

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: God of boundless compassion, within whose family of faith there is room for all, enable us by your Spirit to hear your Word as it is read and proclaimed, and to take it to heart, so that we, too, may be empowered to welcome others as you in Christ welcome us. In his name we pray. Amen

O.T. Lesson: Isaiah 56:3-5

N.T. Lesson: Acts 7:25-40

Recently I have had some strange dreams at night. The details of the dreams vary a bit but the situation is the same. For some reason I have accepted the call to another church. Why I would have done such a crazy thing I have no idea. When I meet the people for the first time, I discover that they are not at all like you. They are not bright and attractive, fun to be with. To put it crudely, they are a bunch of red-necks. In the dream I keep wondering what was I thinking? Why would I have left a great church like this to go to a church in which I have nothing in common with the people I'm supposed to minister to? Will they accept me and my ministry? Will I learn to accept them? That's when I wake up...and give thanks that it's only a bad dream.

But in the Church of Jesus Christ being called to minister to people who are different from us is not a "bad dream." It is what the church is all about...at least it is as Luke tells it in that intriguing story we read a moment ago of Philip's encounter with a man from Ethiopia on a desert road at high noon.

At its simplest level the story can be read as the encounter between an **earnest seeker of the Truth** and a **faithful witness to the Truth**. Philip, who has been proclaiming the gospel in Samaria, is told by "an angel of the Lord" to head south to Gaza, on the edge of the desert. The often deserted road to Gaza would be the last place in the world an evangelist would expect to be sent to speak a word of gospel. But an angel of the Lord tells Philip to "**get up and go,**" and he does, without a word.

On the road down to Gaza Philip meets a stranger. Luke says that he was, "**an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury.**" Whatever else he is, he is an important man, entrusted with huge financial responsibility. He is in effect the Secretary of the Treasury of Ethiopia. He is rich enough to have his own chariot, and his own scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Not only is he rich, he is black and beautiful. In the ancient world it was said that the Ethiopians were the most beautiful of all people. Furthermore, this rich, black and beautiful man is deeply pious. He has undertaken a long, arduous journey to come to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. Now he is on his way home.

Seated in his chariot, he is reading aloud from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. As Philip approaches the chariot, he hears him reading from the great "Suffering Servant" passage in Isaiah 53.

"Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole and with his stripes we are healed."

From the beginning the Church has seen these words as uniquely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is he who, **"was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the**

slaughter, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent... By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?... He poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors."

Hearing the man reading from Isaiah 53 Philip asks, **"Do you understand what you are reading?"** His question is not meant to impugn the man's intelligence. It is an offer to help him understand a passage that is so key to linking Old and New Testaments together. The Ethiopian shakes his head and confesses, **"How can I, unless someone guides me."** This rich, black, beautiful man accustomed to power is impotent to understand the meaning of the scripture he is reading until he is guided deeper into its truth by a faithful interpreter.

The same is true for us, as well. The Bible is a rich, complex, incredibly varied book. It was written over many centuries, by many different authors, in widely different contexts. What's more, the Bible does not always speak with one voice. There is an ongoing debate in scripture, for example, over the extent of God's salvation. Is the salvation of God for Israel alone—or is it intended to "reach the ends of the earth"? (Is. 52:10)

Given the rich variety of scripture, we all need help in "connecting the dots." Presbyterians have always insisted that "scripture interprets scripture." In other words, it is not enough to pick and choose some favorite "proof texts." We need to see how the whole of scripture fits together to form one great narrative of the promises and purposes of the triune God. On our own, we are in danger of misreading scripture unless we are guided into its deeper meaning by someone who, as Tom Long puts it, "not only knows Scripture, but also knows the *God of Scripture*." Someone "who can read the cold ink on the page in the warm light of God's Spirit."¹

That's what Philip does for the rich, pious Ethiopian Minister of Finance. The man wants to understand the meaning of the passage he is reading. But even more what he wants to understand, "in the warm light of God's Spirit," is whether there is a place for him in the covenant Family of God.

You see, he has reason to wonder. There are passages in the scriptures of Israel that would exclude a man like him from life in the covenant community, even from worship itself in the temple. This man is not just **"an Ethiopian...a court official of the Queen of the Ethiopians."** He is **"a eunuch."** It is possible that the term "eunuch" is used simply to refer to the man's political office. The word is sometimes used that way in scripture. But the normal meaning of the word "eunuch" refers to a castrated male—a man who has been neutered so as to serve the Queen without any hint of sexual impropriety. (I wonder if we ought not to do the same thing for all our elected officials.)

In the Ethiopian eunuch we have a man who is eagerly, earnestly seeking the saving truth of God, but who has been told in scripture itself that there is no place in the temple of the Lord for a man like him. The book of Deuteronomy says clearly that no eunuch shall "enter the assembly of the Lord." (Dt. 23:1) No matter how sincere or how pious he may be, he doesn't belong. In his homeland, he may wield considerable power and authority, but to the Family of Faith he is an outsider, a stranger. Scripture says so.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, 2009

Ah yes, but there are other parts of scripture, like the scroll of Isaiah he was reading, that speak a different word and that offer hope of his welcome into the people of God. Which is it? he wonders. Am I in or out? Am I welcomed or excluded? Is there a place for me in covenant family of faith or not?

