

May 2, 2021

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: Acts 8:26-40

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

He is Risen!

That's about what Philip told the Ethiopian eunuch: Jesus is risen! The Ethiopian eunuch... that seems like a strange title to us. For those who don't know, a eunuch was a man who was castrated in order to hold a position of trust within a royal court. It was actually a very widespread practice in Africa, Europe, India and even China. The reasoning behind this strange practice was that such a person was deemed to be reliable and safe to be left alone in the palace. There would be no offspring from them, indeed, there was no threat of infidelity at all. They were therefore entrusted with the management of palaces and provinces, given great responsibility and great privileges. So when we hear "eunuch", it is better to think "Trusted, influential court official". That certainly looks better on a business card than "Mr. Smith, castrated man."

What was an Ethiopian doing worshipping in Jerusalem in the first place? He is called an Ethiopian, but that is not the same as modern day Ethiopia. It was slightly more to the north, running from southern Egypt into Sudan. In the Old Testament, this was the area known as Cush. This Ethiopian official was not a Jew but he was a Gentile God-fearer, someone who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We don't know how he came by this knowledge, but the Hebrews had been around for thousands of years by this point and were well known in northern Africa. Moses' second wife was a Cushite. Perhaps there were Jews living in his own land that he had learned from. We are told that he was in Jerusalem to worship, perhaps on an official visit. He had acquired a copy of the scroll of Isaiah, probably on this same trip, and while on his way home in the back of his wagon, he started to read it. The version of Isaiah 53 that is quoted is from the Greek version of the Old Testament and most people learned Greek because it was the language of trade and culture. It may seem strange to us that he was reading aloud, but almost all ancient people read aloud. They did not have punctuation marks, nor did they use spaces between words. Reading those ancient texts is easier when it is read aloud. It was also considered rude to read silently. There were never enough scrolls for everyone, and not everyone could read, so whoever was reading was expected to read for the benefit of everyone else.

God told Philip to go to this specific place on the road heading south toward Egypt, a place which wasn't appealing or obvious to human reason. It was out in the middle of nowhere. Philip may have wanted to be elsewhere, he may have wanted to be someplace more glamorous or at least someplace with a decent restaurant, but he went where he was guided and he waited. Then, as the Ethiopian's party came by, God told Philip to join them. He walked alongside and once he heard what the Ethiopian was reading, he knew he had his opening and he took it.

Chapter 53 of Isaiah is called the Song of the Suffering Servant, and you have all heard it recently because it is the appointed reading for Good Friday. See if you recognize this portion of Isaiah 53:

**He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by 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;
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:2-5)**

The Ethiopian official was reading this right before Philip showed up. It was not luck nor was it good timing on Philip's part: It was God who set the stage. The players were arrayed and they hit their marks just as God planned. Philip is not the focus of this story. He was just fulfilling his calling from God to share the Gospel. But his willingness to do God's will is a good example for us to follow. He went out to the equivalent of a truck stop on the interstate because God told him to go there. He was prompted by the Spirit he did not do what so many of us do: Approach a stranger of a different nationality and station and started talking to him. This official was a very wealthy and important man and Philip was a poor nobody, but he was not intimidated by the difference. Nor was Philip turned away by the differences in their culture, their manner of dress, or the color of their skin.

We find ourselves in situations similar to Philip's all the time: We have an opportunity to share Christ one-on-one with someone who is very obviously searching for the truth. But we allow our fear and the whispers of the enemy to drown out the voice of God. We find ourselves making excuses to not talk about Jesus. See if any of these excuses sound familiar to you:

- That person looks kind of strange. He might be a mugger, or worse. Better to be safe than sorry.
- That person is a different race than me. I don't know how to connect with them. Someone else can do it.
- I'm really busy today. Any other day I would *totally* tell this person about the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ. But today I'm running late.
- I don't like that guy. We used to work together, but he got fired. He was a drunk and kind of jerk. He wouldn't want to hear about Jesus anyway.
- I already invited that person to church once. They blew me off. There's no point in trying again.
- I don't know what to say. This is really the pastor's job, isn't it?

We've all guilty of using one or more of these excuses. God's word shows us our sin and we must not turn away from that bright mirror. Like any other sin, we must repent of the sin of timid faith. Of fear and even hatred for those whose

skin is a different color or who have an accent. You cannot pretend like you are “of the world” the rest of the six days a week, never mentioning the reason for the hope that is in you. You are not like everyone else. You have been redeemed, your sins forgiven by Christ and you have been given new life from above in Holy Baptism. You have been freed from the prison of sin and death. We do not boast in ourselves, but only in Christ Jesus.

This Ethiopian eunuch became the first Christian among his people, but he was not the last. The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus has over 8 million members today and is one of the church bodies which we, the Missouri Synod, work with. God’s work continues there even today both through our missionaries and through their own pastors and laypeople. God gave you two ears, two eyes and a brain, so use them the way Philip did, to find an opening in which you can share the Gospel. Engage people, listen to them, and the opening will present itself. Whether they listen or not is not on you. We are called not to convert people, but to confess Christ. God sets the stage for us again and again and we are to act like an irresponsible farmer, casting the seed wide, not caring where it lands. May God grant us all the boldness and confidence of Philip to open our mouths and tell of the salvation won for all by the Jesus our Lord.

He is risen!

In Jesus holy name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp