

Sunday, May 2, 2021 - Fifth Sunday of Easter
“God for Everyone”

Acts 8: 26-40

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Story Interrupted

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

A man desperately wanted to know and worship God, but closeness with God was distant and inaccessible. This man, an Ethiopian was an important official employed by his Queen, the closest American counterpart would be the Cabinet level position called Secretary of the Treasury, currently occupied by Janet Yellen – pull a \$1 bill out of your wallet and you’ll find the signature of the person who served in that position when your bill was ordered by the government. Well, that’s who this Ethiopian is. And he was in Jerusalem, and he’s reading the Hebrew Scriptures, right out of Isaiah 53, it seems that he believes in the God of Israel, and Jesus’ disciple Philip met up with him.

We talk about Jesus being for everyone! We have the advantage of a written New Testament. Many of us were raised on it from our youth. We know that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that God would have all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. But the earliest Christians didn’t have *any* of that, at least written down. They had the Old Testament, and the news, passed by the preaching and teaching of the apostles of the resurrected Jesus, but on this day, with Philip and this official, John’s gospel is two or three decades away from being written. The Apostle Paul not only hasn’t yet written any of his letters, he still goes by Saul, and if you’ve got your Bible open to our text today all you have to do is look over on the page to your right and you’ll finally catch up to his conversion in chapter 9. This idea of the Savior of Israel being for the whole world, for as clearly as Jesus taught it, is still a source of confusion and debate. Jesus is here to, as Paul will later say, graft new people into the vine that is Jesus. Or, as Jesus said last week, there are still other sheep who are not yet of this fold and they will be added, too... one flock, one shepherd. But the people of the church are still sorting this out, learning what this looks like applied in real life.

And that's the problem for this official. Although this man was important and he believed in God, closeness with the God of Israel was impossible according to the way it was commonly understood by Old Testament believers. The temple in Jerusalem was set up with various access restrictions – most exclusive was the Holy of Holies, God's throne room on earth where only the high priest could enter and then only on one day a year. Then you have the court of the priests, and then Hebrew men, and then Hebrew women, and way out on the fringes the Court of the Gentiles. The fence separating the Court of the Gentiles from the inner more holy areas was meant to keep out non-Jews and Jews who were ritually unclean and violation was punishable by death.

That this man was not Jewish by birth was something he could overcome. He could convert and enter the more holy areas to the extent the average Hebrew layman could. But this man was also a eunuch, and that made him ritually unclean in a way no amount of repentance could overcome, because he had no power to restore this physical loss. His case, you see, was hopeless – for all his responsibility, education, social standing, wealth and great intentions, access to God was impossible.

This isn't something you have to be an Ethiopian eunuch to understand. As we've opened up more and more, and I'm seeing more faces that haven't physically been in this building for a long time I hear over and over how good it is to be back – to sit in the pew, to hear the music right in front of you, to see familiar faces. For many this is a place of safety, peace, comfort, joy. But there are others for whom this space is intimidating. If this space is safe and comfortable, put yourself a moment into the shoes of someone new, especially if "church" in general is new. The different dress the pastors wear, the standing and sitting and chanting. Most people don't sing anywhere anymore, unless you count your car or the shower – even the National Anthem is now "performed by" a special guest when you go to the Knights or Aviators. There are strange words like narthex and chancel and sacristy, Kyrie, Collect and Agnus Dei, salvation, righteousness and even sin. And then there's the baggage we bring with us to

worship – our pain, our burdens, our insecurities, our inadequacies and hang-ups. Do I fit in? Do I belong? Do I know enough? Am I put together enough? Is the roof going to cave in on me?

The Ethiopian official and Philip start talking about what he's reading – verses that come up in our Good Friday Tenebrae service every year, as the lights go down because on this side of the cross, we know these words to be about Jesus' suffering for us. Listen to this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." What does this mean, who is this passage about, asks the Ethiopian man... and Philip goes on to tell this man the story of Jesus – a perfect sacrifice who suffered death for the whole world to restore access to God for all people.

Because the truth is, you and I are no different than that eunuch – and no, not only if this space is still uncomfortable and strange, those of you who feel peace at being here, too. Closeness with God is distant and inaccessible, impossible. Our uncleanness, our sin, makes us too flawed to enter God's holy presence... but to whatever extent the ancient Hebrews believed the eunuch was an absolutely hopeless cause, Jesus overcomes the Ethiopian official's flaws and loss, and our flaws and loss.

Look at what the words of Jesus' disciple Philip did – God used those words to bring this man, wealthy, prominent and yet utterly hopeless a gift that all the money in Queen Candace's treasury couldn't hope to purchase – the love and acceptance of God.

Resurrected living, a life full of faith doesn't start with you or with me – it starts with Jesus who was led like a sheep to slaughter for our sins to make us holy. That gift of God overcomes every sin, every error, every blemish, everything that makes you ugly or distant or a hopeless cause – and Jesus pours on hope.

The eunuch and Philip travel along and there's some water on the side of the road. It's desert... is it a stream? A spring? A stagnant, muddy puddle after a big rain? It doesn't say. The eunuch said,

“See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ 38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.” And you know what? That eunuch was more intimate with the promises of God in that moment than the most renowned of the High Priests who stepped into God’s earthly throne room. The Holy Spirit Himself made the heart of that hopeless eunuch into God’s Holy of Holies, His throne room on earth. And He does the same for you and me.

And what He did for you, He does for the whole world. No one is too far gone, no one too far away, for nothing is impossible with God. What are your Philip moments? Are there things you need to hear and be reminded for *your own* reassurance? Because God loves you – His Word tells you so. Are there others in your life, discouraged, suffering, struggling? Are there people who don’t know Jesus yet where you can be intentional and look for little windows to share that good news? Are your eyes open for unpredictable moments with random strangers who are very different from you? God will use it all to spread the news, one person at a time – that God is for everyone! In Jesus’ name, Amen.