



## Nothing to Stop Us

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter~April 29, 2018*

### Acts 8:26-40

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "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 asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

### Psalms 22:24-30

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 24 My praise is of you in the great assembly; *<br>I will perform my vows<br>in the presence of those who worship you.            | 27 For yours is the royal power, O God; *<br>you rule over the nations.  |
| 25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied,<br>and those who seek you shall praise you: *<br>"May your heart live for ever!"          | 28 To you alone all who sleep in the earth bow down<br>in worship; *<br>all who go down to the dust fall before you. |
| 26 All the ends of the earth shall remember<br>and turn to you, *<br>and all the families of the nations<br>shall bow before you. | 29 My soul shall live for you;<br>my descendants shall serve you; *<br>they shall be known as yours for ever.        |
|   | 30 They shall come and make known to a people<br>yet unborn*<br>the saving deeds that you have done.                 |

### I John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in

love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

**John 15:1-8**

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Phillip was a deacon of the early church. He was not the same Phillip who hung out with Jesus, wasn't one of the 12, but was an early and highly effective church leader in Jerusalem, probably a very kind man, running a soup kitchen for local people—a kind of “meals on chariot wheels”. At least he had been.

In the few months before we meet Phillip, the local government had begun a persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem, Stephen, the first martyr had been killed and church leaders (and members) were being hunted, arrested and martyred or, if they were lucky, got a tip when the authorities were coming for them and got out of Jerusalem.

Phillip was one of the lucky ones. But as it is hard to run a soup kitchen while flying under the radar and fleeing for your life, Phillip found himself in Samaria, preaching rather than waiting tables. Samaria of all places. Samaritans, you'll remember, were considered the enemies of Jews—real outsiders. But Phillip clearly was not deterred by their outsider status and, in a move that would have warmed Jesus' heart, instead of shunning them preached to them. And, wouldn't you know it, it turns out that Phillip was a pretty good preacher. Really good preacher. His first sermon was so good that an entire Samaritan city converted to Christianity. The first big missionary coup of the Christian church was not pulled off by Peter or James, who were hanging around in Jerusalem trying not to be seen, but by a lowly waiter with a silver tongue. I can only imagine that Phillip was as surprised as anyone else by his rapid success and, if he was even remotely human, in addition to his surprise, was also a little impressed with himself. Probably started wondering where the Spirit would send him next—which large group of people he would share his gifts and talents with and preach right into Christianity.

So it is almost comical to imagine him waiting for his next glamorous assignment, and then an angel shows up and announces that he is to head down a wilderness road—leading right into the middle of the desert. Not exactly what he was hoping for. But to his credit he goes. And there, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the wilderness, he runs into a chariot. He doesn't exactly bubble over with missionary zeal, however, hanging back until the Spirit pretty much orders him to approach the chariot. And, surprise, surprise, there in the chariot is none other than an Ethiopian eunuch. This would be sort of like running into the Queen of England in an alley in North Philadelphia. Ethiopian in the Bible, in addition to being a geographical notation, can also refer to anyone who is beautiful or handsome. So he was handsome, and he must have been rich as he was high in the court of the queen—further he was in charge of her treasury, so he was powerful. Rich, powerful, handsome and alone in the desert. And an outsider—a real outsider. Eunuchs were castrated males and, according to Jewish law, that made them permanent outcasts. Eunuchs couldn't enter the Temple, couldn't share a meal with devout Jews, couldn't even touch or talk to devout Jews. So given all of this improbability, anyone reading the story and knowing a little bit about how God operates, would practically be screaming to Phillip—“Phillip, this has God's fingerprints all over it. Pay attention.” “The kingdom of God is like a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go searching for the one that is lost. The kingdom of God is like an Ethiopian eunuch riding in a chariot in the middle of the desert reading from Isaiah and looking for direction.”—And Phillip's opening line, when he finally cooperates with the Spirit and mosies on over to the chariot (which must have been the slowest moving chariot in history), is not exactly the silver-tongued stuff he is known for: “Do you really understand what you are reading?” Phillip's question isn't very kind, but his attitude really isn't that surprising. It is hard to know how to talk to outsiders. Hard to approach them, the ones whose lives, beliefs are very different than our own. The question springs too easily to our own lips, in mildly condescending fashion “Do you really understand what you are reading?” and the pre-determined answer in our minds is, “of course not, someone like that clearly wouldn't get it.”

