

April 25, 2021

What does salvation look like

The story of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Scripture Acts 8

Word for the Day 664

So we have another familiar story today following on last week's story of the Stoning of Stephen. These are stories about the beginnings of Christianity from the ashes of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the spread of this new religion outside of Israel.

These stories give us an idea of what was important in the early Christian church and one thing stands out from this week's text is that everyone is to be included. Inclusiveness is valued. This is in contrast with contemporary Jewish law and practice of exclusion of certain groups from temple worship, such as blemished people and blemished sacrifices.

Purity was important. Jesus continually pushed these boundaries of purity and acceptability and his followers continued that practice..

There are two characters in this story, Phillip and this Ethiopian Eunuch. Phillip, but which Phillip, the apostle or one of the deacons appointed to take care of the widows referenced in last week's sermon. While there is disagreement here most scholars agree he is one of the newly appointed deacons. As you recall this newly formed office in the church hierarchy was created to make sure the resources of the new church were shared to meet the needs of all the members including the hellenistic widows, who had apparently been neglected.

And who is this eunuch? Eunuchs are castrated males and this person is a black African eunuch. He is also the treasurer for the Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. Eunuchs are often men in powerful positions, keepers of the harem, leaders of the king's armies, skilled diplomats, held in high esteem even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Islamic world, the Ottoman Empire

This black eunuch is traveling in a "chariot" with room for Philip, along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, after worshipping at the Temple there on his return to Aksum, then the capital of Ethiopia, A 1500 mile I might mention, with I suspect an entourage and reading Isaiah, the Jewish prophet. He also was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, which implies that he was familiar with Jewish customs. How is this possible? Ethiopia is on the edge of the known world. A place hardly anyone knew anything about.

Well, you remember the tradition that the queen of Sheba visited King Solomon. (1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9 and in the Koran). She came, brought lots of gifts and left. She was one of many foreign dignitaries to come and visit Solomon in all his splendor. Jewish ideas went back with her and she according to tradition, gave birth to a son, Menelik by Solomon. So, it is possible that

this was a start of a Jewish presence in Ethiopia which the eunuch knew about and that is how he came to be reading Isaiah. I suppose he could have picked up a copy of Isaiah while in Jerusalem, a souvenir of his trip.

Phillip asks him if he understands what he is reading and then he invites Phillip into his chariot to ride along with him and explain Isaiah to him. And Phillip explains that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and then proceeds to tell him about the salvation Jesus brings to all even him.

Then the Eunuch spies a body of water on the side of the road and asks about being baptized.

Without hesitation Phillip says "why not let's get to it". And so Phillip not only invites a black eunuch into the knowledge of Jesus Christ, but also into the fellowship of this new church. Later, about 400CE Ezana, the king of Ethiopia at that time converts to Christianity and the nation follows. Since that time Ethiopia is a Christian nation.

At the present moment Ethiopia is 63% Christian but there are significant numbers of Jews and Muslims also living there.

Other facts about Ethiopia, it has never been colonized by any European country, one of only 7 noncolonized countries in the world. It is one of the oldest continuously independent countries in the world, Christian for the entire time, even withstanding the march of Islam across northern Africa the last half of the first millenium. Every other country crossed by that march became Islamic except Ethiopia. So, the oldest Christian country is made up of Black Christians not white Christians.

So what has this story of Philip and the black Eunuch to teach us today. Well, so I thought I would go to the experts, and the expert on eunuchs of the bible is a person who has preached in this congregation. Any guesses?

It is Jan Everhart, who in 2003 wrote her PhD thesis entitled the Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible: Uncovering an Alternate Gender. Here is a copy of her thesis, which I have now read. I had no idea!!! Her thesis is quoted whenever this topic arises. So I would recommend you put her thesis on your reading list. Half the words in there are in Greek or Hebrew, both of which Jan has a command. And then there are the technical terms of biblical studies known only to the scholars. Yikes.

But I found it very interesting on many levels.

