



Nothing Can Keep Us From Baptism  
Sermon by Pastor Paisley Le Roy  
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles  
August 1, 2021

Reading:

Our reading this day is from the book of Acts, Chapter 8.

Later God's angel spoke to Philip: "At noon today I want you to walk over to that desolate road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza." He got up and he went. He met an Ethiopian eunuch coming down the road. The eunuch had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was returning to Ethiopia, where he was a minister in charge of the finances of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was riding in a chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit told Philip, "Climb into the chariot." Running alongside, Philip heard the eunuch reading Isaiah and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He answered, "How can I without some help?" and invited Philip into the chariot with him. The passage he was reading was this: As a sheep led to slaughter, and quiet as a lamb being sheared, He was silent, saying nothing. He was mocked and put down, never got a fair trial. But who now can count his kin since he has been taken from the earth? The eunuch said, "Tell me, who is the prophet talking about: Himself or some other?" Philip grabbed his chance. Using this passage as his text, he preached Jesus to him. As they continued down the road, they came to a stream of water. The eunuch said, "Here's water. Why can't I be baptized?" He ordered the chariot to stop. They both went down to the water, and Philip baptized him there on the spot. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of God suddenly took Philip off, and that was the last

the eunuch saw of him. But he didn't mind. He had what he'd come for and went on down the road as happy as could be. Philip showed up in Azotus and continued north, preaching the Message in all the villages along that route until he arrived at Caesarea.

Word of God word of life. Thanks be to God.

Sermon:

I continue to try to situate us this time, as we walk through the book of Acts. And so I keep on bringing back this passage from Acts 1, which is considered to be the mission statement of the whole book. It says, "And you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth. And as we've walked through this passage, we've seen the ministry in Jerusalem, we've seen it expand a little to all Judea, and last week we saw it go to Samaria. In this week, friends, we've made it to the ends of the Earth because, you see, Ethiopia was symbolic of the end of the Earth because it was the furthest known location at the time. And so to minister to this man, this Ethiopian man, was finally making it to the ends of the Earth. The Spirit has gone and spread. And now this passage has fascinated many over the years as a conversion story, and I believe it is a conversion story, but I think you lose a key point when you think of it just as a one-way movement. That it is Philip converting the Ethiopian eunuch. Phillip, the follower of the Jesus movement, named a deacon that was appointed by the apostles, he was bestowing his wisdom of faith onto an outsider. He was doing that. That is the conversion of the eunuch. But it's much deeper than that. It's different. It's not just a one-way thing. And to understand how, we're going to just dive into the character of the Ethiopian eunuch. Now, the reason why it's been so easy to classify him as the one just being converted to the faith is because he is, in a way, a marginalized person. He's a person of color, which, back then, wouldn't have been so much of a

big deal because all of these people were people of color. But what would have been a bigger deal is that he was a foreigner in the context in which he was found. So there's one marginalization. He is a foreigner. He also is a eunuch. A eunuch is a castrated male so they would be deemed safe in order to serve in the royal household. And so these are men that usually, before they turn into those teenage years, they are castrated. It is not necessarily their choice to be so, but they are castrated so that they can be of service to the queen. And so because of those two things, he is a marginalized person. But he is also a privileged person. I mean, think of this. He serves the royal household. He's trusted with the entire treasury of the queen. He is a servant that is trusted to go alone to Jerusalem and back. That wouldn't have been allowed of just anyone. And he's reading a scroll from Isaiah. And there's two really important things there. First, that he can read, and second, that he even has a scroll of Isaiah. That's a big deal back then. It's not like in my office where I have ten Bibles just sitting freely on the shelf. Scripture was hard to come by. And so for him to have this scroll and for him to be able to read it shows how privileged he is. And then there's the fact, of course, that he is riding in a chariot. Most people, including Jesus and the followers, were walking place to place always on foot. And so he is riding on a chariot. So this eunuch, instead of being the marginalized person that we always portray him to be, he really occupies this liminal space between privilege and marginalized, a place that I feel like many of us also occupy. There are ones in this room that have sat in these times of houselessness. There are people in this room and in our community who have, in the past, experienced food insecurity. There's people in this room living with mental or physical illness, one that can ostracize us. So even though, as a congregation, we are primarily made of privileged people, many of us occupy this liminal space between privilege and marginalized. But the beauty of this is that he's able to offer Philip something while also Philip offers to