So at least Phillip went for it. Which is a good thing. But the truly amazing thing is the eunuch's response. He had to have sensed Phillip's reluctance, his condescension, but he just dives right in, “well, I don't really get it, but I want to and I need someone to guide me”. This handsome, rich, powerful man, this outsider, is acknowledging he doesn't have the answers, is looking for guidance. What a remarkable thing—for someone who apparently has it all, who would have a lot invested in appearing to know it all, to admit that, in fact, he doesn't. So Phillip, pushed, bossed by the Spirit, hops in next to him and begins to preach. And evidently it was another really good one because the eunuch soon yells out, “wait- stop the chariot—I want to be baptized right now”. Because, of course, out there in the middle of the wilderness, in the middle of the desert, a pool of water just happens to appear in the chariot window. It might have taken Phillip a moment or two to figure out what was going on, but the eunuch sure got it—he understood all right. He got instantly what many of us struggle with for years: through hearing the story of Jesus, he got that God loved him, wildly and completely and with no regard to his status. Eunuch, rich, outsider, handsome, untouchable, powerful- none of these labels held any water with God- and the eunuch's immediate and wholehearted response was to wade right into the water and be baptized- to receive the mark of God's eternal and limitless love right on his head.

What an amazing thing. A eunuch and a fugitive missionary, sitting together in a chariot beside a pool of water in the middle of the desert. Each of them challenged by their experience of the other. Each being pushed by the Spirit to stretch, to expand their understanding of the world, of God. Each being pushed to realize that the love of God is far, far bigger than anything our provincial minds can come up with. Each realizing that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

I suppose it is far easier, in a way, to run a soup kitchen than it is to leap into a chariot, easier to be in the position of giver than of co-learner, easier to stick with what we know than to take a leap into the unknown. It is not easy to sit right next to an outsider, to do something as intimate as tell them God's great story—both the history of it and what God is up to in your own life.

We Episcopalians are known for our great reluctance to do anything that smacks of evangelism. But there is a world of people out there who are dying to hear a life giving word. Dying to have someone guide them through the story that can change them, heal them—change the world. Dying to find some context for and meaning in life—to have the chance to have their pulse quicken and jump up and yell, ‘what’s to stop me from being baptized right now?’ Now I am not asking us to suddenly become a community that grabs people and harasses them into accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. But we have a great treasure—we have the most compelling story there ever was and ever will be—the story of the love of God. Each of us has a story of how we have experienced that love—how it has touched us, changed us, shaped our lives. And, as scary as it may seem to find the nearest chariot and hop on in to encounter a fellow learner, the Spirit is pushing us to do just that. What is to stop us? Only ourselves. Our embarrassment, awkwardness, fear of looking like a religious fanatic, fear of telling the story incorrectly. But the truth is that there really are no pre-requisites to being equipped to tell the story. It probably helps to be kind, to be bold, but it really isn't necessary. The only pre-requisite I can fathom is that we believe the story to have power, to be life-giving, to know that because we have felt it, and then to trust the Spirit. Those reading our story might practically be screaming, “Pay attention. Look all around you—there are pools of water in the desert. When you see them you know that God's fingerprints are all over the place”. May we be blessed to have our eyes opened and see the pools of water in the desert, and may we find the courage to grab the hand of those looking to us to tell the story and wade on in—there really is nothing to stop us.

*\*This sermon owes a debt to Anna Carter Florence whose thoughts influenced its content.*