Eunuchs can be a derisive term. Eunuchs are sexless in our binary world. They are thought to have lost their sexuality and in our sex-saturated world are dismissed at best. But that is not their history. They were valued by many societies and placed in positions of great responsibility and trust as is the case here

What is important in this story is that Phillip introduces this person into the new world of the people of the way and invites him into the fellowship that community by way of baptism. No discussion of whether he needs to be circumcised, or become Jewish first, or to be excluded from some of the rites or rituals. No hesitation, he welcomes the Eunuch into the full fellowship of the church with enthusiasm and without reservation. This is the good news of the gospel! And this fulfills the command to bring this good news to everyone even to the ends of the earth. After all Ethiopia was the end of the earth to the Roman Empire. It was darkness beyond

Ethiopia. The Romans had no idea what was beyond this point. Nobody knew then that the earliest hominoid skeleton named Lucy, would be found many centuries later in Ethiopia.

And Phillip is transformed by this event as well. He is “snatched” away and wakes up in Azotus which is about 34 miles east on the Mediterranean sea. And he goes on his way preaching in every town and hamlet all the way up to Caesarea in the north where he makes his home and raises a family.

We don't know what happens to the Eunuch. We do know that in the fourth century the King of Ethiopia was converted to Christianity and the country has been Christian ever since.

So, Philip brought salvation to the black Ethiopian eunuch.

Does this at all inform our present day ideas of what salvation looks like in our time. Clearly Phillip is telling us that salvation is really for everyone, freely given, no matter what our condition, no matter where we live, or what we have done, or any other condition, or who we love, or who we live with, or who we are descended from. There is a universality to this salvation. God made us all and God loves us all. So salvation is for every one but what does salvation look like really.

Well I can tell you clearly what it doesn't look like. 664 is the word for today. That number is not what salvation looks like. Unlike Jesus' message of salvation which is for all no matter what. You see in this las terrible year of pandemic and terrible loss of life the Stock market rallied and rose to record heights. Huh? How can that be. It increased in value by 1.2 trillion dollars. But unlike Salvation, unlike the love of God it was shared by 664 people. That is not salvation! I would say that is no God's plan for us, for the people of the world. In addition that wealth is not spent in

the community where it could give people a livelihood. It is hoarded. That number represents sin .

Friday there was an editorial in the NY Times by David Brooks. Look it up. It is worth reading. He talks about a survey that found that 51% of republicans, when asked if politics should be about enacting good policy or ensuring the survival of the country as we know it, chose survival. A another poll in February asked which statement is closest to their view “It is a big beautiful world, mostly full of good people, and we must find a way to embrace each other and not allow ourselves to become isolated” or “Our lives are threatened by terrorists, criminals, and illegal immigrants and our priority should be to protect ourselves.” 75 % of Biden voters chose the first, 67% of Trump supporters chose the latter. I have traveled around the world and my experience causes me to choose the first.

In the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian countries I have been to, I was warmly welcomed and can affirm that this is a big, beautiful world where the stranger can be welcomed because I have been that stranger and I was embraced.

Over the last year while the pandemic raged, while people lost their jobs, and their homes, and many were hungry, students lost a year of school, mental health suffered.

That is not what salvation looks like. We live in a zero sum world where if I have it you don't. That kind of world runs on fear, fear that if you prosper I lose. It is s zero sum game. If you get

the job, I don't. It is a world based on scarcity and fear. And that is the opposite of salvation. Salvation looks like when I prosper I share my good fortune with the whole community and we all prosper. No one is left behind. All are cared for. Even the helenistic widows. That is the good news, the gospel. Everyone is included, no exceptions.

Recently in a discussion with a group of Simpson employees I was asked about the students I work with and I was expressing my dismay about one student in particular. I was urged by some of those in that meeting that I should let this student go and concentrate on the others. Afterward one of my colleagues who is a fairly fundamentalist Christian spoke to me. She urged me not to let that student go. She said "God does not abandon us and we cannot abandon our students no matter how tough that is." I agreed.

Being saved means to me that I have nothing to fear because God is with me. God has promised never to leave me isolated. I need not fear. To be in God's hand, is to be loved, unconditionally. Salvation means to believe God when God say to you "Do not fear". Do not be afraid. Listen for God saying that to you this week and every day thereafter. We can then join Phillip and run after the chariot and share the good news. We can join with our black neighbors and say Yes black live do indeed matter. We can join trans gender friends and fight for their rights. We can stand with immigrants and welcome them into our communities and our church. We can join with the prisoner who is denied a job because of her or his past and say I will stand with you. We can do that and more unafraid. Free at Last, Thank God Almighty Free at last.

We can take God at God's word and not be afraid anymore. And heaven will be ours right here and now.

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Let us pray.

Lord, we believe in your promises. Help our unbelief.

Amen