Luke says without comment that the Ethiopian eunuch “**had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home.**” But Luke gives no hint of what might have happened when he showed up for worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Did they welcome him warmly or turn him away? No one would know that he was a eunuch just by looking at him. His masculinity was not like the color of his skin or the elegant robes in which he was dressed. As long as he kept his identity to himself, presumably he could worship, at least in the Court of the Gentiles, without hindrance. Far from home, no one would ever know. “Don’t ask—don’t tell.”

But however he was received outwardly, there was still that nagging question deep within his soul, “**Is there really a place in the family of faith for me?**” “Is my own name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life?” He is not the only one to ask such a question. Even ministers of the gospel sometimes wonder the same thing. We all wonder at times whether if people really knew us the way we know ourselves, would they still listen to our words? Would they still let us be their pastor?

I wonder--and it’s more my own imagination than scripture itself that makes me wonder--but still I wonder that if, when he went to the temple that day, might he have heard a reading and exposition of Isaiah 53 itself? Now on his way home, with the words still echoing in his mind, he reads the passage for himself over and over again.

“...no form or comeliness that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him... despised and rejected by men; oppressed and afflicted, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent... cut off from the land of the living...”

“**About whom does the prophet say this,**” he asks Philip. Does he say it “**about himself or someone else?**”...perhaps, even me? Is my own name written in the margin of the text? You see, I, too, know what it is like to “be despised and rejected.” I, too, have been silent in the face of humiliation. I, too, am “cut off.” Tell me, Philip—interpreter of the gospel--tell me honestly. Is there a place in the Family of God for me? Is there a place for **me**, I who will never have a family of my own?

I know a number of people who wonder the same thing, for many different reasons. They come to worship and look around the sanctuary, and wrongly suppose that everyone else believes more fervently or lives more faithfully than they do. So they ask wonder, Is there a place here for me, with all the conflicts and turmoil of my life? Is there a place for me with all the secrets I seek to keep hidden from others, and even from myself, at times. Is there a place for me in the household of God?

Beginning with the words of Isaiah and moving through all the rest of scripture, Philip tells the Ethiopian eunuch the good news of Jesus. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the words of Isaiah are fulfilled. It is he who “was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole...” **WHOLE!** I wonder if the word exploded in the soul of the eunuch like a skyrocket. **WHOLE! By God! Whole!** For “with his stripes we are healed.” A word of pure gospel!

But there is more--right there in the prophet Isaiah, there is more. You heard it in the Older Testament scripture we read a moment ago.

“Thus says the Lord, Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord

say, 'The Lord will surely cut me off from his people.' and let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord, 'To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.' (Isaiah 53:3-5)

A monument and a name! Hearing those words, the eunuch's black, beautiful face is streaked with tears of grace. So my name is there in scripture, too! The promises of God are for me, as well! I, who will have no family of my own, am given a family. I, whose hope for the future is cut off, am given a future and a hope. I, who have no one to carry on my memory after I am gone, am given a monument--right there in the temple of the Lord from which the law of Deuteronomy would have excluded me! **"In my house and within my walls"** says the Lord. **"I will give them a monument and a name better than sons and daughters...an everlasting name which shall not be cut off."**

What is left but for Philip to confirm the man's welcome into the extended family of Christ? Seeing a pool of water in the desert, the eunuch asks Philip, **"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"** On some days in the past Philip might have come up with a pretty good list of things that would "prevent him from being baptized." But not this day! Not any more! The Ethiopian eunuch commands the chariot to stop, and Luke says that **"both of them, Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him."** At that we are told **"the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing."**

And so as we, too, are *Called Fourth* into the ministry of "welcoming the stranger," we may discover that the Spirit of God is already at work among us in new and surprising ways, pushing and prodding us, like Philip, to go where God would send us, as the Lord continues to provide water for baptism even in the desert of our divisions.

That's when we, too, may come to realize that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just about welcoming white, upper-middle class Americans to our warm, caring fellowship. The gospel is about the startling grace of God that welcomes into the family of faith **ALL** who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and **ALL** who seek to live under his Lordship. In Jesus Christ the dividing walls of hostility come down, and we are "no longer strangers and aliens." By his amazing grace, we are **"fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."** And in that assurance, we, too, can go **"on our way rejoicing."**

So the story we have heard this morning is about an earnest seeker and a faithful witness. But most of all it is a word of gospel, and it is an invitation to share in God's own stunning welcome of us all into God's vast, extended family of faith. In that family of faith even those without home or family, those without hope, whom others would exclude or ridicule or reject, are given a name better than sons and daughters, a name which shall not be cut off. Do you know the name? I bet you do. It is simply this ... **"Beloved Child of God!"** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord!

Allen C. McSween, Jr.
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, SC