

Scripture:
Acts 8:26-40

“From puzzlement to joy.”

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Similar to the two men in Luke 24 that journey on the road to Emmaus --- the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts this morning starts out puzzled by the scriptures.

And then --- also like the 2 on the road to Emmaus ---- thankfully ----- the right person comes along at the right time --- to help him to understand the scriptures ----- causing him ----- ultimately ---- to rejoice.

In Luke 24 verse 27 we read --- “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.”

And our reading this morning --- Acts 8 verse 35 ----- “Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.”

Early Church father and Saint --- John Chrysostom --- writing in the 4th century said --- “So great a thing is the careful reading of the Scriptures.”

And it’s true --- Chrysostom is on to something --- “So great a thing is the careful reading of the Scriptures.”

And Jesus in Luke 24 --- the road to Emmaus ----- and Philip with the Ethiopian in the book of Acts today --- explicitly demonstrate this.

John Calvin writing in the 16th century said that so many people were --- “swollen-headed with confidence in their own abilities” ----- such ---- “that the reading of Scripture bears fruit with such a few people today ---- because scarcely one in a hundred is to be found who gladly submits himself to teaching.”

“because scarcely one in a hundred is to be found who gladly submits themselves to teaching.” ---- I wonder if that is still true today?

Jesus in Luke --- and Philip in the book of Acts ----- could have taught these confused travelers from all kinds of sources --- personal experience --- the Torah --- the Talmud ---- teachings of the Rabbi's ---- and yet they don't --- instead they simply turn to the Scriptures.

John Stott --- writing in our time --- says --- “The fact is that God has given us two gifts --- first the Scriptures --- and secondly ---- the teachers to open up --- explain ---- expound --- and apply the Scriptures.”

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The Ethiopian was already immersed in the Scriptures ----- according to verse 28 --- he was ---- on his way home ---- “sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.”

We definitely need the Scriptures --- we definitely need to read the Scriptures --- but very often we also need to read the Scriptures together --- in community ---- with others.

We often ---- all of us --- need someone to help explain them to us.

Part of what this passage drives home is that we grow in our appreciation and understanding of the scriptures most often and fruitfully --- when we read them together.

Puzzlement.

There's a whole lot of puzzling things in this passage to me beyond just the initial disposition of the Ethiopian when Philip first approaches him.

First of all what was Philip doing walking along this road by himself?

Secondly why would he bother to stop to talk about Jesus with such a highly respected traveler from a foreign land --- it could after all land him in trouble --- remember Stephen has just recently been killed for witnessing to Christ?

Thirdly ----- where did this Ethiopian get a copy of Isaiah --- this would have been an extremely difficult and rare thing to possess --- a copy of the

Book of Isaiah --- a printed copy of scripture in hand outside of the Synagogue was rare indeed?

Fourthly --- he was a wealthy man --- someone of importance and influence --- exchequer to the Queen of Ethiopia ---- why wouldn't he have a few hired teachers to help him better understand this very rare and valuable text -- the Book of Isaiah that he possessed?

And I think the answer to all of these questions --- comes from one of the greatest teachers of all --- and then some ---- the Holy Spirit of God.

The Ethiopian had traveled to Jerusalem to worship --- verse 27 tells us.

In other words the Spirit led him to worship God --- the Spirit of God was alive in him.

“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip --- “Go south on the road --- the desert road --- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”” ---- the very first verse of our scripture reading today.

In other words Philip was out in the middle of the desert all alone walking this road because the Holy Spirit --- in the form of an angel --- told him to.

And Philip stopped ---- why would he run the risk of stopping to talk with someone about Jesus when Stephen had just been killed to doing just this?

Because as verse 29 says ---- “the Holy Spirit told Philip --- “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

And while we don't know exactly where the Ethiopian got a copy of the Book of Isaiah --- we can rest assured it wasn't ill fully gained or he wouldn't have it out in the open --- clearly God wanted this book ----- in his hands ----- on this day ----- and at this time.

How did these two men come together --- clearly God planed it --- clearly the Holy Spirit was at work here too.

And then even as Philip leaves we see the power and influence of the Spirit.

