

## Sermon for May 2, 2021

### Shivon Miller

Today's reading from Acts is a rich scripture text full of things to ponder. I want to therefore invite you into the text slightly differently today, almost like a text study. As we read this text together a few overarching questions to consider:

Who is the receiver in this text? And

Where is God at work?

A few things to know – In this text, the church is still very new. Pentecost (the coming of the Holy Spirit) is still a recent memory and followers of Jesus are just beginning life without Jesus' physical presence. Even this early, the church is being severely persecuted – Stephen has just been stoned and persecution is so intense in Jerusalem that the apostles have been scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. There is conflict between Jew and Gentile communities - has the Lord come only for Israelite believers or for all nations as stated in Jesus' commission? Saul, not yet Paul, is hunting down Christians even as there is a movement outward to proclaim the Word.

Philip, Peter and John have all been in Samaria proclaiming the good news when suddenly an angel of the Lord appears to Philip in our text today. And the angel says "Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza." The text then says "This was wilderness road."

Who is the receiver in this text so far?

I am struck that the angel comes to and sends Philip and Philip alone on this journey. We read that Peter and John are sent back to Jerusalem. The call Philip receives is distinct from the call Peter and John receive. While they are all sent to be witnesses – God leads them in distinct ways. They receive a different and distinct word from God.

And where is God to be at work in this text?

On a road from Jerusalem to Gaza, a wilderness road, God is at work off the beaten path, away from the mainline, in the wilderness.

This distinct call to this wilderness road leads Philip to an Ethiopian eunuch, "a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury." He has come to Jerusalem to worship and is returning home.

What do we know from the description of this man? Ethiopia was a foreign land. In Biblical times it was considered the ends of the earth, the regions farthest away, not just the country we call Ethiopia now. This Ethiopian man therefore was a foreigner, from the farthest reach of the gospel. In this time those identified as Ethiopians were brown and black skinned people. Philip would have identified this man as a different race. A eunuch was a castrated

male, having been identified as having no heterosexual interest and being gender altered. He is a servant to the queen, a man in charge of money. He is a pagan not a Jew and while it tells us that he has come to Jerusalem to worship he would not have been allowed to enter and worship beyond the outer gates. This man would have been identified as “other”, an outsider by more than geographical location.

This man is reading the words of the prophet Isaiah, the word of God, in his chariot. The Spirit says to Philip “Go over to his chariot and join it.” You – go and join this man where he is. And Philip ran up to it. Philip runs along this wilderness road to join this man.

Philip listens to him reading and asks “Do you understand what you are reading?” And the man responds “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invites Philip in. Together in the chariot, the man asks questions and Philip proclaims the good news he knows about Jesus.

Who is the receiver? And Where is God at work?

We may be quick to respond – the Ethiopian receives – a teacher, a new understanding, the good news. God is at work through Philip as he joins this foreigner.

But our text continues. As they were going along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch says “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Philip first receives a word from God, “go and join this man” and then he receives a question “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Philip stands on this wilderness road, where he has been led by the Spirit of God. He sits with the man whom the Spirit has told him to go and join. And he is presented with the question that is at the heart of discipleship – What is to prevent me from being received by God? Who is the good news for? Who has Jesus come to save? Jew and Gentile? Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth? Is there anything that can prevent God from claiming one as beloved?

Here led to this place, seated beside a man from the farthest edge of the earth, of a different race, with open sexual and gender identity, a servant and money manager, with no religious heritage on a wilderness road with no church building or assembly, formal training or fanfare, and Philip is asked “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

No words come from Philip’s mouth in response. No words are spoken by the angel of God or the spirit of the Lord. The text simply goes on “He commanded the chariot to stop and both of them, Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. Nothing prevents him. When they came up out of the water the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away.

God knew the eunuch on the wilderness road. God’s word had already reached this man. God sends his Spirit to Philip that both Philip and this man may experience God’s promise, God’s unprevented embrace, at work everywhere for everyone.

Once Philip has baptized the man the Spirit has accomplished what God intended.

Who is the receiver in this text?

The text states that the Ethiopian goes on his way rejoicing, and historians recognize that Ethiopia received the good news and began baptizing earlier than surrounding areas. Many attribute this to the work of this eunuch baptized and sent in this text.

While the eunuch most certainly receives the good news and the gift of baptism, Philip also receives. Philip receives an experience of God on a wilderness road with a man from the ends of the earth. Where is God at work? Everywhere for everyone! Philip will then be snatched up and sent to Azotus and following towns, having received assurance of the Spirit at work everywhere for everyone, a message that Saul and then Peter will receive in other ways in the next chapters of Acts as God sends out the church to be witness in all the world.

Today we enter this text as receivers. We, like Philip, will at times receive distinct direction from God, unique to our journey. Peter and John went one way while Philip is sent another. Are our ears open to hearing the Spirit speak "Get up and go" - instead of just assuming that our path will mirror the path of those around us. What experiences or learnings does God have to offer? We receive the assurance that God will be on wilderness roads and will urge us into the presence of strangers, those unlike us in every way, to speak AND to hear the good news. We receive the question "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Is anyone beyond the love and claim of God? Is there anywhere that God cannot act and bring about new life? Romans 8 states: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." We, like Philip, experience, God acting everywhere for everyone. We, like Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, receive the unconditional and determined love of God.

Today wonder - Where will you be snatched up and set next to carry such witness to the world? Abiding in God may we go to bear fruit, to love one another as God has loved. Child of God, you are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Thanks be to God!