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**Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21**

## A WILDERNESS ROAD

The Ethiopian's encounter with the Easter message of new life begins on a wilderness road. In the Bible, the term "wilderness" always refers to the desert—a dry, harsh, empty land, a place lacking signs of life. But that is exactly where the Easter message of new life seems to show up--in just such places lacking signs of life, like a tomb.

So here we are again, in another place lacking signs of life. On a wilderness road. We know this story from Acts takes place on a wilderness road because the writer of this story takes the time to include. Do you remember that little parenthetical aside, when the writer tells us, "This is a wilderness road"? The writer wants to make sure we understand the nature of this environment—it was dry, it was barren, it lacked signs of life.

One of Jesus' disciples, Philip, is directed by God to this wilderness road where he encounters this foreigner, this Ethiopian eunuch. This Ethiopian was a member of the queen's court and had traveled to Jerusalem to worship but was now returning home in his chariot. And while he rides along he studies the scriptures, trying to understand God's word. Philip meets up with the Ethiopian, gets into his chariot and then the two of them have a conversation about the scriptures. And Philip begins to tell the Ethiopian all about Jesus.

And the Ethiopian believes the good news about God's love made known through Jesus. And then, looking up, the Ethiopian sees water. Water in the wilderness! And he asks that very crucial question: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" What is to prevent me from being baptized?

Baptism symbolizes the new life Christ makes possible. Baptism is an Easter moment, when we embrace the message of the new life God makes possible. What is to prevent this Ethiopian from being baptized?

Well, a good many things *could* have prevented him. The fact that he was a foreigner and may not have been Jewish could have been an obstacle. It's true that the Ethiopian was an official in the queen's court, but as a castrated male his sexual identity would have made him unclean in the Jewish world. Touching him or being near him would have been taboo for someone like Philip. But Philip does not give in to those social conventions. Philip pushes aside such obstacles between this man and God's gift of life.

Of course, there was also the significant matter that they were riding through the dry, lifeless wilderness. But it seems that not even the wilderness stood in the way of the gift of new life for suddenly there was a body of water—right there in the wilderness! What was to prevent him from being baptized? Apparently not a darn thing! Even the wilderness offers up the gift of life. And so the two of them get out of the chariot, and go down into the miraculous waters of new life.

What about you and me? What is to prevent us from being baptized? Perhaps you are thinking to yourself: but I *have* been baptized. And that may indeed be true. But baptism is not just a singular moment in time. It's true that we Presbyterians do not believe in *re-baptizing* a person, but we also don't regard baptism as a one and done event. Baptism symbolizes the new life in Christ. Baptism is an Easter moment. And that means that baptism is something we live into and live out every single day of our lives. What prevents us from knowing and expressing and living out the new life in Christ?

It may be, it may be that one of our obstacles to the new life in Christ is that we also find ourselves on a wilderness road. Maybe you find yourself in a dry and lifeless place and cannot conceive that new life could be possible. You have been laid off. You've been given a scary diagnosis. You are bowed over with grief and sadness. You're going through a divorce. Sometimes we're going along in life when suddenly we face a detour and find ourselves on a wilderness road.

And sometimes, we give ourselves up to the wilderness. We accept its emptiness and barrenness. We permit its lifelessness to seep into our hearts and souls. And then what prevents us from knowing the new life in Christ comes from within us. We grow bitter. We become cynical. We seek comfort in what we can find at the store or what we can consume from the bottle. We find security in the numbers printed at the bottom of our bank statement. We draw a narrow circle around those people we will accept and grow suspicious of others not like us. And we craft a life of our own making. Maybe we give up seeking any other kind of life.

What really attracts me to this story about the Ethiopian is his quest for finding some meaning in life beyond himself. He was a spiritual seeker. He had traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship. And then on his way home, he was still studying the scriptures, trying to find meaning and understanding about God and God's words for life.

Last Sunday afternoon, my family had to put our dog to sleep. She had terminal cancer and had reached a point where she was suffering too much. This past week since her death, we've had those unsettling moments when we expect to see her or hear her around the house, only to find her gone. There is, as my husband noted, an absence of presence. But I got to thinking that you could reverse that phrase and it also be true. You could say that there is a

presence of absence. In the case of our dog, there is a strong presence of something being absent.

But isn't that true of a lot of us a lot the time? Do we not feel the presence of absence in our lives, the sense that something is missing in our lives? And so we seek to fill that emptiness with *something*. Some turn to alcohol or drugs or sex. Some strive to build careers or grow their portfolios. Some will take vacations, hit the shopping malls, or the gym. Some will focus on creating strong loyalties to family, nation, party, or interest group.

I think the Ethiopian in our story was seeking answers to the presence of absence he felt. He was seeking to understand God and God's purpose in his life. And then Philip shared with him the good news of God's love in Jesus, and the call to walk the way of love, and the assurance of abundant life both now and beyond the grave. And the absence was filled with a presence that brought this Ethiopian great joy and great life.

I got to thinking about how well we do or do not do this for others. How well do we help fill the absence people feel by offering the presence of God's life-giving love? I regret to say that the history of the Christian church does not give a very favorable answer to that question. Remember the Ethiopian's question to Philip: "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" Too often it has been Christians themselves, ourselves, who have kept people from knowing the new life in Christ.

I once asked my daughter what her friends thought about her mother being a pastor. She said that they were fine with it once they knew that I was not a little bit racist and a little bit homophobic. How sad is that statement! That Christians are primarily known for their intolerance rather than for their love is a massive failure to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But

studies show that one of the reasons younger people state for their disinterest in Christianity rests in its historical and present day examples of intolerance, hatred, abuse, and exclusion.

To the Ethiopian's question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized," we Christians can only answer truthfully: it has been us! And it is *still* us. We have been and still are a little and a lot racist. We have been and still are a little and a lot exclusionary. We have been and still are a little and a lot materialistic in the face of great human need and inequalities. Christians have not abided in God's love, as the writer of 1 John calls us to do. We have not loved our brothers and our sisters as Christ commands us. We have prevented so many from knowing the new life Christ offers. And in doing so, we have wandered into a dry and barren wilderness of our own making.

But even as we find ourselves in the wilderness, we have hope. We have hope because we know what God can do with dry and lifeless places. We know what God can do with dry and lifeless people. We know what God can do with dry and lifeless spirits. We have hope because with God, a wilderness road does not mean the end of the road.