Verse 39 --- “When they came up out of the water --- the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away and the eunuch did not see him again --- but went on his way rejoicing.”

The passage opens with the Spirit guiding Philip and the passage ends with the Spirit guiding Philip.

The Holy Spirit enters into this puzzling environment ---- the seeking and longing heart of the Ethiopian ---- and leaves it with joy ----- baptismal joy ---- new life in Christ joy.

At the very heart of this passage is the powerful and marvelous --- movement of God’s grace.

For God --- it is not too much effort to get all the game pieces on this particular chess board moving such that everything happens at just the right time ----- and all for the purpose of saving one lone traveling man on a desert road on the outskirts of town.

The Ethiopian eunuch is moved from puzzlement over Isaiah’s prophecy ---- to a joy drenched baptism --- in a very short period of time ----- thanks to Philip --- and most importantly --- thanks to the Holy Spirit of God.

The truth is the Spirit does all kinds of peculiar ----- and synchronistic things ---- in order for this event to come together perfectly.

One commentator said this whole scene is a kind of ----“meanwhile scene” - ----- a meanwhile back at the ranch kind of scene --- tucked off to the side.

The followers of Jesus were building a new following and establishing themselves as a new group of people despite Stephen having been killed ----- and meanwhile out in the desert ---- way off to the side of things ---- there was Philip and an Ethiopian chatting about Jesus.

And as is so often the case in the Gospels ----- we don’t ever get the name of the person most deeply affected by the encounter with the healing and saving power of Jesus.

And remember names play a pretty big role in some respects in the Gospels --- Matthew spends verse after verse --- indeed the first 16 verses of his Gospel tracing back names --- the lineage of Christ.

And remember names play a pretty significant role --- place names ----
 "...out of you Bethlehem of Ephrathah will come one who will rule over all of Israel..."

And yet as we move through the Gospels so many of the people Jesus and His disciples encounter --- and heal and teach --- and save ---- remain nameless.

As nameless as this Ethiopian eunuch.

And not only do they remain nameless but very often they simply float in and out of the biblical witness --- with no introduction and no good bye.

Think of the Ethiopian ---- as quickly as he comes into the Bible he disappears from it --- in a few short verses he comes and goes and is never heard from again.

It's ----- "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip however --- appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea." -----
 ----- and never again do we hear about the eunuch.

The same can be said for so many of the people helped and healed --- in the scriptures.

The man born blind in John's gospel.

The hemorrhaging woman.

The woman at the well ----- and on and on the list goes --- nameless --- one scene --- one event people ----- who we never hear from again.

Meanwhile --- "... " ----- over here --- pushed off to the side.

Most of the time these people aren't taking centre stage --- most of the time Jesus and the disciples were traveling somewhere else ----- focused on something else and they are suddenly pulled off to the side in some great act of love.

Philip and the other disciples are busy in the book of Acts forming what we now call --- the early church.

They're busy establishing this --- as yet --- nameless Jesus movement.

Remember it's not until Acts 11 verse 26 that these people of ---"the way" -- ----- the followers of Christ ----- are referred to as "Christians" for the very first time.

So Philip and the others are busy forming and building this group of soon to be called Christians and we have this little ---- "meanwhile back at the ranch" ----- off to the side --- tucked away over here --- kind of interaction ----- that so often characterizes the way of Christ.

This little --- "somewhere over here" --- interaction --- that is reminiscent of so many of Jesus' encounters reminds us that just as the disciples are busy forming and building up the movement of Christ --- so the gospel is spreading itself with intimate one on one acts of kindness --- generosity --- and love just like this one.

Interactions --- off to the side --- out in the desert --- on a lonely road ---- on the side of a chariot --- scroll unfurled --- puzzled reader --- where the Holy Spirit is powerfully alive and at work.

At any given moment in the life of the church --- including these earliest of early days ---- we see the Spirit at work where 2 or 3 are gathered.

On a road side --- at a well ---- up on a tree branch just outside of town --- and so on.

Often the most unlikely of places --- way off to the side.

The ---- nothing particularly dazzling or memorable about it ---- kind of places.