him. He tells him, come up in my chariot. So Philip offers, I mean the Ethiopian eunuch offers him hospitality, and he is the one who drives this Spirit-led conversation. There's one time in the passage when Philip really speaks up, and we don't even get the words that he is saying. We just know that he is teaching him about the person of Jesus Christ. And so it is a two-way conversation, one of hospitality being offered to Philip from the eunuch and one of conversion to the faith that is being offered from Philip to the eunuch. But this space that he finds himself in, being the privileged yet marginalized person that he is, also allows us to see what he is reading in a different light. Isaiah 53, "As sheep that is led to the slaughter, so he is silent." As Christians, I think we automatically read this text and see it as the character of Jesus. We read Jesus into this scripture, which I think is faithful. We know that what is described in that passage indeed happens to Jesus, but it's not just a book about Jesus. To say that about any book in the Hebrew scriptures is to lower the Jewish faith, and we don't want to get into that. So there are many things that Jesus is a fulfillment of, but we also can see other people's stories playing out in this text. And so this passage he reads, he's reading in the context of him. Just like every Sunday we read passages in the context of what's happening in scripture, what's happening in the world, and what's happening in our own lives. And so he reads Isaiah 53. But Isaiah is a book of hope. And just a couple chapters later, even though it says he is silenced, Isaiah 56 talks of a time of messianic blessing, when eunuchs and other marginalized people will be fully able to participate in the assembly. Because currently the law would have made it so he was able to even go into the temple. He made that long pilgrimage, but because of the castrated male which he is, he would have not been allowed into the assembly. In the book of Deuteronomy it explicitly says he is not allowed to participate in the assembly of God. And so this book that he's reading is one that is reorienting him to see the hope in his own life, to see that the humiliation that he has faced by being

the man that he is, is not the end of the story. It called, the scripture called the Ethiopian eunuch because he is one who felt humiliated. He is one whose life was stripped away from him, as he does not live it for himself, but he lives it for the queen. He even had his right to procreate stripped away from him so his legacy would stop with him. So the fullness of the book of Isaiah, again, is not just about Jesus but about us, about people throughout time. Now, having explored more about his social location in that liminal space and how he relates to that sheep that is silent before the slaughter, his question rings much differently, the powerful question that we hear. And one translation, I think, says it even better. What is to prevent me from being baptized? Now, many over the years have said, well, nothing prevents you from being baptized, right? Nothing prevents you from being baptized. But that is our context in which we live in. But to him, there were several roadblocks to the baptismal waters. He was living in Ethiopia, so he was cut off from the land of Israel. He was a eunuch, so he was in violation of that purity code which we talked about. He was a member of the cabinet of the Ethiopian queen, so he's loyal to the wrong sovereign. He belonged in the wrong nation, held the wrong job, possessed the wrong sexuality. And there's also the roadblocks that Philip faces because he is called to be a deacon. He is called to go out there in service and to be there for the poor and the marginalized. He is called to walk alongside them, to gather the means. But he is not called at this moment to baptize. That was the work of the apostles. And so this call to Philip to bring him to the baptismal waters is radical, even for him. It's his first time. And as a pastor who recently had my first baptism and whose hands shook as they picked up that water recognizing the power that is in it, that opportunity to bring the Ethiopian eunuch to the waters was one that forever changed Philip's life. The question is, what is to prevent me from being baptized? And yet nothing short of miraculous happens. He asks this question

knowing very well that there is a lot to keep him from. But let's listen in to where it says that.

"As they continued down the road they came to a stream of water. The eunuch said, "Here is water. What is to keep me from being baptized?" And he ordered the chariot to stop.

It's really subtle what happens here, but Philip never answers. In this moment the eunuch takes control of his own future, and he tells that chariot to stop. And I can't help but wonder, why did Philip not speak? This could have very well gotten him in trouble, so maybe he could have spoken up, but I like to say that the Spirit caught his tongue and that he wasn't able to say anything in that moment. He stood in awe at this request. But his lack of answer, I believe, says everything because the air is thick with the Spirit's whispering. Nothing, nothing is to keep you from being baptized. And upon this answer that we are not privy to hear, the eunuch takes his induction into faith into his own hands, commanding the chariot to stop, pulling Philip out, and the two find their way down to the river, and he is baptized. And Thomas Long puts it well when he says, "In that baptism walls of prejudice and prohibition that stood for generations came tumbling down, blown down by that breath of God's Spirit. And another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored to the wideness of God's grace." In that baptism the eunuch's life was changed forever, and also the experience of Philip being able to spread the news of Christ changed forever. Nothing could prevent him from being baptized. And I think that's a lesson we need to learn here, that we, as a church universal, need to hear. Because we as humans are prone to put restrictions on the means of grace. But the Spirit, when that happens, tears those down, those restrictions down and reorients us to our real call, the call we are given in those baptismal waters when we are given the command to love God and to love neighbor freely and to embrace all people without any prerequisites. And that is our most prominent call as Christians, to not

limit the power of God's grace, to not say that God's grace shows up here for this person but not here for this one. The biggest sin of all is to limit the power of God's grace. And so the answer is, nothing. Nothing can keep you from being baptized. And so we, as we become co-creators in a world where all can come to the water, we, like Philip, are changed. We are brought to our knees and we realize the limitless love of God that flows in and through us and in this community, so long as we are brave enough to let it. And so my prayer for us, Bethlehem, is that we walk alongside those on the margins, those that in society and, yes, even in the church have historically been pushed out. Because if there is one thing that we know about the Spirit of God is her power to knock things down, to tumble down the systems that we have put into place. If there's anything we know about the Spirit of God in the power of water is that boundless, boundless and full of grace. And because we know and confess and hopefully rejoice in the gift of the Spirit and the gift of grace to all through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we are freed by this water. We are changed. And so the question is, what is to keep us from being baptized? What is to keep anyone from being baptized? And the Spirit whispers, nothing, beloved child of God, absolutely nothing. And for that we say thanks be to God. Amen.