

Acts 8:26-40

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.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the 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?”^[h]³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip^[i] 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.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Can you remember a point in time when your life took an unexpected turn? A moment, a decision, a crisis, that would forever change what life looked like. A moment that would become a hinge between what came before, and what comes after. A moment where suddenly the world around you seems wholly different than it did before. Life is full of these in between, life changing, turning point moments. Sometimes, these turning point moments are cause for great celebration; for many of our students graduating this week, this is a turning point in their lives. As they look to new schools, new jobs, new opportunities with excitement, this is a moment where life changes, and it doesn't look the same as it did before. And still

other times, the turning point moments of our lives hold more complicated emotions. The uncertainty of a new diagnosis. The grief of the loss of loved one.

What then, does our faith teach us about the turning point moments of our lives? Where is God at work when life changes? How do we discern where the Holy Spirit is calling us to be in the midst of those turning point moments? How do we respond faithfully to changing of the world around us?

This story of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch represents a kind of turning point in the story of Acts. Up until this point, the apostles have been spreading the gospel in and throughout Jerusalem, and Judea. The church has been growing, gathering more and more believers. They've been sharing their resources, healing the sick, and speaking out against the religious leaders, the chief priests in Jerusalem. But here, in the eight chapter, there is a turning point. The ministry of the early church begins to expand, first into the northern Kingdom of Samaria, as Phillip begins preaching the good news to Samaritans and baptizing new believers. And then into the wider world. This is a turning point, because from this point on, this movement of scrappy, persecuted, neighbor-loving, Christ followers won't just be for people who considered themselves part of the Jewish faith, it would be for everyone. Phillip and the eunuch offer us a portrait of faith in a changing world, a faith that carries us through pivotal moments and turning points, into God's promised future.

The text begins with an angel appearing to Phillip and telling him to go South, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, and this road Luke tells us, is a wilderness road. The instruction while clear and direct, couldn't be vaguer. Can you imagine a call like this happening in your life? Go south, to a road, in the middle of nowhere? No specific directions. No instructions for what to do when you get there. Almost nothing. Just go south. To a road. And that's it. See what you find. And yet, this simple, vague instruction leads Phillip to this encounter that forever changes the trajectory of the Christian movement.

The very first thing this text teaches us about faith at the turning points, is that God calls us to show up. Often without an idea of what to expect, or a 5-step plan, or a step-by-step list of instructions. Instead, God calls us to show up and be present to the movement of the Spirit. To listen and to look for where God's presence is being made known, and to be open to the ways that the Holy Spirit might be working through us. Which means, making peace with the uncertainty of life without a road map. First God says, show up.

When I was in my first year of college, I had applied to be a member of the student leadership team for the Presbyterian Campus Ministry of Raleigh. It was a student group that met in the basement of a Presbyterian Church right off campus, and where I had found a little home in my first semester away from home. And as part of the application process, each of us would meet with the campus minister, to

figure out what role on the leadership team we would fill. Scott, the campus pastor at the time asked me over coffee, what gifts I had to share with the leadership team. What I thought God might do with me. Still a first year, having just survived my first semester, and still unsure of who I was had no idea what gifts I had for ministry. I said, I don't know, but I can be there. At the time I thought it was a terrible answer, but my campus minister reassured me, that we cannot love one another, cannot serve one another, cannot care for one another unless we are first with one another. The first step, he said, is showing up.

In the midst of turning points, we must show up for one another, trusting that God will use us, even when we don't know how it will turn out, or what it will look like, we show up.

So, when Phillip shows up on that wilderness road in the middle of nowhere, with no instructions, and no idea what God is asking him to do there, suddenly a chariot rushes by, and again the voice of the Holy Spirit speaks to Phillip telling him to run after the chariot, and there he finds the Ethiopian Eunuch reading the scrolls of Isaiah, on his way home.

It's important for us to understand several things about the eunuch, in order to grasp the full complexity of the story. Firstly, he is a foreigner, from Ethiopia, a distant land thousands of miles from Jerusalem, so far that it required a chariot to

traverse the distance. Secondly, as a eunuch, he would likely have been a religious outsider. According to Deuteronomic law, eunuchs were to be excluded from religious life, marked as ritually unclean, and unable to participate in temple worship. Some scholars suggests that perhaps he is Jewish, because he is returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, but either way, he has likely experienced stigma and discrimination at the hands of the religious institution. Third, he is a royal official for the Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, allowing him access to significant power, wealth, and influence, and yet it is likely that is position of influence is only afforded to him by means of his own enslavement.

