relief is still drawn from the suffocating air of our society, where violence is all too often the first answer to perceived threat.

I offer this modern day, real time example for us because I want us to really understand the significance of THIS Acts 8 moment in scripture, while also realizing that we continue to operate in a world, still today, that acts as if Acts 8:26-39 never happened. But Acts 8 did happen! And we must retell this story because what it can teach us has the power to transform us and take us down a different road than the one we’re on now.

Even if just for a moment, Philip and the eunuch breathe a different kind of air on this

wilderness road. Spirit-filled air. Philip and the eunuch show us what our world can look like with one encounter when we get the WHO and HOW of faith right.

First the WHO. Philip, like Stephen, is a Hellenist, a Greek-speaking Jew. We don't know much about him other than that he was selected from his peers to be in a deacon-like role to oversee the distribution of food, especially ensuring that widows were fed. Essentially Philip was chosen to wait tables with a heart for the vulnerable and an eye toward equity. He didn't need a seminary degree for this or a theological education. In fact, unlike the apostles who devoted themselves to worship and studying scripture, Philip was probably a fisherman or some kind of tradesman. And yet – with no formal theological education – the Spirit of the Lord called Philip beyond his original task of waiting tables in Jerusalem, to go to Samaria, to the Samaritans of people, to share his faith. Imagine that! You don't have to know

everything to share what you do know. (Evangelism 101!) And Philip had a successful ministry, especially in terms of healing and giving attention to those troubled in body or spirit (Acts 8:4-8).

Maybe that compassion came because he himself was traumatized. Philip witnessed the murder of his friend Stephen and the continual persecution of so many others. This is important to remember. The stakes were high. Following the Spirit and spreading the gospel was a life or death matter. So when he listens to the angel of the Lord who tells him to get up and go to the wilderness road, the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza (so Southwest, down toward the coast of the Mediterranean Sea) – and he says, “okay” and he goes...it's nothing short of pure courage.

Philip's courage is on full display a second time when he's on this road and he sees an official of the Queen's court from Ethiopia riding in a tricked out Tesla version of a

Chariot. Everything about this person was foreign or different to Philip, and the Spirit speaks to Philip and says “*Go over to the chariot and join it.*” And what does Philip do? He runs right over! Now most of us would be second guessing whether this was a good idea or not, especially since there could have been a language barrier in addition to the cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic barriers. But none of this fazes Philip.

So to sum up, WHO is Philip? He’s a Greek speaking Jew who followed Jesus, a deacon leader in his community, not educated or wealthy, but called to evangelize with a special compassion for the hurting, probably because he carries trauma himself, who is deeply courageous, and trusting of the Spirit. Philip has more faith than he does fear. And, we learn, he is observant and likes to ask questions. He gets curious about this person who he does not know and asks, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” (vs 30). We soon learn that he is a good teacher, an effective explainer of the

text, is willing to baptize someone on the spot and then immediately disappears from the scene, which shows us that he’s not focused on feeding his ego by getting credit for this new convert.

If that’s Philip, WHO then is the person in the chariot? Well, we know they are from Ethiopia, which is not necessarily where we draw that country’s borders today; back then it would have been the kingdom of Nubia – in the area that is currently South Sudan. They would have had dark skin, probably quite a bit darker, and blacker, than Philip’s. They worked for the queen’s court, and was in charge of the treasury. So – they were rich. And trusted. Because you don’t work in that high of a position if you are not trusted. But – sadly – they more than likely had experienced trauma. From what we know of eunuchs who worked in high courts, they were most likely not born a eunuch, but were castrated (their testicles removed if not other genitalia) in order to NOT be a threat to the king or queen

because one who is rendered physically unable to have children would never be able to be a king and therefore would not try to overthrow the throne. But of course, castration, changed their growth patterns and testosterone levels. So eunuchs were often shorter, had less hair, perhaps softer mannerisms, and a higher voice. In other words, there were several ways, beyond their position in the courts, that you could tell someone was likely a eunuch.

Throughout this encounter, Luke, the author of Acts, refers to the eunuch as a eunuch more so than any other identifying word – so it is a key part of their identity, at least to an outsider if not also to the eunuch themselves. It is a sad irony that sexual, physical violence is what allowed eunuchs to achieve social and economic status. Beyond the fancy chariot, the eunuch had a scroll – which were few and far between – it signaled both wealth AND education.

