

5th Sunday of Easter

Sermon 5.3.15

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

John 15:1-8

The reason Philip was travelling this wilderness road was because of a crackdown on the early church in Jerusalem.

Granted, that's not what Philip perhaps thought, or what our writer (Luke) seemed to think. No, they thought it was an angel of the Lord who sent Philip southbound on this wilderness road, just like they thought it was the Spirit of the Lord that told Peter to go over to the passing chariot and to join it on its going.

But you could make a good argument, a sensible argument, that what had actually set Philip on this journey was a crackdown on the early church in Jerusalem.

Let's remember, after all, that the early church had set up operations in Jerusalem. This is according to Luke—he who wrote both the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, two now separate books that likely at first were one. This is according to Luke, that the early church had been busy at work in Jerusalem these last few weeks, maybe months. Since the crucifixion of Jesus, and the resurrection; since the ascension of Jesus to the Father and the coming down of the Holy Spirit to the people: these disciples-turned-apostles had settled into Jerusalem as their field of operations.

Here, in Jerusalem, they had preached to the people of good news, of a God who, though crucified, yet came back in peace. Here, in the city of peace, they had healed in Christ's name and taught of Christ's way; here they had gathered and prayed and baptized people by the hundreds, the thousands. Here also they were compelled to appear before the council of chief priests and were eventually persecuted, rounded up and imprisoned.

Saul oversaw a lot of this. Saul (who would soon become Paul) oversaw a lot of the persecution. A Pharisee possessed of zeal, Paul would, of course, eventually bring that zeal to serve the church. But until such time, he used it very much against the church, the most specific example of this: the stoning of Stephen.

Stephen was the first apostle killed. And Saul, the story notes, approved that killing—when the council, having heard enough of what Stephen had to say, rushed him and dragged him out to the street and stoned him to death while he prayed and while Saul held the coats of those throwing the stones. And following this, all “were scattered throughout the countryside” and the apostles “went from place to place.”

It's funny then, don't you think, that the writer and perhaps Philip himself thought it was an angel of the Lord that had him on that wilderness road, and it was the spirit of the Lord that had him join the chariot on its going—these and not the threat of persecution?

That's hardly the emphasis of our writer, though. What is the emphasis is that, while Philip was going, he encountered a eunuch. Five times this man is referred to in the story, and always as this: a eunuch. Consider, he could have referred to as "the court official" or "the treasurer," both remarkable enough positions. He could have been called "the Ethiopian," or "the stranger," or simply, "the man." Instead, we're reminded again and again that he was a eunuch.

I wonder why.

A eunuch is an emasculated man. Either by birth or by choice or by force, a eunuch is one whose testes don't function and so is unable to reproduce. In the case of this one eunuch we know nothing of the circumstances by which he came to be so—whether he was merely celibate, or was infertile, or had been castrated for courtly purposes (to sing as a castrati for the queen, to guard a harem for the king). All we know is that he was a eunuch.

Though this we also know, that he was drawn to this bit of scripture—from the prophecy of Isaiah in which the prophet speaks of the so-called Suffering Servant. "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." So interested, in fact, was he that he'd come up with some questions, most notable this one: of whom was the prophet speaking?

He was right to ask someone for help in interpreting the text—which, of course I would say, right? I always say that. It justifies my livelihood; it justifies my doing exactly what I'm doing right now. People need the scriptures interpreted for them! And they need a paid professional clergy to do it! But it's not just that. It's also this, that the question he asked points to a quite complicated matter.

About whom is the prophet speaking, of himself or of someone else and, if of someone else, then whom? Google that and notice how many hits you get. Notice, indeed, how live a question that is still.

Isaiah first spoke of the Suffering Servant during the exile of the people from Judea to Babylon. About 500 years before Christ, this is remembered to have been a dreadful time in the life of the people Israel. Though life in Babylon was easy for some, and though the people weren't persecuted under Babylonian rule, they were still ruled by a foreign power and they no longer had access to their homeland. They had perhaps, indeed, been silenced before their shearers, had

perhaps been led easily to what felt like slaughter. They had likely been humiliated and even denied justice. So, maybe the Suffering Servant was the whole people Israel—and by their suffering the world will somehow be saved.

Or maybe this was to be understood as one man, one person, though emblematic and not an historically real individual. Maybe the Suffering Servant was an imagined or hoped for or universal personage whose suffering had the affect of saving the whole. The vagueness around the “who” of it does nothing to offset the persistent reality that humans look for scapegoats—one whose suffering will save everyone else from suffering, one who is not caught by the social safety net but is strangled by it.

