

The Spirit and the Eunuch

Acts 8:26-39

Sermon by Dan Schrock

August 9, 2015

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. 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 worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now 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. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As 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?" ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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. (NRSV)

Today I continue with our series on the Holy Spirit. So far we've noted the Spirit's work in the grand sweep of nature and in the grand sweep of the world. We've seen that the Holy Spirit works in big picture arenas. But today I want to zoom in on the little picture, on the work of the Spirit in the life of a single person, the Ethiopian eunuch. While working in creation and in the world, the Spirit simultaneously works in the subtle dance of the human soul.

There are three important facts about this man riding south on his chariot from Jerusalem to Gaza: first, he's Ethiopian; second, he's the treasurer for the Candace; and third, he's a eunuch. Let's take each of these in turn.

First, he's Ethiopian, from the northeast side of Africa. Contrary to what some white folks think, Africans actually have a fairly prominent presence in the Bible. After the Egyptians, who are nearly ubiquitous in the Old Testament, the next most prominent group of Africans are the Ethiopians. Unfortunately, some translations like the New International Version tend to hide the references to Ethiopians behind confusing terminology. The words "Cush" and "Nubia," which appear in translations like the NIV, are more or less interchangeable with "Ethiopia." All three terms refer to the same

geographical region south of Egypt along the Blue Nile River and the White Nile River, in what today is the modern nation of Sudan.

It's unfortunate that some maps in study Bibles do not even include Ethiopia. Instead they end at the southern border of Egypt. So when you look at a map, sometimes you can't tell where Ethiopia was in Biblical times. It's as if the place and the people didn't even exist, or was so unimportant that it's not worthy of putting on a map. I wish publishers would uniformly provide maps that include Ethiopia.

We're fairly confident that Ethiopians were black. The word "Ethiopia" was coined by the ancient Greeks, and the word means "burnt-faced" people. To the white-skinned Greeks, it looked like black skin was burnt. From the literary evidence left to us, it seems that Mediterranean peoples thought black skin was exotic and attractive. We find strong evidence for this in Song of Solomon 1:5, where the woman of the book is speaking. In the New Revised Standard Version, she says: "I am black and beautiful." So the female lover of the Song of Solomon is a black woman; she's glad to be black; and she thinks of herself as beautiful. Moreover this relationship could be an inter-racial one since nowhere does the text say the male lover is black.

In our world people often think of Africans as militarily weak, poor, and culturally backward. But just the opposite was true in the ancient world. During the long sweep of Biblical history, Ethiopians were perceived to be a superior people. If you look at Genesis 10:8-9 and Jeremiah 46:9, you'll see people thought Ethiopians were militarily powerful; and there's a good reason they thought that. In 751 BCE, the Ethiopians conquered Egypt and ruled that empire until 656 BCE, which means that for nearly a hundred years Ethiopia was one of the region's political and military powerhouses. Another example of Ethiopian military power happened in 22 BCE when Augustus Caesar's army of Roman soldiers clashed with an Ethiopian army but failed to beat them. Instead Augustus offered the Ethiopians a peace treaty that favored Ethiopian interests over Roman interests, which for a Roman general was a rare gesture of respect.

Ethiopians pop up with some regularity in the Old Testament. Did you know that Moses' wife was Ethiopian (Num. 12:1)? Or that the palace official who rescued Jeremiah

from the cistern, a man named Ebed-melech, was also Ethiopian (Jeremiah 38:7)? The father of the Old Testament prophet Zephaniah also appears to have been an Ethiopian. He married a Jewish woman, making Zephaniah bi-racial (Zephaniah 1:1)?

So the first important fact about our man in Acts 8 is he's Ethiopian. And in the ancient world that was a highly respectable ethnicity. Isaiah 18:2 captures well the way other people thought of Ethiopians: "Ah, land of whirring wings beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, sending ambassadors by the Nile in vessels of papyrus on the waters! Go, you swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth, to a people feared near and far, [to] a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide" (NRSV). It was cool to be Ethiopian!

The second important fact about this man is that he's in charge of the queen's treasury. Think of him as the Minister of Finance or as the Secretary of the Treasury. Probably the eunuch was a wealthy, powerful man. By any worldly standard you want to use, he was successful and satisfied. He had the queen's trust and the queen's ear. Access to the queen meant that he may have had some influence over how taxes were collected, what amount was assessed, and how the queen spent her money. He probably lived in her palace, enjoyed excellent food and wine, beds of ivory, fine fabrics, and plenty of servants. Life for this particular Ethiopian was very good. He was at the top of the social ladder.