So in summary, we know this person in the chariot is a foreigner, from Ethiopia, they've experienced trauma, and are a minority in terms of their sexual function and gender identity, and yet had a powerful place in society in terms of their wealth, status, and education. And – the eunuch was most likely of the Jewish faith tradition, as they were coming back from worship in Jerusalem. It's likely they were excluded from entering the Temple fully, but could have been in the outer courts, but it's hard to know for sure.

In Deuteronomy 23:1 we learn that eunuchs are part of a list of Israelites who are excluded from the assembly of those who can worship and offer sacrifices. But in Isaiah 56, after the Babylonian exile is over, eunuchs are welcomed back into the Temple. People who had been maimed and marginalized by the empire now had a place in God's embrace. No wonder the eunuch in our story today was reading from Isaiah!

Regardless of whether the eunuch was or wasn't allowed in the Temple in Jerusalem, we know they were already faithful in worship attendance and eager for faith formation as they were reading the scroll of Isaiah on their ride home. This is when Philip enters the scene and asks a question about whether the eunuch understands the text they're reading, and the response is another question, *"How can I unless someone guides me?"* (vs 31)

What a humbling, open response to what could have felt like an intrusive question – especially to my introverted self! But this is the moment where we start getting into the HOW of faith. HOW these two interact. It is an exchange of questions, of curiosity, of *"tell me more."* It is a conversation that opens doors instead of closing them. It's a moment of Philip explaining one of the suffering servant passages of Isaiah to the eunuch, a passage of how someone was humiliated and denied justice, something that would have

resonated I'm sure. So the eunuch asks more questions. And Philips answers. We do not know the full exchange, but it seems to be one of invitation, curiosity, and mutual learning and sharing. We do not get the sense of fear or hesitation on either of their parts even though these are two strangers from opposite walks of life.

And of course, after hearing the gospel explained, notably from a man less educated than the eunuch himself, the eunuch sees some water and asks, *"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"* (vs 36)

The answer, of course, is nothing! Nothing is to prevent the eunuch from being baptized. Not too much or too little masculinity. Not one's orientation or identity. Not the ability to reproduce or have kids. Not skin color or country of origin or faith background. Not education or wealth. Not one's make or model of chariot carriage. Not where one is from or where one is going. Not trauma. Not sin. Not a perfect understanding faith or lack

thereof.<sup>1</sup> Nothing can prevent baptism. Baptism is for everyone; and if baptism is for everyone, then the identity of belovedness is for everyone too, as we learn from Jesus' baptism when the heavens open and we hear: "*You are my son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased,*" (Mark 1). Baptism symbolizes this identity marker of belovedness.

I love the boldness with which the eunuch asks for baptism, taking agency of their faith and faith journey. The eunuch knows their belovedness and worth. The eunuch knows they matter – their life, their faith, their future matters. And – I love how Philip responds with equal boldness in his willingness to baptize the eunuch. Neither of them needs permission granted from someone else, they listen to God speaking in that moment.

If you've ever been told by a pastor or a church leader that

you can or cannot do something in the church because of who or how you are – whether that be becoming a member of the church, or being baptized, or being ordained, or preaching or teaching, or being a deacon, or taking communion, or serving communion, or whatever it may be – please hear this truth today: it is not my place or any pastor's place or any church member or leader's place to tell you how you are created by God to be or how the Spirit of God is moving in your life and what you are or are not called by God to do. I am deeply sorry if this has happened to you, and certainly if I have ever made you feel that way. While I cannot undo the harm of what has been done or said to you, I invite you to look at Philip and the eunuch in today's text. See how they trust the Spirit's movement in their lives. See how they do not need permission from someone in the church to tell them who they can be or who they can

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<sup>1</sup> You'll note that verse 37 is omitted from the text. Later, someone tried to add words to this text that had Philip answering the eunuch's question with: "*If you believe with all your heart, you may,*" and the eunuch replying, "*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of*

*God.*" But that verse – verse 37 – has been deemed NOT part of the original text, and is why your text jumps from verse 36 to 38. NOTHING, especially not having the "right or wrong words" can prevent one from being baptized.

and cannot relate to or speak with or share a ride with or who or how they can baptize or be baptized. May their story be a balm for the scars and wounds we bear from people who are trying to “act AS God” instead of as fellow pilgrims on the journey.

