

SUMMARY: PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH***Acts 8:26-40***

None of us like to have our biases/opinions challenged. We build protective walls around what we choose to believe. Then, we surround ourselves with like-minded people, people who tend to re-inforce whatever are our opinions. We avoid those whose opinions differ from ours – see them as ‘wrong’ and either as ‘outsiders’ best to be ignored or needing to be converted to our way of thinking!’ What we lose sight of is that our opinions are just that: OPINIONS! They are never the whole truth! There’s always more to it. People and situations are always sooo much more complex than we like to believe.

A special problem is when we do that with God. ***Our opinions ABOUT God may NEVER take the place OF God in our lives!*** Perhaps that’s a good definition of what fundamentalists do and why all forms of fundamentalism is just so harmful and toxically divisive.

But coming back to our scripture for today: ***26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south^a to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ... 27 So he got up and went.*** An ‘Angel of the Lord’ is also elsewhere understood to mean ‘The Spirit of God’ or the ‘Holy Spirit’ Have you ever had a prompting like that - when you believe you were being given an urge to do something that you genuinely suspected may be of God? What did you do with it?

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 worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. This is very specific... We’re given all these details because, perhaps, Luke (*the writer of Acts*) was wanting to stress this as something that actually happened – perhaps something that still needs actually to be happening...

And this is what happened – as he came to that road from Jerusalem to Gaza: ***29 ...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.*** Philip’s running suggests his eagerness to respond to that prompting! When he caught up to the Ethiopian’s chariot, he began by asking: ***“Do you understand what you are reading?” ‘No’³¹ that Ethiopian official replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And so he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.***

What a privilege – to be invited in, not necessarily as an answer-giver, you know, an opinion offer’er, but as a guide! Simply to help guide another in their spiritual growth. That’s what the Greek word for ‘guide’ means. *Οδηγησει* which puts together two words (*οδος*+ *νγεομαι*) meaning, literally: ‘road’ and ‘lead’. Philip was being offered to guide his spiritual journey...

Then, in verse 34, the questioning began: ***34 ...“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.*** I wonder what we would share as ‘*the good news about Jesus?*’ What has this meant for you – what does it mean for you? Because unless we know it somehow for ourselves we would have nothing to lead others towards.

Something quite wonderful must have resonated with that Ethiopian as he and Philip shared, because: **36 As they ...came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"** What do you think 'baptism would have represented to that Eunuch: what was he *actually* asking for? And why the urgency?

We understand baptism as a sacrament of initiation - an initiation rite, something that marks the beginning of our spiritual life. I like to think that through his time with Philip, he had been given to glimpse something quite wonderful and now wanted to waste no time before properly embracing it – marking his beginning of it!

38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip^g 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. What does a life of rejoicing look like? The word 'rejoicing' (*ἡγαροῦν*) has many beautiful associations: of course 'rejoicing' as we have it here in our text, but it is also used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe being in a state of joy, of gladness, beauty. It comes from a word meaning 'grace' (*ἡγαροῦ*) meaning that Philip left him in a grace-filled state of mind: open, aware, alert to Christ's everywhere-presence - just how God would have him be.

While we're told that that wealthy Ethiopian Official was a worshipper, he was clearly also deliberately curious. He was probably a Gentile as Jews wouldn't have allowed a eunuch properly to be part of their community. But clearly, he was being drawn. Intrigued by scripture, and all of this Jesus stuff after Easter, he wanted to know more. He had questions, he wanted guidance, and (*like blind Bartimaeusⁱ*) he wanted to see.

I love Richard Rohr's definition of the opposite of our having faith, which he says isn't a doubt that questions, but a certitude which questions nothing, because it believes that it totally knows all that there is to know. Certitude leaves no room for doubt. *Like the Pharisees! Like us at our most arrogant worst.* But when, like this curious Ethiopian we are willing to admit our certain ignorance and curiosity, well, that's just the place that faith begins to kick in, and so we begin to grow.

I love how Parker Palmer puts it in one of his podcasts – how it's not necessarily answers that we are most needing – it's the freedom to express our precious and meaningful questions – *THAT'S* what matters most. I'm wildly paraphrasing him here: ***'It's as we wrap our lives around those questions, the miracle is that eventually our lives begin to look like what we are asking – perhaps even becoming the answer to our seeking...'***

That Ethiopian Eunuch had had his curiosity seriously piqued – by God. He had questions, and so began to explore. Philip was given to see what was going on and prompted quickly to run to give that seeker the spacious guidance he needed to explore, and to discover... **Philip was available enough to spot and to accept the invitation to come alongside when it was offered.** And within that relationship God did the rest: Christ was revealed/ the Ethiopian was given to want to engage the risen Christ with all his heart, and so was baptized.

Richard Rohr's description of the 4 worldviewsⁱⁱ that we all live within is very helpful. But first, we should notice how a worldview is never so much WHAT we see in the world as HOW we see, what we see!

It's the filter through which we see, and by which we interpret everything. A Materialistic worldview sees everything through just whatever is purely physical, logical, tangible. *Anything good from God must lead to my greater wealth or privilege or benefit (they would say) or else it is irrelevant.* The so-called 'prosperity cults' seem to be very much into this. A Spiritual worldview is the opposite of that. None of 'this' really matters nearly so much as what we are doing in terms of our spirituality. Just keep doing whatever sacred rituals are practices we do and know that how we are actually living, treating the earth, others, ourselves, really doesn't matter. ***I'm appalled at how easily we allow ourselves to be caught up within each of these at times, and while there may be good in each, ultimately, both are toxic.*** As is the third, dual-worldview which sees both perspectives but believe they are quite separate, needing a professional mediation – clergy/priests/gurus – to make the connections! Thankfully, there is a fourth truer and healthier worldview which understands how it is all one in God and is revealed as such by and within the risen Christ! This is us at our best - as we are given to see everything, everywhere as God-soaked, sacred/ Christ-filled...

If our sin creates the illusion of ugly separation with God's whole and holy creation, Christ breathed SHALOM seals that it has now all been revealed as whole – as having been perfectly restored. That, I believe, is mostly what God used Philip to help guide that curiously-called Ethiopian to see as he moved towards journeying on with his life – rejoicing! It's what Jesus gave blind Bartimaeus to see on the roadside, and its' what is constantly being offered to us all.

Truly the gates of heaven have been broken wide open and God's love is now exposed by the risen Christ to be everywhere! May we be SOOO blessed by our awareness of that despite the even at times worst of our circumstances.

O May it be so, in Jesus' Name.
Amen.

Rev Robin Jacobson

ⁱ Luke 18:35-43

ⁱⁱ The Universal Christ (2019) Appendix – Listed elsewhere as (1) Materialistic (2) Spiritual (3) Priestly (4) Incarnational