

April 29, 2018  
Easter 5B  
Acts 8: 26-40

### **Radical Inclusion in the Kingdom of God**

*In the name of God; the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sustainer. Amen.*

Today's message is about radical inclusion in the Kingdom of God.

You see, we are an Easter people  
and that means seeking God's Kingdom in our midst, right here,  
right now, all around us.

And in these weeks of Easter, we are also spending time with the book of Acts.

Not so much the acts of the apostles as it is commonly known,  
rather the continuing acts of God  
as experienced through the resurrected Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Let me say that again:

Acts tells the story of the continuing acts of God  
as experienced through the resurrected Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

And we see that played out today in this strange story about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

There are really three main characters in this story:  
Philip, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and the Holy Spirit  
or Spirit of the Lord as it is called.

I'm going to re-tell the story and I want you to notice the three characters.

Notice who does the inviting, who does the welcoming, and who does the connecting.

The angel of the Lord told Philip the Evangelist to go south along a wilderness route, so he did.

As he was walking along,  
Philip happened upon a grand chariot belonging to the queen of the Ethiopians  
and in it, an Ethiopian eunuch who served as a royal court official.  
The Ethiopian eunuch, as we know him, had been worshipping in Jerusalem  
and was returning home.  
At that moment, he was studying a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

The Spirit told Philip the Evangelist, "Go over there and join him."

And Philip did.  
As he came near, Philip heard the Ethiopian eunuch reading scripture aloud.  
Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"  
To which he replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"  
He invited Philip into the chariot and together they read and discussed Isaiah 53.

After a while, Philip told him about Jesus and the good news of God in Christ.

A little farther down the road, they saw some water and the eunuch said,  
"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

He commanded the chariot to stop.  
They went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

When they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away;  
the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

Before we get into who did the inviting, the welcoming, and the connecting in this strange tale, it helps to spend some time with each of our three characters.

The Philip in Acts is often confused with Philip the apostle.

There were in fact two Philips and this one is known as Philip the Evangelist.

This Philip was one of the Jerusalem Seven

designated as table server and administrator in the earliest church.

While the disciples were supposed to be out evangelizing,

Philip was tasked with serving at table, managing the budget,  
and fixing the copier.

He was an early church version of Parish Administrator and Deacon rolled into one.

And yet, how do we know him? As Philip the Evangelizer.

Turns out he was really good at spreading the good news  
as well as pouring wine and writing the checks.

Thank goodness for that.

The Ethiopian eunuch is a wonderfully fascinating character.

History has stereotyped him as a double outcast

both for being foreign and for his sexuality.

And yet, that stereotype isn't fair.

Although he is nameless and only identified by his race and sexual status,  
he is so much more.

Here are the other things we know about the eunuch.

He is wealthy, enough to ride in a chariot.

He is educated, enough to read Hebrew.

He is devout, enough to study scripture.

He is humble, enough to know he cannot understand it alone.

He is hospitable, in that he welcomes Philip to join him.

In some ways, the eunuch too is an evangelist.

The radical inclusion in this story runs both ways.

And our third character is the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is an active presence; speaking, sending, and interacting with the men in this story.

The Spirit guides this conversion,

drawing these two evangelists together and thrusting them forward

into the radically inclusive and universal embrace of God's Kingdom.

This is a very personal story of the recovery of an outcast person.

This is a universal story of the all-encompassing grace and welcome  
by God to all of God's people.

So, who did the inviting, the welcoming, and the connecting in this strange tale?

The Holy Spirit is the catalyst for change in this story.

She does the **inviting** when she sends Philip south down the wilderness road.

The **inviting** happens again when Philip sees the eunuch on the road  
and the Spirit tells him to join the eunuch.

The eunuch **welcomes** Philip

and they **connect** through their discussion of scripture and good news.

The radical inclusion of God is experienced by both men in their connection with one another and through the powerful experience of the eunuch's conversion and baptism.

In the course of his conversion,  
the eunuch asks three important questions which still apply to us today.

How can I understand unless someone guides me?

About whom does the prophet say this?

And what is to prevent me from being baptized  
or fully included in God's welcoming embrace?

The eunuch's questions were integral components of his journey of faith and transformation and they speak to all of us being welcomed into God's broad embrace.

Let's look at these questions one at a time.

*How can I understand unless someone guides me?*

I've heard this very question from some of you.

How can I understand scripture without others to guide me?

The *Bible* is confusing, complicated, contradictory, and overwhelming.  
It's true.

We all need a Philip to guide us.

Scripture is best read and studied in community.

That's why we build 50% of our worship around the Liturgy of the Word.

Each time we gather for worship as a community,  
there is a component of hearing scripture read aloud  
and typically, some of kind of response  
in the form of a sermon or discussion.

We need each other not only because some are more learned  
or have fancy degrees in theology,

but because we learn from one another's experiences and insights.

I imagine Isaiah 53 was brought to life in a powerful way

as the eunuch and Philip the Evangelist reflected upon the prophet's words together.

The same thing happens when a group of us sit down together to discuss a story from the *Bible*.

It is richer, more nuanced, providing more understanding for all.

Next, the eunuch asks a more specific question about the text they are studying.

*About whom does the prophet say this?*

He is struggling to understand what these words mean, maybe you are too.

So, what does the prophet say?

He says: "*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 wants to know, "Is this God's word for me today?"

But Philip sees this text differently.

He sees it through the lens of the cross and resurrection.

Hearing these words and knowing the story of Jesus,  
it becomes a narrative of redemption, of restoration, and of hope.  
Philip shares this version with the eunuch  
which transitions into him proclaiming the good news about Jesus as well.

And lastly, the eunuch asks Philip:

*What is to prevent me from being baptized or fully included in God's welcoming embrace?*

What a vulnerable question from someone who was considered an outcast by many in his day.

He was foreign, serving the wrong queen,  
and his sexuality was considered to be wrong too.

But for God, he was just right, a beloved child worthy of embrace and inclusion.

Philip's answer reflects that broad acceptance and he responds,

"Absolutely nothing. Nothing prevents you from being baptized.

Nothing is holding you back from full inclusion in God's welcoming embrace.

God's Kingdom is wide open to you, a child of God."

This is the bursting forth of God's Kingdom,

wild, radical, full and abundant inclusion of all who seek God.

We are invited.

We are welcomed.

We are connected in God's wide embrace.