

The Gospel To The Uttermost:

On The Road to Timbuktu

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The gospel of God in Jesus is on its way to the uttermost parts of the earth—and to the uttermost parts of ourselves. What astounding news.

At the beginning of *Acts* the Risen Christ says that the Spirit would come upon them and that they would be Christ's witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth." (Acts 1:8). And so it happened. The Spirit showed up in Jerusalem on Pentecost, then among Samaritans and Gentiles—which is how we Gentiles are here today—and then on the road to Ethiopia—our text for today.

I

Today's hero is Phillip, a Greek speaking Jew, one of the seven filled with the Spirit and chosen to be a leader in the young church. He's just been to Samaria where the Spirit has broken out.

Now the angel of the Lord visits him and says, “Get up, Phillip and head down the desert road to Gaza.” Philip, deeply in touch with the Spirit, gets up and goes.

At the very same time “lo and behold” (King James english for “Pay attention here, God is at work”) going down the same Gaza road is an Ethiopian eunuch. To the first century Jew, Ethiopia was most foreign of foreign lands, the farthest off of faraway places, like when we say “outer Mongolia” or “Timbuktu”. The gospel is on its way to Timbuktu—and to the Timbuktu in you.

This man, then, is a foreigner of foreigners. He is of African descent, his skin is darkest black, and he is sexually different. He is a eunuch in the service of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia. Eunuchs were chosen for such service so they would be “safe in the harem”, so to speak, and so they’d be able to give undivided service to the Queen and her court. (That may be more detail than you wanted.)

The man revs our anxiety motors. He is different, “other”, ethnically, sexually, politically, religiously. Homer’s *Odyssey* speaks of “far off Ethiopians...the further most of men.” The gospel is on its way to the furthestmost parts of the world and the furthestmost, hidden most parts of ourselves.

The Ethiopian eunuch is traveling down the Gaza road south riding in a chariot and reading the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures—which by the way was produced in Egypt. He had been to the temple in Jerusalem to worship and was returning home.

Why had he gone to the temple to worship? He's not a Jew, he is a foreigner, and in Deuteronomy 23:1 in the Hebrew Bible clearly states: "A eunuch shall not enter the assembly of the Lord." He is an outsider in almost every conceivable way. Why would he go to a place which so clearly barred his entrance, and why would he be reading a Bible which so clearly defined his exclusion?

Why would he go and linger around the outer courts of the temple hoping only to peep in as the doors opened? Why would we?

Is it because in spite of all the exclusions we meet in scripture or in church *we sense a deeper inclusion there?*

He was holding the scroll of Isaiah in his hands. Had he read these words from the prophet Isaiah?

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from God's people." Let not the eunuch say, "Behold I am a dry tree." For thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep my

Sabbaths, who chooses the things that please me and hold fast to the covenant: I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people. Thus says the Lord who gathers the outcasts of Israel, "I will gather yet others to them besides those already gathered" (from Isaiah 56:3-8).

Words like those can almost make you forget Deuteronomy 23:1.

The eunuch was reading just a few chapters earlier:

As 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 and as for his descendents he was cut off with no offspring.

The eunuch's mind was filled with wondering. Who was this scripture talking about? Could it be talking about me?

II

The eunuch was riding along in his chariot reading Isaiah aloud when "lo and behold" Phillip, led by the Spirit, shows up along the same road. When he

pulled up he heard the familiar cadences of Isaiah. Philip asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The eunuch replied, “How can I unless someone guides me?”

Then he invited Philip into the chariot, and they began to read the scripture together.

In our lives we need sacred scripture. But that’s not enough. We need the Spirit to help us, and teachers, and a community of faith within which to read and interpret scripture.

The eunuch said to Philip: “About whom does the prophet say these things?”

I love how the text describes what Philip did: “And beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news of Jesus.”

Philip began where this man was, and with this text which touched the tremblingest part of him, and from there led him to the good news of Jesus Christ. It is how true evangelism happens.

Phillip could have said, Nope, Mr., you’re starting at the wrong place. You’ve got to go back to the Law of Moses, Deuteronomy 23:1, “A EUNUCH

SHALL NOT ENTER THE ASSEMBLY OF THE LORD.” The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it!

There are two ways to read scripture. The first way is by looking for how many people you can exclude. The second way looks for how many people you can include. I believe if you read the Bible in the Spirit of Jesus you read it the second way. That is how Jesus read his own Hebrew scripture. And it got him in a lot of trouble.

I would love to have overheard the conversation in the chariot. Maybe Philip said something like this:

“This scripture is pointing to a man named Jesus. He is the suffering servant of God described by Isaiah, despised and rejected, wounded for our iniquities and by whose stripes we are healed. He is the one without offspring but whose family is growing all over the world.”

