

Philip and the Spirit

Psalm 22:25-31 & Acts 8:26-40

Pastor James Ramsey ~ May 3, 2015 (Easter 5B)

Decades ago now, researchers and biologists struggled to re-establish herds of bighorn sheep in the mountain and desert regions of the American



West. Time and again, a goodly-sized herd was released into an area where bighorns once flourished, but then, year by year, their numbers always began to dwindle away. The problem, the scientists finally figured out, was that the sheep did not know how to move between their summer range and their winter range, and so they starved.

Biologists could re-introduce the sheep back into ideal habitat, could rig them with radio collars, could inoculate them against all sorts of bighorn diseases, but ultimately could NOT teach them the migration routes that bighorns learn only from other bighorns. They discovered that once the link between sheep and ground is broken, and the memory of the trails is lost, there seems to be no way of restoring it.



The bighorns died because they didn't understand where they were, and they didn't know where they needed to go. Churches languish and discipleship fades for the same reason. No matter how moving and profound our individual experiences of Christ may be, there needs to be more to our life of faith, more to see us through the duration of our lives. We need others, each other, the community of faith, to guard us and guide us through all the changing scenery we will encounter in our lifetime.



As the flock is essential to English sparrows on migration – the herd, and specifically, the older, wiser, more experienced of the bighorns is essential in guiding individual sheep to green pastures and still waters, summer and winter.

Not so different for us. We need the guides and the heralds among us. Those who have insight, patience, wisdom, experience, deep faith, can show us the way to go for peace, well-being, salvation. God knows this well.

So God brings seekers and guides together, within congregations, in the church, but also in the real world.

We see this beautifully illustrated in the quirky and unique story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. That story appears only in Acts and is not mentioned



anywhere else in the Bible. Let's examine this brief, yet detailed, vignette.

The account falls immediately after a report of Philip's preaching in Samaria and the story of Philip's involvement in the conversion and baptism of the Samaritan magician Simon. The story of Philip's interaction with the Ethiopian continues the theme of outsiders being welcomed into the growing Christian community. Just as Simon was something of an outsider because of his connections in Samaria and his suspect occupation, so, too, does the Ethiopian eunuch appear to be an initially unlikely candidate for conversion.

As an African, he lives far from Jerusalem. However, as was predicted early in the Book of Acts, the Christian message is on the move "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Philip was successful in Samaria, and perhaps the Ethiopian represents the next step: "to the ends of the earth."

Throughout the book of Acts, the primary actor instigating the success of the Christian mission is not the body of new believers, not the church or even specifically the apostles. Rather, it is God. The Spirit is active and on the move.

Three times in this story we see God taking the initiative. Philip takes the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza under guidance from "an angel of the Lord." Then the Spirit directs him to go over and join the Ethiopian's chariot. And finally, at the conclusion of the baptism, the Spirit of the Lord snatches him away, apparently because there is yet more urgent Kingdom business to which he must attend!



There is no doubt that God has brought Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch together. Philip's gifts were brought to the feet of the Ethiopian seeker. And the Ethiopian's desire for clarity and depth in his faith journey was answered by Philip's appearance.

I stumbled upon this ridiculous little video rendition of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch on YouTube. It was just a brief snippet, about 3 minutes, of a British Television series from the 1980s called Anno Domine – which apparently was a series of Bible programs. I had never heard of it. The only version I found had apparently Danish subtitles.

Anyway, in the video, the Eunuch is played by Ben Vereen. He invites Philip up into his chariot and quips, "I suppose you could call me 'one sympathetic to the Jewish Scriptures' ...like my queen.

"Ah," Philip says knowingly, "Candace of Ethiopia." The eunuch describes that he is the state treasurer and is dressed so formally, because he is required to carry part of the treasury on his body! – and then has a big laugh.

They go on to discuss what the eunuch has been reading – the Prophet Isaiah. The eunuch describes himself as a simple man and he doesn't understand to whom the prophet is referring. He asks, "Is he speaking about himself or someone else?"



Philip says evasively, "Someone else." The eunuch waits a minute and then asks insistently, "Who, who is this someone else?"

Philip seems hesitant to get into things...perhaps to pique the eunuch's interest. "It will take rather long to tell," he says. Ben Vereen, as the eunuch, says hurriedly, "we have time – then he moves the curtain in the chariot

and points to the road and beyond. "Look around," he quips with a laugh, "nothing but desert, we have time, you tell."

And then Philip proceeds to lay out the story of Jesus, recounting his birth, life, death and resurrection. The brief video ends with both characters out of the chariot and Philip pouring water over the eunuch's head, baptizing him by the side of the road.

Philip proclaimed to the eunuch "the good news about Jesus". He tells him that Jesus died on the cross like a sheep led to slaughter, to demonstrate just how far he will go to show his love for us. This sacrifice brings us forgiveness of sin and the restoration of a right relationship with God, no matter who we are American, Ethiopian, man, woman or eunuch. And then, to prove that death is not the end, God raised Jesus from the dead and raises us as well.

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**GOD'S
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That's the Jesus story, as simple as can be...God's message of hope. It's what the Ethiopian eunuch needed to hear. It's what we all need to hear – especially those who are outsiders in our society. It's a story we can tell if we are willing to be guided by God's Spirit and to sit beside and guide those to whom God

sends us. It's a story we must tell, with our words, but also with our actions – with our willingness to love and to serve and to sacrifice for the hungry and homeless, the lonely and disenfranchised, the hurting and the vulnerable.

This morning, as an ongoing part of our strategic planning process, we hold our last of four Cottage Meetings between the worship services.



The theme today is Stewardship. Much of the talk may very well be about money, revenue, finances, but there is more to it than that – more to give than cash. The sense of Stewardship is that we are stewards, caretakers of all that God has given us – the Gospel message, our gifts and talents, the resources at our disposal.



What does God's Spirit have to say to us, about where we should go and who we should encourage and how we might make ourselves available for the common good?

The writer Anne Lamott described her sense of community and ongoing experience of baptism last year in an interview.

She said, “Left to my own devices, I’m like a tide pool, with these little crabs and animals struggling for survival.



I run out of soul food or emotional nourishment. Then from the audience or from my church or whatever, I can feel the tide come in and bring with it little bits of seaweed or krill or nourishment. It’s gentle but it’s startling -- the cold water is startling, and it brings with it everything I need.”



Lamott told the interviewer, “I’m a worried person, and that’s why I think it’s such difficult work. Our whole lives have been practicing not being startled or surprised by water and by the baptism. That’s why baptism is so profound -- you’re submerged, you can’t breathe and you sputter for a minute -- but, when you come out, you’re a different person.

The Ethiopian eunuch was a different person for having met Philip – for having been touched by the Spirit through him. We are guides to each other and to all those to whom God sends us. You have gifts to share, encouraging words to speak, the Gospel to proclaim in your own unique way with your own blend of gifts and talents. Maybe you’ll find yourself chasing down a chariot!

**WHEN we all share
the TRUTH that we know
and SEE the gifts
in each other...**