

**Apr. 25, 2021 – (Easter 4 – Ethiopian Eunuch Baptized)
Sermon Text – Acts 8:26-39**

- Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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? ...and Philip baptized him. -

The book of Acts tells the story of how the good news of Jesus Christ spread throughout the ancient world. It is the gospel writer Luke's attempt to demonstrate that the earliest followers of Jesus carried out the mission that he had given to them. Jesus had told his disciples, "... and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Last week, we heard the story of Stephen, how he was chosen as one of the men to serve as deacons in the early church, in order to insure the fair distribution of food to all the widows of the community; and, how he was killed because of his mighty deeds of power and the witness he provided to the gospel in the city of Jerusalem. In the intervening verses, between the stoning of Stephen and today's passage, we read of the persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem and how they were forced out of the city and into the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. In our reading for today, we hear of Philip, another of the men elected to be deacons for the purpose of distributing the food, who begins to proclaim the good news, first in the cities and villages of Samaria, north of Jerusalem, and now to the south and west of the city on the road leading down to Gaza and the Mediterranean Sea.

There are a number of things that strike me about this story. First, this is the work of the Lord. It happens because of the message brought to Philip by an angel, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." That was not the original intent. Philip was not commissioned as a deacon because of his preaching skills. He was chosen, I would think, because he was good in the kitchen. He could manage the food supply. He could make sure that everyone got what they needed. And he probably didn't mind cleaning up afterward and doing the dishes. If you remember, the disciples were very careful when choosing someone to fill Judas' place among the twelve. They take great pains to insure that the one chosen is worthy of that position. He must be someone who has been with "us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." They propose two such men. They pray for God's guidance. They cast lots. And Matthias is chosen... We never hear from him again. When the controversy

arises about the distribution of food to the widows, the twelve respond by pointing out that “it is not right that they should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.” That is lesser work. It does not require the careful qualification procedures of Matthias’ earlier appointment. The rest of the followers can find someone themselves. All that is required is that they be “full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” who are willing to serve. They, of course, appoint seven, who begin by overseeing the food distribution; but then, at the urging of the Lord, go on to do ever so much more.

Secondly, we notice in this story, that the word of God is on the move. We have seen this pattern before. People are on a journey. They are travelling along the road. As they travel, an unknown stranger joins them. He opens the scripture to them, interpreting what is written in light of the good news of the Messiah. And the encounter concludes with a sacramental moment. In the story of the walk to Emmaus, the story ends with the breaking of bread and the sharing of communion over a meal. In our reading for today, the story ends in a pool of water with the baptism of a new follower of Jesus Christ. This is a pattern that can, and will be repeated endlessly, as the word of God spreads from one follower to another along the way. The important notion seems to be that everyone needs a guide to help them understand just what following will mean for them. I once read about an attempt to reintroduce Big Horn Sheep into an area of the west where they used to be plentiful, but from which they have been absent for some time. The conditions in the area are perfect for Big Horn Sheep, but the project, in its early days at least, has been unsuccessful. No matter how many or how carefully the sheep are introduced to their new home, they do not thrive in their new location. Eventually, they all die, usually from starvation. They do not know how or when or where to move from one location to another to find food during all times of the year, both summer and winter. And it appears that humans cannot properly teach them. Perhaps we don’t know how to do it either, or how to communicate it to the sheep. It seems what they need is other sheep to show them the way. Unfortunately, there are no such sheep to serve as their guides.

And thirdly, the one whom Philip meets along the road is obviously a special sort of person. He is described as “an Ethiopian eunuch,...[who] had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home.” That means, first of all, that he was a black man. He was from Africa. And he was an official in the royal court. Thankfully, we do not have Eunuchs as part of our society today. In the ancient world, they served an important purpose. Because they were males who would never have children, they made ideal servants for the king or queen. Without offspring, they had no potential to be rivals for the throne. That made them loyal. They could be trusted. They were extremely valuable. And they could certainly be believers. But they were also

excluded from the full worship of the Jewish faith. They could not enter into the court of the men at the temple, but would have had to remain with the unclean in the area open to the gentiles. So, we have in this story, one of the “lost” sheep of the house of Israel. It reminds me of Luke’s earlier chapter, in which he gathers three of Jesus’ parables about the “lost sheep,” the “lost coin,” and the “lost son” or “sons.” They are the ones for whom God has a special concern. They are the ones for whom God will leave all the rest in order to go, to seek and to find them. They are the ones, over whom there is great rejoicing in heaven, when the lost one has been found. Not only does the word of God begin to move outward from Jerusalem, it continues to zero in on those who would otherwise be lost, if they had not been found by the seeking of the Lord.

To sum up, the work of witnessing is God’s business. We do it at the urging of the Lord. And it is given to all God’s people as their special commission. Witnesses need no special qualifications. They need no special degrees. They need no special courses of study. All they need is faith and the presence of God’s Spirit to serve as a guide. You have all received the gift of faith and the presence of the Spirit in your baptisms. You can be Christ’s witnesses. You can go and seek and find the lost. And through you, God can bring them to full life in God’s kingdom, no matter who they may be. The story you have to tell is simple. Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus lives again. That is our Easter faith! And it is for you. It is for them. It is for everyone. You can be their guide. As we were studying, one of our area pastors told this story. He said:

Some people were enjoying an evening with neighbors in their hot tub. As they soaked up the warmth of the evening and the sweetness of the wine, their conversation turned toward matters of faith. The neighbors reported that they had been to church and they had enjoyed the experience, but that they had never been baptized. Quoting the Ethiopian of today’s story, they said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent [us] from being baptized?’ None of them could think of a good reason. So, they were baptized.

The words are easy. “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” True, for the sake of good order, we usually do it in the church, amongst the community of faith. But, that does not mean that God doesn’t use the unusual circumstance, the exceptional witness and the neighborly hot tub, to bring about the work of the kingdom. May you all be blessed in your witnessing.

Amen.