

The Acts of the Apostles is today considered to be the second half of the gospel of Luke. This coherence of the two books reframes our understanding of Jesus, the Church and us. The story (told by Luke) doesn't end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather it's a climactic twist, a new beginning, a denouement of our expectations of God and how God moves in the world. The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the birth or emergence of the Church from the remnant of disciples who experienced Jesus as resurrected, and filled by the revolutionizing power of the Spirit of God went out through the city, the region and to the ends of the Earth to tell the story of Jesus. Their retelling of the story included the paradox that we – through the Spirit of God, as the Church (the gathered community of those who find faith and life in Christ Jesus) – enter into this story, we are protagonists, not spectators, in the story of what God is doing in the world through the power and person of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Acts has no real narrative end. Rather it continues in you, me, and us, today.

the south :: this phrase can also be translated as “go at noon to the road.” This would represent a strange request, as one would usually not travel at the hottest part of the day in a warm region (noon).

Ethiopian eunuch :: There were Jewish tribes that lived in Nubia and beyond (southern Egypt) what we today call Northern Sudan and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (one of the oldest in the world, dating back to the 4th BCE) claims this Eunuch as its patriarch or Christian origin.

Eunuchs are not commonly spoken of today, but played a well-established role in the ancient world. They were men who had been mutilated, suffering identity-changing violence by imperial powers. But being so castrated they were deemed more trustworthy to oversee and manage a royal harem as well as royal treasuries (as here). They were commonly male descendants of royal families who had not been chosen to be king or sovereign. By being castrated, and not being able to have descendants, any threat of dethroning the king (their older brother) in a coup d'état would be eliminated. Laws of ancient kingdoms even specified that a eunuch could never be crowned king. Eunuchs were considered less than whole, a sort of non-person.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, eunuchs were forbidden to worship God by entering into the temple. “No one whose *testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off [a eunuch]* shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Deuteronomy 23:1 They were considered to be blemished, less than perfect, a non-person in terms of reflecting the image of God (Genesis 1:27) “⁸ For no one who has a blemish shall draw near [to God, or the altar of the LORD], one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ¹⁹ or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, ²⁰ or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or *crushed testicles*.” - Leviticus 21:18-20

This religiously proscribed rejection and banishment changes after the return from the Babylonian Exile through the prophetic message, in particular, of Isaiah 56:1-8. Foreigners and eunuchs are welcomed in the same way as anyone else--that is, those who keep the Sabbath and hold fast the covenant. Sabbath-keeping was a religious observance and a sign of the covenant that people could do within the family even when there was no temple for sacrifice and holiday worship.

SCRIPTURES FOR SUNDAY 5.7.2017

Acts 8:26-39

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward **the south** to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an *Ethiopian eunuch, a court official* of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. **HE HAD COME TO JERUSALEM TO WORSHIP** ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! **What is to prevent me from being baptized?**” ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

¹Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

² Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.

³ Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely separate me from his people”;
and do not let the *eunuch* say,
“I am just a dry tree.”

⁴ For thus says the Lord:

To the *eunuchs* who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,

all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—

⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices

will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸ Thus says the Lord God,

who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them

besides those already gathered.” - Isaiah 56:1-8

The secret to this new and reformed openness to formerly excluded and outcast people is expressed in these verses at the end (verse 8): God will gather these "outcast" (foreigners and eunuchs) to the "outcasts of Israel" already gathered. None are members of God's people by right; all are outcasts, brought in by grace. (See Deuteronomy 7:7-8 ⁷It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”). Those who know themselves to be gathered outcasts will more easily welcome other outcasts into their midst.

What is to prevent me from being baptized :: In many Bibles, a footnote will reproduce verse 37 but note that it is only found in a few manuscripts. What does verse 37 say? The manuscripts add all or most of verse 37, And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” It contains what some ancient readers and scribes thought was a missing piece to this story. It contains the centurion’s confession of faith. After all, how can he be baptized if he doesn’t confess his faith?

The irony of this is that at some point, some in the church decided that there was just one thing that prevented this Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized; he first had to confess! He had to say the “right” words, pray the “right” prayer. But the miraculous appearance of water in the middle of nowhere answers his question definitively. Nothing will prevent him from being baptized. Not his ambiguous status as a eunuch. Not his ethnicity. Not his riches and learning. Not being in the middle of nowhere with a stranger named Philip. God’s saving power will not be restrained!

note from Eric Barreto at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3041

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

***What strikes or shimmers for you in this passage?**

***If you were the eunuch, who lived life as a non-person, how would you have experienced reading Isaiah?; encountering Philip?; and Philip’s interpretation of the gospel good news? How would your vision of God change in this encounter?**

***If you were Philip how would you have responded to this crazy experience?; Being sent into the desert to wait by a road in the heat of the day?; Meeting a foreign eunuch who just happens to be reading scripture?; Hearing the eunuch’s enthusiastic response and request to be baptized? (especially as it probably was quite a ‘hot topic’ which was culturally verboten.) How would your vision of God change in this encounter?**

*** How does your (our) vision of God change in this encounter? How does it change our expectation of the Church?; our vocation and calling to live as the Church of Jesus Christ in the world today?**