Christians, of course, have taken this universal personage to be now located, realized, in Jesus; and, indeed, they’ve written that conviction right into their founding texts—*our* founding texts. Some would swear that Isaiah was foretelling, from 500 years in the past, Jesus Christ who was to come. Some would swear Isaiah was speaking only of Jesus Christ, with his prophesying of a suffering servant. Others, like me, are content with the notion that those who witnessed Christ at work, and then on the cross, and then resurrected—all people, incidentally, who would have been intimately familiar with the Servant of Isaiah’s imagining—recognized in Christ what phenomenon was attributed centuries earlier to the Suffering Servant, and then used that recognition to speak of and understand Christ.

But none of this is what drew that Ethiopian man to the scripture he was reading. As a member of the court of the Candace, he was clearly not a Jew and so would likely have had no knowledge of Isaiah or his writing. What’s more, as a eunuch he’d have been forbidden from participating in worship in the Temple. But somehow, this Ethiopian had come upon this scroll, and for some reason, he’d become fixated on this bit of scripture—which has me mindful of the Godly Play question that we pose each time after we hear a story: “I wonder where you are in this story, or what part of this story is about you.”

Godly Play: as I said last time we performed Godly Play in worship, I’ve felt called into the question lately about whether Godly Play still works for us, the adults in the church. I said I’d been made aware of some peoples’ continued ambivalence about Godly Play Sunday—made aware usually by indirect means. I said also that, as we grow in number as a congregation, there may come a time when it’s no longer workable: the more people there are, the further many will have to sit from the story, and one of the crucial aspects of Godly Play is close proximity to the story, and therefor intimacy with it; also too many people will also have a chilling effect on response (no one

will talk) or an agitating effect (people will talk too much, some won't know when [or really how] to stop). These together had me toying with the idea of putting it to rest.

If that comes to that, here's what we'd lose out on.

I appreciate that Godly Play encourages each of us to understand these ancient stories as our stories—*your* stories, and *your* stories. We live in a time of extremes as regards the Bible: either people have abandoned it and so left themselves illiterate as to what it says, to say nothing of inexperienced as to the truth of what it says; or they've take hold of it with such aggression and self-righteousness that they believe it to be theirs exclusively. Godly Play, it seems to me, offers a middle way.

Godly Play puts in peoples' minds these stories that invite more questions than clear answers, that open up mystery more than putting forth solutions to what mystifies. It does so by lifting the stories off the page and out of their words by which they're usually, these days, transmitted; and this frees us from the fixed thinking of so-called "biblical literalism." It's no longer about the words, but the story. It does so also by wondering where you are in this story, or what part of this story is about you.

Of course, strictly speaking none of these stories is about you, or me for that matter. Abraham and Sarah heading out of the land of Ur to parts unknown knew nothing of us, knew nothing of me. David, in his dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah, was sparing not a single thought for you, for me. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he was speaking to his disciples, not to us; he was speaking in Galilee in the year 30, not to us in Monterey in 2015.

And yet that's not entirely true, right? No, the Bible isn't about us, and yet yes, the Bible is about us. No, the Bible speaks not to us, and yet, yes, the Bible does speak to us. We're not its readers, we're also its subjects: and it's that makes it Holy Writ; it's this that makes it sacred scripture, Holy Writ. Not that it was written by God, or that it's really old, but because it still speaks today is what sets apart from so much else that humans have written down. Much of the Bible is shockingly relevant, distressingly relevant, delightfully relevant. The Bible is sacred scripture because it *is* about us; it *is* about you.

The gospel writers read of the Suffering Servant, and contemplated Jesus, and realized, "My God, that old bit of scripture is about our friend."

I read Psalm 8, which asks the Lord, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" and I realize, "My God, that question is my question."

You might read of a vine and its branches, and realize, “My God, I am grown off of or grafted to something so much larger than my individual self.”

The Ethiopian, the treasurer of the court of the Candace, the eunuch: perhaps he read of this one who was silent in face of his own slaughter, who was humiliated and then denied justice, and realized, “My God, that’s *me*.”

This story is eager for us to understand that this man had some power and some prestige. He who served in the Queen’s court, it tells us, which means he kept company with those who had high prestige and near absolute power. He was in charge of the Queen’s entire treasury, it tells us, which means he had access to great wealth and the trust of its owner. For goodness’ sake, he was riding in a chariot. He was *somebody*.