What is so delightful about this story, and odd, is that there are no outside forces here on this wilderness road shaping power and privilege or saying who’s in and who’s out – it’s just the Spirit of God and two people who are living in the present moment and who are willing and ripe for transformation. Sister Corita Kent said, “*Love the moment and the energy of that moment will spread beyond all boundaries.*” May WE live in the moment that the Spirit gives us this day, and break down the boundaries that are upheld by fear, division, and cultural, religious, and societal norms.

Out on the wilderness road, a lighter skinned man can run up to a darker skinned man in a vehicle – and both walk away

with life not death. Out on the wilderness road, one who’s endured religious persecution can go up to one who’s endured physical trauma and a conversation can be had that is driven by questions and openness and empathizing, not dictated by answers or power. Out on the wilderness road, one who is uneducated can teach one who is educated. Out on the wilderness road, one who identifies as male can sit beside one who is beyond binaries of male or female – without competing for rights. Out on the wilderness road, one who serves food to the widows can speak with one who controls the treasury for an entire country without having the fear of “being asked for money” or the reaction of rolling up their window or looking away. Out on the wilderness road one can eagerly share their faith with another, without shame or fear of stoning.

The Spirit of the Lord is alive and well on this wilderness road, breaking down the divisions that normally exist because of borders and binaries,



education level, economic status, or experience and expectations. But this breaking down of divisions is about embracing difference, not erasing it. Both of these people show up fully how they are and Luke goes into detail to tell us WHO they are, their stories and how they show up in the world, and it is NOT DESPITE who they are or IN SPITE OF who they are, but BECAUSE of WHO they are, that faith is deepened and transformation happens.

This story highlights the particularities of these two people, and does not erase them. We are who we are. And God wants us to bring who we are to our faith, not hide it. We need not fear one another or ourselves. When we show up not with preconceived notions or prepackaged answers or passed down fears, but fully and authentically as ourselves – then we show up as our full *imago dei* – “image of God” to one another. And the Spirit moves and transformation happens.

Unfortunately, in our world it is not safe for many to show up as they are. So for those of us who do have that privilege more often than not, we must create change so that all can feel safe living WHO and HOW they are. Because until this happens, not only will we keep losing life, we’ll keep losing faith too.

You see, Philip and the eunuch probably never see each other again, but they, and Christianity are forever changed. The Ethiopian orthodox church (closely related to the Coptic church of neighboring Egypt) is one of the oldest strands of Christianity, originating in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century. How oft we forget that our faith was born in the Middle East and grew up in Africa long before it ever made it to Europe. Acts reminds us of the many origins of our faith.

This inspiring, delightfully odd story in Acts 8 shows us that the key ingredients that make space for the Spirit of God to work in our lives include: 1) showing up in the particularity of who we are without shame or apology; 2) not fearing the

“other”; 3) being inquisitive and vulnerable, sharing with another our questions, our story; and 4) believing we matter to God (and that others do too) and that we have agency in our faith.

Who we are, how we see ourselves and others, and how we show up and engage matters. And if what we learn in this story is true, then every moment holds the possibility of transformation.

So maybe we need to begin re-imagining every road we are on as a wilderness road. Maybe we need to begin constructing new road. A road that is unlike any we are traveling on now – but is accessible to us if we follow the Spirit with courage. Can we imagine a road where our differences make us stronger and our baptisms lead us into a deeper understanding of belovedness? Can we imagine a road where a person who has been given power or privilege goes up to the chariot car of a person who has less power or privilege – and transformation happens instead of trauma? Can

we imagine this road? *“Thy kin-dom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”*

This IS a delightfully odd story. But I wish it wasn’t odd. I wish it was ordinary. Oh for a world where two people as different as Philip and the eunuch need not fear each other but rather come to deeper faith because of each other. Delightful stories shouldn’t be the odd ones out. They should be the ordinary ones. So let’s make it so. The Spirit of Lord is calling us to “get up and go” and build this wilderness road.

What is to prevent us from making this so? According to the gospel – Nothing.

Amen.