The third important fact is that he's a eunuch. That was a good thing and a not so good thing. The good part was that it allowed him to live in the palace. As a castrated man, he was no sexual threat to the queen or to any of her female servants. Eunuchs were common in the ancient world as trustworthy servants to kings and queens. Usually they were castrated as infants or small boys, then raised and educated over many years to become palace servants. What made them trustworthy palace servants was precisely their sexual impotence which allowed them to walk freely in and out of women's quarters. Eunuchs formed a small class of sexual minorities who had an ambiguous sexuality that wasn't either fully male or fully female.

The downside to being a eunuch was a lack of intimacy. The book of Sirach, an intertestamental book found in the Apocrypha and written 150 years before Jesus, says

this about eunuchs: “A eunuch embraces a maiden and groans” (Sirach 30:20). That gives us a clue about why this eunuch traveled some 800 miles one way in a bumpy chariot over terrible roads just to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. This man is barren, unable to marry, unable to have sexual intercourse, and unable to have children. He couldn’t marry even if he wanted to. That privilege had been surgically removed from him. His biological barrenness was irreversible. Maybe his biological barrenness created in him a kind of spiritual barrenness, making him feel distant and remote from God. Maybe he was feeling a little bored with his work. Maybe he was having a mid-life crisis and he was on some kind of a spiritual quest.

Whatever the reason, it was big deal for him to travel all the way from Ethiopia just to worship in Jerusalem. By chariot, that trip would have taken at least 6 weeks both ways. And when he finally arrived in Jerusalem, he wasn’t even allowed to enter the Temple. He had to stand on the edge of the Temple because he was a eunuch. Why? Because as a castrated man, he was ritually unclean. Deuteronomy 23:1 says, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Jewish rules defined eunuchs as permanently damaged goods, prohibited for life from entering the inner precincts of the temple. Eunuchs were cut off from the community of God’s people. No matter how good and spiritual they were, they were always regarded as outsiders. Jews thought they were not and could not be God’s children.

I think this man was spiritually desperate. Why else would he have sought special permission from his queen to be gone that long, spending a month and a half of his valuable time bumping up and down in a chariot without shock absorbers, just to stand on the outside of a holy place, and from that marginal place aim a few prayers at the God who supposedly lived inside that temple? I tell you, this man *really* wanted to connect with God. All his wealth and power, his social standing and political access, were not enough. He was looking for something or Someone to fill the barrenness of this life.

Luke implies that whatever the Ethiopian eunuch was looking for, he didn’t find it at the temple in Jerusalem. On the trip back to Ethiopia he’s still searching, squinting

between bumps at his scroll of Isaiah, which when Philip arrives, is turned to 53:7-8. After the two men meet, Philip asks the eunuch if he understands what he's reading.

No, says the eunuch, I'm confused about this reference to a sheep led to the slaughter. Who's that supposed to refer to?

That would be Jesus, replies Philip. Let me tell you about him.

So side by side in the chariot they sit, Philip explaining and the eunuch listening. When they ride by a pond, the eunuch wants to know if he could be baptized. Sure!, says Philip. So down in the water they go, the eunuch to swim in the amniotic waters of God's own womb. Up out of the water they come, Philip to be whisked away by the Spirit for his next assignment, and the eunuch to begin new life as a true and beloved child of God.

We can suppose that the Holy Spirit has been working in Ethiopian eunuch for a long time. It was the Spirit who put into the eunuch a deep desire for God. It was the Spirit who impelled him to make that long and lonely trip to Jerusalem. It was the Spirit who motivated him to read Isaiah. And it was the Spirit who sent Philip to meet the eunuch at a ripe turning point in his life.

We don't know what happened to the Ethiopian eunuch after this. But from church history we do know that thanks to the Holy Spirit, the Christian church in Africa soon grew strong and vibrant. Over the next 600 years, the northern tier of Africa—in what is now Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco—became one of the most important centers of the church, producing major leaders like Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origin, and Augustine, who was the greatest Christian theologian between Paul and Thomas Aquinas. Northern Africa became a major theological and spiritual center for the church. One of the finer gifts north African Christians gave the rest of the church was the practice of contemplative prayer. That interest in contemplative prayer eventually helped to shape monasticism, which in turn, many centuries later, profoundly influenced the development of Anabaptism through the leadership of Michael Sattler.

As the Ethiopian eunuch continued his bumpy road home, his spirit jumped for joy at the new intimacy with God now available to him. His flesh tingled at the memory of God's holy womb, still fresh and strong and wet.