Scholar, Dr. Willie Jennings describes the eunuchs difference this way: “This Ethiopian eunuch is the outer boundary of the possibility of Jewish existence, and there at that border God will bring that difference near, very near to the hearth of home in the Spirit.”

At this pivotal moment in the church’s history. A moment fraught with excitement, with fear, with persecution, with urgency. God calls Phillip to bear witness to the work of the Spirit in the life of *this* man. This man who embodies all that is different from Phillip’s own experience and culture. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Phillip asks. To which the reply is. “How can I, unless someone is to guide me?”

Which brings us to the second thing this text has to teach us about faith in the turning points, faith in a changing world: We cannot do this work alone. God calls us to communities and to relationships that bridge the differences between us, that gather together our vast and diverse life experiences, to be held together in Christ's own body the church. When the world begins to change, we cannot retreat into our silos, our ivory towers, and our illusions of what makes us the same or different. God calls us to boldly and tenderly meet one another on the road, because we all need someone to guide us in order to understand what God is up to.

In the 2018 documentary, "Won't You Be My Neighbor," about the life of Fred Rogers, Francois Clemmons reflects on his relationship with Mister Rogers, and on the significance of a particular moment in the show's history. It was the late 1960's, and while significant legislative progress had been made in the movement for Civil Rights, Black Americans still faced significant discrimination in the wake of Jim Crow. It was a turning point in our nation's history, full of conflict, of anger, of racism. And on May 9, 1969, in a simple but powerful act, Mister Rogers invited Officer Clemmons to join him in his kiddie pool. Together they shared a moment of intimacy, and of deep friendship, splashing together in the kiddie pool, and even sharing a towel together. "Fred was making a statement about race" Clemmons says, "That it didn't matter if you were black or white, as long as you were friends." God is always drawing us into deeper community with one another,

blurring the lines that divide us. And it is this kind of community, where we recognize each other's humanity, where we offer one another kindness and tenderness, that will sustain us in the midst of a changing world, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that will turn the world for the better.

Can you imagine it? Phillip and the eunuch, two people from vastly different walks of life, sitting together in a chariot, reading scripture together, knees touching. Asking questions and sharing wisdom. I wonder if in those moments of tenderness, the eunuch began to recognize himself in Phillip, in the story of the suffering servant, in the body of the risen Christ.

Finally, after talking and riding together for some time, the eunuch asks "What is to prevent me from being baptized. It is no small question from this person who has been excluded from religious life for likely his whole life. It carries with it a lifetime of disappointment, rejection, and isolation. The question itself is a risk, as if to ask Phillip, "will *you* prevent me from being baptized? Will you prevent me from the body of Christ? Will *you* keep me from participating in the work of the Spirit?" And immediately, Phillip commands the chariot to stop, and the two walk down to the water, and Phillip baptizes him right then and there.

In that moment, together in the waters of baptism, the eunuch and Phillip fulfill that prophetic promise offered by the prophet Isaiah in our first text for today, just chapters after the text they read together in the chariot:

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.”

⁴For thus says the LORD:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,

who choose the things that please me

and hold fast my covenant,

⁵I 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.

Which is to say, that in the turning point that is the Kingdom of God, no one will be cut off. No one will be excluded. No one will be denied the grace of God which is poured out for all people. This isn't just a turning point for the church, or for Phillip, it is a turning point for the eunuch as well. A lifetime of exclusion from

religious life, turned upside down, as he becomes the center of this story of divine inclusion. Which brings us to the final piece of wisdom this text offers for the upside down, turning points of our lives. Sometimes the best thing we can do, to follow God's Spirit in a changing world is to get out of the way.

What is to prevent me from being baptized? The eunuch asked. What is to get in the way? The truth is too often we get in the way of work of the Spirit. Too often the church has been in the way of the Spirit. We think we get to decide who is in, and who is out. We put our own egos, our own selfishness, our own fears first. We make idols of our own success, our own excellence, and we say no, to the divine calling of the Spirit. But in this moment, Phillip gets out of the way. He offers his own "yes," to the "yes" of the Spirit revealed in their conversation. And the eunuch is baptized. The world begins to turn. As Luke tells us in the first chapter of Acts, the gospel spreads throughout Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth...

"and [the eunuch] went on his way rejoicing." The text tells us. Never to see Phillip again, and yet forever changed by this encounter, filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

How will you show up? How will the Spirit draw you into community that bridges barriers, that transforms the world for the better? And how will you get out

of the way of the Spirit, offer your own sacred yes in response to the divine “Yes”
of the Spirit? Amen.