But he was also nobody. Amidst a culture in which you made a name for yourself by having children and then grandchildren, this man was nobody. Amidst a culture in which you achieved eternal life by way of offspring (by way of being not merely a vine branch but the vine itself), this eunuch was indeed cut off. Insofar as “generation” is understood as the action of generating life, this one person’s “generation” cannot be described. Insofar as one’s life remains alive through one’s offspring, this eunuch’s life will indeed be taken away from the earth. This eunuch is but a servant, the Queen’s servant so perhaps not so evidently suffering. But I don’t have to work too hard to imagine him as a figure of suffering—isolated and cut off.

So, “My God,” he perhaps recognized, “this bit of scripture is about me.”

His question, put to Philip, reveals that he knows it’s not *only* about him. But his fascination with it suggests that he has been drawn in—he *is* drawn in, grafted on—and he knows it.

And he welcomes it.

People these days will wonder sometimes about the once-African slaves of the American (mostly) South taking on the religion of their masters. They wonder about it, weightedly, suggesting that this is the ultimate act of colonialism and enslavement: to overtake native stories with the so-supposed “civilizing” stories of Christianity. And this is true enough in many cases: in many cases Christian missionaries were meant to “civilize” primitive peoples with stories of the Christian west. But in the case of white masters and black slaves in America (as I understand it) the slaves were meant to be illiterate, one productive effect of which was that they not to have access to the stories of the Bible. The tacit understanding in this is that, if the were to have such access, they’d recognize the truth: that these stories of liberation, of salvation, are their stories at least as much as they are the stories of their masters, at least or more so, even much more so. Really, masters offer the stories of

the gospel to their slaves at their own peril. Nothing upends exploitation like the recognition that slaves are people and so beloved of God.

Maybe this is why it's so significant that this man, this Ethiopian, this treasurer of the Queen's court, be understood first and last and most of all as a eunuch, as one cut off, as one whose generation cannot be imagined and whose life is all but taken away from the earth: because it is to such as these most of all that the gospel is most urgent and most truly belongs.

And perhaps Philip said as much when, according to the story, he "began to speak proclaiming the good news about Jesus," the good news that has us recognize our own selves as remembered to the body of Christ, as re-membered in the mind of God—not cut off and forgotten but rejoined to that which gives life, like branches grafted on to the life-sustaining vine.

But none of this is what interests me this morning.

This is what does: that the apostles who are in effect refugees out of Jerusalem understood themselves not merely as people on the run from the threat of persecution but are people led into new territory and new potential by angels and by the Spirit of the Lord.

Is that how we would imagine such a thing? Is that how we *do* imagine such a thing? When we're on the run from some closed-down circumstance in life, can we imagine ourselves not simply running from but moving toward and by the sustaining guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Really, do we believe that the Lord is with us, or not?

Today, right now, many hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people in the world are themselves refugees—refugees from persecution just as deadly but far more widespread as what persecution those first apostles were facing in Jerusalem. The world is awash in such people, and their suffering is great and their need is urgent and what they present to those places where they mean to find refuge is one of the great challenges of our time. So I wonder, would considering their predicament as one guided by the Holy Spirit alter the world's response to it? If so, how?

Same question applies not only for this problem that we face, but for all problems that we face. The world is not as it once was. (It never is.) So, do we believe this is someone's fault or are we willing also to consider this the guiding purpose of our God?

Listen to this: when I read the back story behind today's encounter between Philip and the eunuch, I grew more and more anxious. The tension between the burgeoning church and the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem was real and deeply threatening; and the way in which this tension is told of in the book of Acts courts the conclusion that there were good guys and there were bad guys, moreover that the good guys were the apostles and the bad guys were the Jewish leaders who were

stiff-necked and unchanging. See: it's the church verses the Jews, the text courts us to conclude. And this, we know, is a very dangerous conclusion.

So listen to *this*: the thing that relieved my anxiety about what conclusion this story might demand was the thought that the apostles weren't simply refugees chased out by bad people, but were pilgrims led by angels and the Spirit of the Lord. Can you hear the difference? One harks backward, the other forward. The former courts resentment and a spirit of revenge, while the latter invites hope and a watchful eye for signs of renewal, even resurrection.

It's too simple a thing to say that the refugee crisis facing the world today is a situation in need of mere reframing, or that any of the crises before us simply need a more upbeat spin (if not just flat denial). But what if the terrifying trends of our time are also leading us toward some new good, some grand acts of wisdom and courage?

We'd be sensible to assume that such a thing is unrealistic. But we wouldn't be the people God has called us to be.

A crisis, etymologically speaking, is a point of decision. By God, we are free to decide.

Thanks be to God.