

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Acts 8:26-40

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the Ethiopian eunuch. This is one of the stranger stories in The Acts of the Apostles. Yet, because of this man’s question, it is one of the more important stories. We don’t know much about him. He was certainly a long way from home. What was he doing in Jerusalem? Our passage says he was there for the festival. Was he, then, a Jew of the Diaspora? It’s doubtful. That would explain why he was in Jerusalem during Passover, but not his unfamiliarity with Isaiah 53. Or was he what Luke calls a “God-fearer” – one who was not a Jew by birth or by conversion, but one who admired and honored the religion? That would be reason enough to bring him to Jerusalem and explain his unfamiliarity with the Isaiah passage. But, as a eunuch, he was a mutilated person and not allowed full participation in Temple worship, according to Deuteronomy (23:1). However, no God-fearers were. So, he was mutilated, a gentile outsider, a sexual minority and from a different race and nation of people. There were a number of reasons why this eunuch was not the best candidate for baptism.

Then, maybe he was an important person. St. Luke (author of The Acts) does tell us that he was a powerful man—in charge of his nation’s treasury. He was rich enough to have a chariot large enough to seat at least two and a driver to drive it. He was an important man, but he was also a marginalized man. It was not unusual for kings and queens of the ancient world to find or create eunuchs for royal service. Not only was the harem safe with a eunuch in charge but also the eunuch had no other people demanding his loyalty—no wife, no children, not even any in-laws looking for a little influence in the job market. That made a eunuch even more trustworthy and hence more valuable as a servant—he had a single-minded loyalty. But he lived on the margins of society, excluded by everyone else, and with no family to protect him in old age or keep his name alive in the future.

To make the eunuch’s initial question even more awkward to answer is Philip’s action. He was out of step with the theology of the Apostolic church—nothing is supposed to change without the initiative of the apostles.

And while they couldn't seem to stop rogue deacons from preaching and teaching and baptizing, they made it clear that the Holy Spirit comes only through the hands of an Apostle (8.14-17). Converting gentiles is okay because Peter did it first! But that doesn't happen until chapter 10. Philip jumped the gun. Philip is "only" a deacon (6.1-7) whose assigned task is to assist at the table and care for the widows and the poor. No one authorized him to preach, convert or baptize. Philip and those other deacons just didn't know how to stay in their place. The eunuch is marginalized as an outsider and Philip is out of order. But the Holy Spirit didn't seem to mind. Notice that the only commands in this passage come from an angel and from the Spirit. It was the Spirit who orders Philip to go and join the eunuch.

"Like a sheep he was led to slaughter," the man read aloud, "and like a lamb silent before its shearers, so he does not open his mouth." So Philip opened his. Scholars are not certain who Isaiah had in mind when he preached about the silence of the lamb, but we do know who Philip had in mind. If this silent lamb is who Philip thinks he is, then maybe it says something important for our lives. Friends, too often we hear these lessons read aloud in church and we don't connect, we don't learn anything new and we don't change any of our opinions. But stories like these can show us how to live. Whether these stories are factual or not is beside the point—they are always and everywhere true—and the Bible is full of them. That is why the Bible plays such a central role in our worship. We've preached the gospel to the ends of the earth, but we still have not established His peaceable kingdom even close to what Jesus did in His few short years as the Word made flesh. Our farmers could feed the world if we let them; instead we pay them not to grow so much. We watch people die in lands of drought and starvation. The War on Poverty in the mid-60s reduced the number of the elderly poor from 35% to a current 9%. It helped reduce child poverty from 25% to 14% in 1969; but since then it has fluctuated up to 21.8% by 2012.¹ And who would guess that California today has the highest poverty rate of any state in the Union at 20%. Beyond that, we are living in an age of story starvation. We have a thousand channels on our TVs and nothing worth watching. There is no common narrative in our land. We starve for stories that are always and everywhere true, that teach us how to

¹ As sited in
http://poverty.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/us_census_near_poverty_2012.pdf

see and understand.

St. Luke chose this story very carefully. Look at all the disruptions here. It is the Spirit who directs everything, including the Apostles. Jesus had died, yet the Apostles were healing people in His name. People of all shapes and sizes and ethnic groups, the poor and the wealthy, flocked to be a part of the Apostles' fellowship. Deacons, interestingly, were not authorized to preach or to teach or to baptize and yet they did. Christianity was at first a small Jewish sect, but persecution pushed it out into the world (chs. 7 & 8). Eunuchs were mutilated people and were not allowed to come before the Holy, and yet the Holy Spirit sends Philip to a eunuch.

It's possible that the eunuch's question—"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"—opened the eyes of Philip and Luke and the rest of the Apostles. Philip came to understand that neither the eunuch's mutilated body, nor his ethnicity, nor his skin color, nor his foreignness prevented his full participation in the life of the Church. Maybe this eunuch is the one who introduced Christianity to Ethiopia where it became a bastion of Christian faith for centuries and is still there today, greatly diminished by persecution. I'm praying that this story, guided by the same Spirit who guided Philip, will find ways to connect with our lives so that we understand anew that there is nothing that prevents full participation in the life of the Church for those who fear God. Amen.