Places that in truth --- were really just places you stopped at on the way to somewhere else --- or were simply just passing through.

These are often precisely the places the Spirit of God is at work.

Think of how many times Jesus encountered people while he was walking -- - or traveling --- passing through --- or simply stopped for a brief rest --- headed somewhere else.

Yes He taught on hillsides and with great crowds --- the Sermon on the Mount ---- but very often it was as He walked along --- on the way to somewhere else ---- that people came to Him to be healed and helped.

So it often is with us.

When we're on our way somewhere ---- or just taking a short break along the way --- as we head for what we're really doing.

Often it's in these ---- pause ---- nondescript kind of moments.

These ---- "on the way to somewhere else" ---- kind of encounters ---- that we are called to be present and listen to the direction of the Holy Spirit guiding us to help out ---- or teach --- or witness --- or whatever the Spirit so chooses.

As many people have rightly said ----- sometimes these --- "interruptions" ----- are our real work.

Sometimes these interruptions are our real work.

Philip was on his way to Azotus and Caesarea ----- that was his real purpose ----- to get there and to teach people.

But clearly this time spent with the Ethiopian was also part of his journey.

The Holy Spirit ----- witnesses and works in all kinds of unexpected ways and places.

The ministry --- the lives that we are called to as followers of Christ ----- so often includes unexpected little side journeys ----- off road meanderings ---- - involving unexpected people in unexpected places and unexpected ways.

When we are obedient to the Spirit ----- allowing and inviting God to lead and direct us --- wherever that might be --- amazing things happen.

“...the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.” ---- verse 39 says.

And so it is ----- when the Holy Spirit directs and guides us ---- we go on our way rejoicing.

And not only joy at the end --- but joy where there was once only puzzlement and uncertainty to begin with.

Stephen the very first martyr has just been killed prior to our passage today.

And just after Saul is converted ----becoming Paul ---- going from Christian killer --- to pre-eminent and model Christian in one brief encounter.

And sandwiched between these 2 huge monumental events ---- the stoning of Stephen and conversion of Saul ---- Paul ----- we have this encounter with the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch out in the desert.

Philip was open to God’s direction --- thanks to the Spirit.

The Ethiopian was open to the truth and teaching of Christ --- thanks to the Spirit.

Philip went over to this wealthy foreign delegate and listened to what he was reading --- people often read aloud ----- and makes himself available ---- thanks to the Spirit.

What began as puzzling ----- ends in rejoicing ----- thanks to the Spirit.

All because two people were caught up in reading the scriptures together ---- - and allowed themselves to be guided by God.

Chrysostom is right ---- “so great a thing is the careful reading of the Scriptures.”

Especially the reading of the scriptures together as the Holy Spirit illumines and clarifies them to us.

When the scriptures are read --- and the Holy Spirit is invited to move among us ----- we go from puzzlement --- uncertainty and questioning --- to clarity and rejoicing.

The Spirit of God moves in mysterious and unexpected --- beautiful ways.

God’s Word --- God’s Living Word ----- Jesus Christ --- moves in mysterious --- unexpected ---- and beautiful ways.

All we really have to do is remain open --- attentive and teachable.

Open --- receptive --- and teachable just like Philip and just like the Ethiopian.

If we are open.

If we are receptive.

And if we are teachable.

We can ever so smoothly move from puzzlement and confusion --- which let’s face it --- life can sometimes be puzzling and confusing.

But if we are open ---- receptive --- and teachable ----- we can very easily find ourselves moved from puzzlement ---- to clarity --- conviction ---- and joy.

Where once we may have been lost --- in Christ we are found.

Where once we may have been blind ----- thanks to Christ we can see.

May all our hearts be opened they way the Ethiopian eunuch's heart was opened.

May all our eyes behold the risen and resurrected one ---- sometimes calling us ----off to the side ---- in what appears to be a distraction or interruption --- that in the end turns out to be our real work.

From puzzlement to joy ----- and everything else in between.

Such is the work of the Spirit --- mysteriously working and weaving its beautiful saving truth among us.

Praise be to God.

Amen