“And the scripture is also talking about you: You are the foreigner, the eunuch now welcomed into God’s house and God’s family.”

Philip told him about Jesus and new life in Christ and baptism. When they came to an oasis, the eunuch said, “Here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Right here, right now?

Note: It wasn't the preacher Philip who said, "here's water, let me baptize you." It was the eunuch who took the initiative: "here is water, what hinders me from being baptized?"

Did Philip panic for a moment? The rules and regulations had not been decided back in Jerusalem. "What will they say when they hear I've baptized this man?"

But thank God, Philip was more in tune with the Spirit than with his anxieties about what headquarters might say. Some of the ancient manuscripts record these beautiful words from Philip: "If you believe with all your heart you may."

How beautifully simple: "If you believe with all your heart you may."

The eunuch was ready. Philip stopped the chariot. And they went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water the text says that the Spirit "snatched" Philip away back on the road to preach the gospel. And as for the eunuch? He "went on his way rejoicing."

Let's take a glance at Philip, this brave, Spirit-led, boundary-crossing Philip. Jesus and the Spirit had reached across ethnic boundaries to claim him. Then he had brought the gospel north to Samaria and south down the Gaza road to the Ethiopian eunuch. He also raised four daughters in Caesarea—and all four

became preachers! That's right. Check it out, Acts 21:8-9. The Spirit is breaking down gender barriers too, and dismantling the stained glass ceiling. Four preacher daughters! That must've been some household.

IV

Where does this text touch the tremblingest part of you? Is there a hiddenmost part of you the gospel of grace has not yet reached? The song from Iona goes: "Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?" Is there an uttermost part of you that wonders whether it belongs here? Is there a part of you that says, if people really knew me, if they knew all my thoughts, or all I've done, or what I believe or don't believe, I wouldn't be accepted here?

We've read the psalm:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord,

Who shall stand in God's holy place?

The one who has clean hands and a pure heart (Psalm 23:3-4).

Who has clean hands? A pure heart. No one. Grace has brought you here.

A number of years ago while at Myers Park Baptist on a choir retreat at the beach I preached this text. Then I led the choir to the ocean for a symbolic renewal of baptismal vows. On the way to the water Damian Sekielewski, a young

adult who had recently come here from Poland, ran up to me and said, “Here’s water, what hinders me from being baptized?”

“You mean *now*?” I said, “And *here*?”

“Yes now”, he said, and grinned from ear to ear. There I was on the road to Gaza!

So we went together into the surf to about four feet of water so I could baptize him. Then we suddenly saw fins: several sharks swimming about 20 feet from us. I didn’t ask if they were *Christian* sharks. We scampered out of the water in a little less dignified way than we had entered the water. What to do? We spied a hotel pool nearby with one of those “lazy river” sections. I baptized Damien in the “lazy river” in front of the choir and a number of startled vacationers. The choir sang “Amazing Grace”, and people cheered and hugged.

Another story. It happened at the Easter Vigil Service, the night before Easter, at Broadway Baptist Church, a center-city church where I served as pastor. We built “the great fire of Easter” in a large kettle outside the front doors of the church, then lit our candles from the fire, and processed into the sanctuary for a service of music, readings, the baptism of several people and the renewal of baptismal vows for us all. At the end of the service, as people filed out a homeless man came by and said, “Can I be baptized tonight?”

He told me he'd been wandering by and saw the strange fire and said "What the *hell* is that?!" He'd walked near, then came in, sat in the back of the sanctuary for the service, saw the baptism, and now wanted to be baptized himself. There I was on the road to Gaza!

I said, "Sure!" I gathered ten or twelve folks still hanging around and asked if they would be the congregation for the baptism. We found a white robe for him, I put my wet robe back on, and I baptized him. We prayed for him and sang a song. When he came up out of the water I saw his glowing face. And he "went on his way rejoicing."

Conclusion

When my daughter Ann was graduating from first grade there was an awards luncheon for everyone. All the children getting awards had their names listed in the printed program.

When we sat down, Ann picked up her program and searched for her name there. When her finger got to her name, her face lit up. "There's my name!"

Then she glanced over at her friend, Thea, across the table and began to search for her name. When she found it, she pushed the program over to her and showed her *her* name. A big smile broke across her friend's face and they laughed and giggled together.

Isn't that what we all want and need? To find our name somewhere in God's book, in God's story? Have you seen your name there today?

That's what the Spirit does: it helps us find out name in the Bible and our place in God's great story.

And the mission of the church and our mission here at Grace? To help others find their names in the redemptive story of God. Look! There it is.