

Easter 5, May 2, 2021 (Jo 15:1-8; Acts 8:26-40; I Jo 4:7-21)

Remember the last two weeks, when we talked about the lame man healed by Peter in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth? He went walking and leaping and praising God—and for the first time in his life was permitted inside the temple courts!

In today's reading from Acts we meet Philip, one of the first disciples called by Jesus in John's gospel. Philip was obedient to the voice of the Lord. *Go to the wilderness*, said an angel. In the Bible, *wilderness* is always a place of lost-ness, of wandering, suffering, temptation. But Philip went.

And on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, the chief treasurer of the Ethiopian queen. What is God up to here? First the wilderness. Now a foreigner, a person ritually unclean because he doesn't follow the Jewish laws. And he's not even technically a *man*—he's a *eunuch*.

In Bible times, occasionally a man was castrated so he could safely preside over a harem. This was a position of great responsibility, as was caring for the treasury.

At any rate, this foreigner, marred as he was in the context of Jewish law, was one of the *proselytes*—people who worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from afar but weren't allowed into the inner circle of Jews because they weren't circumcised.

Any physical imperfection was considered *ritually unclean*, not acceptable in God's sight. So any man with a physical disability was barred from the holy place of worship in Jerusalem. We're told that the Ethiopian eunuch **had gone to Jerusalem to worship**, but obviously he didn't get to worship in the temple.

Page 2

Now, on his way home, he was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit of God told Philip, *Go to that chariot and stay near it.*

So Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. **Do you understand what you're reading?** Philip asked. The Ethiopian eunuch said no, he needed help, and he invited Philip to join him in his chariot.

He was reading from Isaiah 53, one of our Holy Week texts. **He was oppressed and afflicted; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken (Is 53:7-8).**

It's ironic that if the Ethiopian eunuch had read a little further in Isaiah, he would have found acceptance from five centuries earlier, despite his physical condition.

For this is what the Lord says: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off (Is 56:4-5).

It's ironic, and very sad, that selective reading on the part of the Pharisees upheld certain parts of their scriptures and ignored other parts.

It's very sad that the same thing happens today. Many people in the 41,000 denominations or sects of Christianity pick and choose which chapters and verses of the Bible they want to proclaim. That's why Martin Luther taught us to read the Bible as a whole, to "let scripture interpret scripture."

Back to our text: Luke, the author of Acts, tells us, **Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.**

The good news about Jesus! Jesus, who came to seek and save the lost. Jesus, who repeatedly sought out the last, the least, the little, the lonely, the lost—the outcast, the voiceless, the untouchable.

Jesus, who unconditionally loved everyone his religion and his culture despised. Jesus, who accepted each person he met as a beloved child of God. Jesus, who said, **Do not judge, and you will not be judged** (Luke 6:37).

Can you imagine the joy of that foreign man who'd had his manhood taken away and had been considered a non-person by the Jewish leaders? Can we even begin to understand the incredible, amazing sense of acceptance he must have felt as the love of Jesus was revealed to him?

Look! he cried out, **here's water! What's to prevent me from being baptized?** And the Spirit of God must have whispered to Philip, *Absolutely nothing!*

So both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. – Listen to words by Thomas G. Long: “*And walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling down, blown away by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit. A man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wilderness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ*” (Thomas G. Long, *Daily Feast, Year B*, p. 265).

In last week’s reading from Acts the lame man, once healed, went *walking and leaping and praising God*. Today the newly baptized Ethiopian eunuch **went on his way rejoicing**.

Do you want a story of *really good news*? Hear again words from the first letter of John: **Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. . . . This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. . . . There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear. . . . We love because he first loved us.**

Did you hear that last sentence? **We love because he first loved us.** While we were still sinners, **Christ died for us.** You can never out-sin God’s forgiveness. You can never out-run God’s love.

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed; alleluia!**