

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is such a lovely story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In Acts the Spirit is poured out on the apostles and then it just keeps spreading, like water poured out on dry ground, through Jerusalem and Judea, past Samaria, and out to the whole world. Today Philip is directed by an angel to get up and go to a wilderness road, sort of the way God had told Abraham and Sarah to go to a land that he would show them. I imagine it very long and dusty, with rows of corn on either side and the sky enormous and blank above it, just an empty road in the middle of nowhere, maybe a contrail way off near the horizon. Philip's hanging around on the empty road when who should drive by but a court official of the queen of the Ethiopians, the official in charge of her whole treasury. And this official is a eunuch.

It was the custom then to create eunuchs under certain conditions and for various purposes. Sometimes a king would have his younger brothers castrated so that they could not aspire to the throne, because someone unable to have children could not be a king. Sometimes boys or young men were castrated so that they could be entrusted with responsibilities that were thought to be beyond the capacity of men with testosterone—supervising a harem or, as in this case, being administrator of the treasury. This was most likely not a condition that this man had been born with; it had been done to him. And in a weird way it was a sign of privilege, because being the younger brother of a king or able to administer a treasury were obviously positions that occurred only in the upper classes. The Ethiopian eunuch was both privileged and a victim of imperial violence.

So he's seated in his chariot reading Isaiah, traveling on the road from

Jerusalem to Gaza. This is apparently a man who is interested in Judaism, perhaps even somehow affiliated with Jews in Ethiopia, who is returning home from a visit to the Temple. He would not have been able to make a sacrifice or go very far into the Temple because of his physical imperfection, but he had gone anyway. Now he's reading Isaiah, and invites Philip to join him in the chariot and explain the scripture to him.

Like 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. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.

"About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" the eunuch asks Philip.

The passage he read was one of the so-called Suffering Servant songs of Isaiah, who wrote during the Babylonian Exile, a dark time for Israel. Nobody is sure who the Suffering Servant represents, but there's most consensus that it is Israel itself. However, Philip and the early church read Isaiah and saw a description of Jesus, who suffered stoically without deserving it, and whose sufferings showed human beings how imperative it was to repent of our sinfulness. So presumably that's what Philip starts explaining to the eunuch. Isaiah is prophesying that a servant of God will be led to slaughter, that he will be humiliated and denied justice. "Who can describe his generation?" This servant will be deprived of the chance at a full life, which for people then included having children, a new generation. His life is taken away from the earth.

Imagine the connections the electrified eunuch would be making. Privileged and aristocratic though he was, his identity had been taken from him by force and

his future cut off. He, who had been violated by imperial power and consigned to permanent humiliation and no hope of a family, he had been voluntarily joined in his circumstances by none other than the Son of God. "In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." Where he had been, Christ had been too. The scripture was written for him.

But as excited as he was, he still couldn't quite believe that everyone would see it that way. He wanted to get baptized, but he had to ask for it this way: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Because something had always prevented him from pursuing what looked life-giving and inviting, and that something was permanent and intrinsic. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The answer was Nothing, and so Philip baptized him.

And that was that; apparently that's all God wanted Philip to do out there on that dusty road, just be there for a traveling foreign official whose heart is yearning toward God. The eunuch saw Philip no more and went on his way rejoicing; Philip "found himself" at Azotus, and without worrying about how he'd gotten there, picked himself up and went on proclaiming the good news till he came to Caesarea. (What that means, so we can all fully appreciate what the Spirit was up to, was that instead of trekking back east to Jerusalem, Philip launched off northwards along the coast and made a much longer trip through the country of the Samaritans, I guess because he was already out in the field and might as well make use of the trip. The guy was on fire.)

[Play Rundman's "Report to Candace"]

“Yeah, the lamb went to slaughter, but that wasn’t the end /Life rises out of death again”. Picture the chariot bumping down that long, dusty road with the huge sky above it, the Ethiopian treasury official oblivious now to his monotonous surroundings, repeating to himself, Life rises out of death again; and taking his free, Spirit-filled self back to the court of the Candace, dead to his old brokenness and alive for real and for good.

Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, you find us wherever we are, at home, at work, out shopping and today at worship. Not one of us have you missed or found too trivial to bother with. May we be as receptive of you as Philip was, going to whatever wilderness road you say, rejoicing in your power to bring new life out of death. Amen.